

A woman's place is in the YWCA: The World War II years

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

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(EDITORS NOTE: This is part of a series on the YWCA by McNeil Hurlbert, who is a regular guest writer for the Williamsport Women column.)

In the 1940s, the Williamsport Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) both expanded offerings for the community and created special programs to support the war effort. A sense of world citizenship, which was present in the YW on a national level, extended to the Williamsport organization. It often was pointed out that in many countries the YW was the



PHOTOS PROVIDED

In this photo provided by the Lycoming County Historical Society, women attend a book review in the west lounge of the YWCA as the Rev. L. Elbert Wilson reviews his book "How Never To Be Tired."

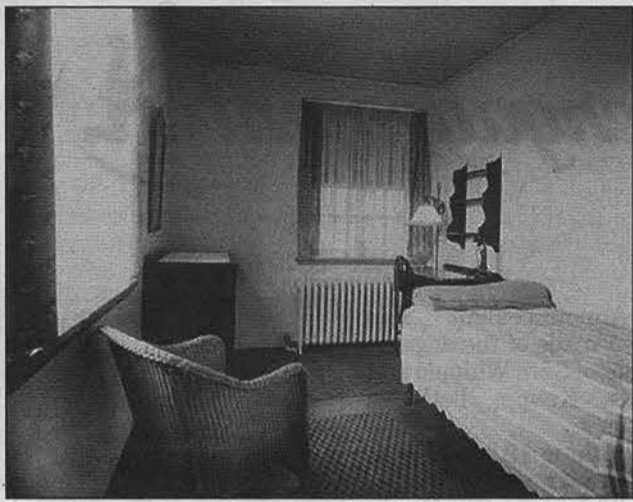
only leadership community for women. The World Fellowship Committee was devoted to "striving for a new world order in the midst of world crisis" and educated members through speakers emphasizing inclusion of all races, nations and social groups — "a girl in China or Mexico is one of us." The local YW hosted Italian dinners, Japanese teas and Chinese dinners

with the proceeds going to the Chinese Relief Fund.

The Cosmopolitan Club

In 1941, the new Cosmopolitan Club brought together women whose families were moving to

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PHOTOS PROVIDED

Shown in these photos courtesy of the Lycoming County Women's History Collection, are rooms at the YWCA. Above left is a double room and above right is a single room.

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Williamsport as war industries expanded in the area. Later, membership was extended to any woman not born in Williamsport. At first the Cosmo Club's purpose was to provide a place for newcomers to gather, but it soon became a vehicle for community good and war support. It was the first club to establish a downtown booth at the S.S. Kresge Co. to sell defense stamps and bonds, with sales the first year totaling \$17,000. Later, fundraisers were held for "crippled children" and the Red Cross. Social events held at the YW or the country club included numerous teas, with a woman "presiding at the tea table" and dessert bridge games, with a speaker talking about "Women's responsibilities to the world" or giving a book review. Also included at meetings usually was a musical performance; often it was Mary Landon Russell playing the piano. Immediately after the war, the club hosted foreign-born war brides at a tea.

The Hostess Club

The formation of the Hostess Club, composed of younger women, arose out of a need for hostesses at servicemen's dances during the time when there were two service units located in the city. The women held regular meetings, sang in their own choir and participated in club social events such as a wiener roast to which they had to bring their own wieners and buns. They supported performances of the Little Bond Plays by making and selling warsages —

corsages made up of war stamps. With headlines like "Warsages considered a vital necessity," the newspaper promoted the idea that every well-dressed woman needed one.

The new "Misty Belles" Club, created for the swing shift employees from Sylvania, continued the YW's long-standing mission of serving factory women. Members organized a basketball team and committees ranged from devotions to refreshments.

Youth and adult activities

During the difficult war years, the YW continued to expand and strengthen opportunities for girls, though often with a home front emphasis. The Girls Reserve (an established group open to girls between the ages of 12 and 18) chose as one of its projects compiling scrapbooks for soldiers. Members also knitted clothing and made fudge to send to friends in the service, donated time to the Red Cross, sewed for the British War Relief Society and sold canes on white cane day. The group engaged in recreational activities as well, including summer weeks at Camp Kline, with campfires, singing, hikes and amateur night.

In 1944, the YW started the "Nibble Nook." It was promoted as the city's first youth recreation center, where high school girls could relax after school and dance.

To appeal to the "younger social set," the Hi-Tri Club, a long-established YW girls' youth program, sponsored the Hot Spot, a night club serving soft drinks. The well-chaperoned young people danced to music

from a juke box on the veranda until 11 p.m. The group also organized dances after high school football games and sponsored a Big/Little Sister program in which a high school senior would "adopt" an incoming sophomore and offer mentoring over the summer. The newspaper reported that "carefree teenagers abandoned studies to let their hair down at the annual wiener roast on the grounds of the George Lamade home on Grampian Boulevard." Once again, because of the meat shortage, participants arrived carrying their own wieners.

Other YW offerings included new babysitting classes for girls, as well as a charm school that taught etiquette, voice modulation, grooming, posture and personality development.

On Thursdays, there was a Mr. and Mrs. Night, with badminton, ping pong, archery, shuffleboard and a mixed plunge in the pool. Mindful that many women were without husbands and friends because of the war, the recreation department also had programs that were not geared toward couples, including golf lessons with visiting pro golfers and the Bulls-eye Club for experienced archers.

An "Information Please" desk was open at the YW from 7:30 a.m. until 11 p.m. An average day brought 250 phone calls and 300 walk-ins.

YW housing and dining facilities

The Residence Committee conducted business as usual, housing women in need of a safe and comfortable place to stay. Minutes

report that in 1942, for example, \$17,000 was generated from 97 "permanents" and 548 "transients." However, the dining room frequently experienced operating losses. Meat prices were high, and because of rationing, the dining room eventually could not even offer bread with the evening meal. Organizations were unwilling to pay \$1 a plate for banquets and made arrangements elsewhere. Community diners sought good-quality meals, meanwhile the residents were trying to economize. Eventually, the Dining Room Committee voted to close the dining room to the public.

In 1965, Mrs. F.E. Manson wrote a brief history of the YW. Her words especially suit the organization during those war years: "The YW leaders were always ready to act when a changing world indicated action, more often than not, ahead of the thinking of their fellow citizens."

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