Civilizing Kansas:
Women's Organizations, 1880–1920

by June O. Underwood

Two images dominate our vision of women on the Great Plains and in early Kansas. One is of the pioneer mother, devastated by the difficulties of her life and driven mad by the wind. The other is of the civilizing woman, Carry Nation wielding her ax against the demon rum. It is to the latter image, and its connections with real life, that this essay addresses itself.

"Civilizing" is a term with strong connotations in American culture. American literature is full of males who "light out for the territory" to escape civilizing females. Once the pioneer woman was past the difficulties of settlement, so popular notions go, she proceeded to civilize, laying down her rifle and picking up her hatchet, forcing her adolescent children into church and tight shoes, and driving golden-hearted whores and fun-loving saloon keepers out of town. Even historians have difficulty defining nineteenth-century women's civilizing mission. When they describe women as civilizers, they talk primarily about the home — bringing lace tablecloths and dinner-time manners to family life. However, the civilizing which is the subject of this essay is a far tougher and more collective activity than espousing domestic amenities. It is influencing society and government to diminish human suffering. Women's organizations in frontier and post-frontier Kansas worked continuously over many years bringing to local communities structures which would prevent poverty, misery, and disease. This essay explores the range of civic and social activities of Kansas women's organizations and their incursion into and impact upon public and political spheres and then attempts to account for the decline of those organizations after 1920.

Julie Roy Jeffrey in Frontier Women asks the question: "if...the move to the frontier meant the abandonment of civilization by frontiersmen, what did it mean for their wives and daughters, who presumably thought themselves responsible for civilized the wilderness?"

For women, the move to the frontier meant taking on the nurturing and home responsibilities into which they had been socialized. As innumerable historians have documented, the rise of industrialism in the East had separated "home" from work, and women's duties, practically and ideologically, involved harmonizing human environments and relationships and caring for the welfare of others. Politically as well as economically restricted to the domestic sphere, middle-class women focused on religion and nurture,

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2. The term "civilizer" has been so banalized and derogated that historians of the women's West sometimes go out of their way to deny women this role. See, for example, Elizabeth Jameson, "Women as Workers, Women as Civilizers: True Womanhood in the American West," Frontiers 7 (1984): 1-8. Jameson despises the term, feeling it is overly simple and denounces passivity. However, one of her sources, May Wing, wanted to be remembered for running the local museum, starting the school hot lunch program, organizing a boys' chorus, and teaching Sunday school (7). These are the kinds of activities I would term "civilizing."


June O. Underwood, associate professor of English and associate dean of liberal arts and sciences at Emporia State University, received B.A. and M.A. degrees from Pennsylvania State University and a Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Stony Brook. She has published a number of articles on Victorian and western literature and the history and literature of women on the Great Plains and is currently writing a book on Kansas women's organizations, 1890-1920.
ignoring economics and politics. As Barbara Berg shows, almost at the instant of this enclosure within the domestic, however, women found ways of breaking out of its restrictions. When they broke loose they did so almost entirely in terms of the domestic ideologies: teaching the children, being responsible for social welfare, taking on “municipal” housecleaning. Women bonded together in their domestic enclosures, and because of that sisterhood, they were able to extend their extradomestic power. The period in America from about 1800 to 1850, before Kansas became a territory and attained statehood, was the period in which successive stages in the domestic ideology, including women’s relegation to the private sphere, their banding together as a separate community, and their assuming responsibilities for public welfare, were formulated.

Thus, when women came to Kansas after 1850, they brought not only the baggage of human concerns but years of working together, separate from the male populace, to achieve social good. Abolitionists had found in women a source of great power; later the sanitary commissions of the Civil War were staffed by women. Thus, once the initial settlement of the frontier was completed, women were ready to go on with their public welfare and reform activities—their civilizing. As Jeffrey puts it, “As the period of isolation came to an end, women’s social contacts multiplied. The organization of churches, schools, and voluntary associations, the development of rural towns and cities, gave women a new and more public forum for their activities and opened another phase of female experience on the frontier. With growth came the opportunity to carry out the civilizing mission implicit in the concept of domesticity.”

Kansas is an excellent place in which to explore the activities of organized women because of its settlement patterns, the availability of its historical materials, and its relationship to the Civil War. It is possible to trace stages in organizational development and relate them to the maturity of the society. Because of the lateness of its settlement and the pride Kansas has had in its history, both written and pictorial materials are readily available. And finally, Kansas was a place of political experimentation, seen nationally as embodying possibilities for a new society. The Kansas-Nebraska Act made Kansas a stage for tests of slavery sentiments prior to the Civil War. The first suffrage campaign in the nation (1867) took place in Kansas. Populists, prohibitionists, and progressives all found positions of great power within the state. Thus social questions and reform campaigns were part of the milieu of Kansas. However, the state, parts of which were frontier until at least 1910, did not become urbanized and never, except for some geographical pockets, attracted large industries. Because of these conditions, it is possible to investigate reform in a nonurban, nonindustrialized state. The few studies of women’s organization and reform activities which have been done focus on urbanization as the catalyst for such activities. Yet Kansas, without an urban crisis, was in the forefront of founding and supporting reforms hitherto seen as urban.

In examining the activities of Kansas women’s organizations, however, it is important to note that no claim is made that they were radical or unique. The reforms the women advocated were reforms, not revolutions. The radical ideas which coexisted with their reform sentiments would have acted as stimulants to thinking, but, as shall be shown, did not affect the women’s collective actions. The rapid organization and functioning of the women’s groups in Kansas was undoubtedly a result of the pervasive nature and functioning of such groups back east. By 1850 newspapers and magazines were readily available throughout the nation, and by 1870, the railroads had begun building their Kansas networks. Kansas was linked in communications, economics, and ideology to the rest of the country, and its women shared that linkage. Women’s work in the abolition movement, the sanitary commissions of the Civil War, the temperance campaigns, and the veterans’ relief auxiliaries was part of frontier women’s heritage. Thus, the women of Kansas, like its men, took on the nation’s most modern ideas and concerns.

The importance of women combining for social welfare and self-improvement has been recognized by historians of women’s history. Mary P. Ryan, for exam-
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...in Womanhood in America, has this to say about the growth and development of women's organizations nationally:

By the turn of the century women's clubs were not only investigating social conditions but conducting social reforms—forming corporations to build sanitary housing in the slums, reconstructing the judicial system for juvenile offenders, and endorsing factory and child labor legislation. The Women's Trade Union League founded in 1903 devoted less and less time to bringing middle-class culture to working girls and became deeply embroiled in union activities and strikes. Meanwhile, traditional women's groups had become careless of their ladylike ways. As early as the 1870s, the Women's [sic] Christian Temperance Union resorted to the vulgar antics of Carrie Nation, entering saloons and destroying the tavernkeeper's property. By the turn of the century, the WCTU had become a broad social service organization, embarking on a high-minded activity and suffrage and prong to debate such questions as "Is housework incompatible with the higher life?"

Here Ryan discusses two of the three major national organizations: the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the General Federation of Women's Clubs; later in her book she devotes a great deal of time to the equal suffrage associations. All were involved in reform. Beginning in the 1870s until her death in 1898, Frances Willard led the WCTU into heavy suffrage activity and social reform. The General Federation (to whose members the disparaging phrase "women's clubbers" was applied) was put on its mettle in its 1904 biennial convention, when the social reform position was so brilliantly argued by Sarah Platt Decker of Denver that the convention made her president. In her first speech, she directly addressed the issue of social activity. "Ladies," she said, "you have chosen me your leader. Well, I have an important piece of news to give you. Dante is dead. He has been dead for several centuries, and I think it is time that we dropped the study of his Inferno and turned our attention to our own."

These powerful organizations, along with others allied to them like the settlement houses, the trade union league movements, and the consumers' leagues, were instrumental in changing America's concern for its peoples. And in Kansas they arose almost simultaneously with the national groups.

Kansas settlers came primarily from the Midwest—Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana—and because of the national communications network, the women were thoroughly in touch with the ideologies of the woman's sphere and the organized activities of that sphere. For example, the Friends in Council, a Lawrence study club, evolved from a similar group in Quincy, Illinois, and corresponded regularly with the mother club. By 1890 study clubs were so prevalent in Kansas that when the New England Woman's Club and the New York Sorosis joined together to issue a call for a convention and general federation, two delegates from Kansas were present.

Kansas women also joined many other clubs, of which the Woman's Relief Corps (WRC), a national charitable and patriotic group, was perhaps the most important. Because of the influx of Civil War veterans seeking free land in Kansas, the WRC (associated with the male Grand Army of the Republic) was quite powerful. Agnes D. Hays quotes from the WCTU state newspaper, Our Messenger, about an 1886 camp meeting:

On the right of the platform was a tent with "WCTU Hqrs." in large letters on the side, and a little farther off was another tent marked "WRC Hqrs." for the three great women's societies, the Equal Suffrage Association, the Woman's Relief Corps, and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union were united in carrying on this camp meeting and worked harmoniously together, each endorsing the others and mutually aiding one another.

The Kansas WRC fought against restricting membership to immediate female relatives of veterans, and in opening its doors to "all loyal women" gained a larger membership as well as a larger possibility for action. Rather than restricting themselves to social and patriotic functions, they became important agents for charity and social change.

6. Mary P. Ryan, Womanhood in America: From Colonial Times to the Present (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 290–31. It is Ryan who says that by 1920 the woman's organizations had coalesced to form a "rationalized organizational network that was nearly as sophisticated in its own way as the corporate business world"(235).


Other national clubs of local prominence were the American Association of University Women (the AAUW, originally the Association of Collegiate Alumnae), which organized first in Lawrence in 1906; the National Association of Colored Women, which existed in Kansas as the Kansas Association of Colored Women and Girls; the Kansas Congress of Parents and Teachers, originally the Congress of Mothers and Parent-Teacher Associations (PTA); Altrusa, a service club; the PEO, an adult sorority interested in education; the League of Women Voters; the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR); the Business and Professional Women's Club (BPW); and innumerable others. The rural women, although less heavily organized, nevertheless had rural clubs modeled after the town groups by 1920. More serious work, for them, was done as part of the Granges and, later, the Farm Bureau's Home Demonstration Units. The Grange was a particularly egalitarian organization, having a specific executive position in each chapter designated for a woman. The Grange, from its formation, endorsed female suffrage, and women frequently held leadership posts in the organization outside of those set aside for them.

The patterns of growth found among the women's clubs in Kansas were indicative of how important they were in women's lives. The clubs organized as rapidly as women settlers were available to begin them. Rather than creeping westward from the older, more established towns in eastern Kansas, women's organizations were likely to spring up in the newest frontier settlements. Wichita and Dodge City had ladies' benevolent societies (charitable organizations) within a year after those cities were founded. The PEO was first organized in Meade in 1888, when Meade was only three years old. From Meade (southwestern Kansas), it spread east and north, first to La Crosse, then Lyons, then Hutchinson, Seneca, and finally to the pre-Civil War town of Council Grove."

Experience, interest, and public approbation, as
well as proximity to similar organizations, seemed to trigger organizing. The WCTU first organized in Bismarck Grove near the twenty-year-old settlement of Lawrence in 1878, and in its first year, the chapters contributing to its treasury were nearby — Osage City, Burlingame, Leavenworth, Topeka, and Lawrence. By the third year, however, sixteen clubs, widely scattered throughout the state, were contributing members. Among these were Sabetha, in northeastern Kansas, Parsons in the southeast, Sterling in central Kansas, Wetmore, north and east of Manhattan, Enterprise, west and south of Manhattan, and Emporia, in the east-central part of the state. There is no early record of the WCTU in the northwestern part of the state, although Hoxie (Sheridan County) had a sod temperance hall in 1880. The WCTU did not organize there until 1898. Temperance was a long-standing ideology of Kansans, so the WCTU found an immediately receptive public. In Dodge City, however, the town businessmen apparently managed to prevent the WCTU from organizing until 1886, after Dodge had passed its peak as a cattle drive center. Thus, while the WCTU was generally a great success, there were areas where it was prevented from organizing by the liquor and business interests.

Women organized in large numbers and their organizations spread rapidly. The WCTU organized statewide in 1879, the WRC in 1884, the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association (KESA) in 1884, and the PEO in 1888. The Young Women's Christian Association, in conjunction with the YMCA, appeared in the normal schools and colleges by the 1880s. The leadership of these groups, like their founding, was not restricted to

the mature eastern settlements of the state. The WRC met in Fort Scott in 1885, in Wichita in 1886, in Abilene in 1887, in Winfield in 1888, and in Emporia in 1889.\textsuperscript{14} Even the women's study clubs and literary clubs, which seemed to follow settlement patterns, were scattered throughout the state by 1893, the year of state federation. Moreover, because of the loosely affiliated nature of the Federation, it included powerful older groups like the Social Science Club, founded in 1881, and the Kansas Women's Press Association.\textsuperscript{15} These professionally oriented groups, because they were already well organized, were able to aid the Federation in systematizing its communications and beginning its work immediately.

To summarize, the patterns of origination of women's clubs indicate that personal contact and experience, public approbation, and concern for shared problems account for their establishment and growth. The rapidity with which statewide federations became established was a result of the lively and powerful smaller groups already existing. Years of domestic and intractable work, both political and social, gave women a base from which to move.

The ways clubs organized statewide make an important commentary on how their members thought the clubs would function. The WCTU, for example, organized around already established state political districts. Today this seems natural enough, but, in fact, such districting was a radical departure from the concept of women operating in private spheres. For instance, women's church groups and benevolent societies were either single-city oriented or directly accountable to the hierarchy of the diocese or state charity director. However, the WCTU immediately went public and political. It may have learned its tactics from abolitionist or suffrage groups farther east; the tactics indicate the seriousness of the women's intentions.\textsuperscript{16} Moreover, the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association, the Woman's Relief Corps, and finally the Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs organized themselves likewise. The organization of the last is telling, since the literary clubs originally had as part of their national charter a clause pledging themselves to self-improvement but not political action.\textsuperscript{17} Once having taken political districts for their own endeavors, however, even these fairly elitist study clubs were poised for political action, ready to take on those reforms which they could not resist.

Before the public reform activities of the women's clubs are described, it is necessary to discuss their benefits to individuals. While these personal benefits are difficult to document from the social and public materials used in this study, it is possible to speculate on them. Perhaps the single most important personal aspect of these organizations was that they affirmed the women's sense of the validity and importance of their own values. This was particularly necessary in the raw frontier environment in which these women found themselves. Bonding among women, so important in eastern women's existence, did not seem to break down in the remote villages of Kansas. In fact, the general sense of isolation may have helped make organization come easy. Moreover, because women's days were relatively undifferentiated in the task-oriented, on-call domestic existence they led, the weekly meetings would have served as markers in their lives and given them something to look forward to. Within the groups they would have found support and relief from family tensions. The WCTU and suffrage organizations, for example, held closed, women-only meetings. Mary Austin, in her autobiography, Earth Horizon, describes these meetings as resembling consciousness-raising sessions, in which revolutionary ideas about women's rights to refuse sexual intercourse with alcoholic husbands were raised. The right of refusal was questioned only in terms of fears about genetic damage to unborn children, but that it was raised at all gives an indication of the power and concerns of the organizations.\textsuperscript{18}

Besides giving women personal support, the women's organizations served as educational institutions.

\textsuperscript{14} History of the Department of Kansas Women's Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic, 1884–1934 (N.p., n.d.), 15.

\textsuperscript{15} There is no history of the State Federation of Women's Clubs in Kansas. Information about individual clubs belonging to the State Federation can be obtained from the Women's Clubs Clippings: typescript lists of officials of the organizations which give the women's affiliations; and materials such as yearbooks and convention programs of local and regional meetings of the Federation. All are in the Library, Kansas State Historical Society.

\textsuperscript{16} I have found no information about the origins or reasons for the political districting, which first appears in the Minutes of the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Kansas at the Fourth Annual Meeting (Burlington: Osage County Chronicle, 1889). By 1885 all seven state districts had vice-presidents. The idea of following political organizational patterns may have originated from activist churchwomen.


\textsuperscript{18} Mary Austin, Earth Horizon: An Autobiography (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1939), ch. 6 and 7. Austin tells of the impact of Frances Willard on the lives of frontier women and of her mother's involvement in the WCTU. She says, "I remember: the first woman who was allowed to speak in our church on the right of women to refuse to bear children to habitual drunkards, and my mother putting her arm across my knees and taking my hand in one of the few natural gestures of a community of woman interest she ever made toward me" (112).
Women gained valuable knowledge from the groups about how to cope with their domestic careers. In addition to the usual chores of the nineteenth-century wife and mother, women moving into raw frontier villages needed to find clean water and nutritious food-stuffs and to discover how to manage the economics of marketing, treat unfamiliar illnesses, and make goods that would have been store-bought farther east. Women used the organizations to gain basic medical advice, particularly in areas like childbirth which were most germane to them. This basic education for survival was informally worked into club agendas and intertwined with education about civic affairs.

The public affairs interests of the women's groups were never as narrow as their names might suggest. The WCTU, for example, took on woman suffrage, charitable work, public education, relief for prostitutes, church organization, parliamentary procedure (important preparation for public visibility), and many other activities. The WRC, the DAR, and the PEO were involved in a myriad of activities—charitable, patriotic, educational, and political. In the 1880s, to belong to the Order of the Eastern Star (the women's affiliate of the Masons) was to discuss suffrage. And the issue of suffrage was intimately tied to women's social responsibilities, what evils in the streets needed cleaning. Within the study clubs, literature, history, and philosophy, as well as current events and theories of philanthropy, were discussed. Regardless of specific club ideology, women were being trained in gathering information and in discussing its nuances and ramifications for political action.

The discipline involved in setting up constitutions and bylaws, in holding elections of officers, and in carrying out responsibilities as secretaries, auditors, treasurers, and speakers of their clubs, gave women self-confidence and an understanding of their own capabilities in activities which closely resembled those of the male public sphere. The study of parliamentary laws, the recounting of current events, and the discussion of political and elective strategies contributed to women's understanding of public affairs. The city,
county, district, and state federations of the clubs, with their complications of conferences, politics, and civic actions, initiated women into the processes of the public sphere. Thus the women’s organizations served individual women as support and educational institutions and prepared them for their place in the public arena. While clubs served women in these personal ways, they were also important to society. The single most ubiquitous public work the women did was charitable. The tradition of women doing the welfare work of the society goes back to the missionary cent societies at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Almost all the Kansas women’s clubs, whether social, political, or educational, provided money, food, and clothing for the elderly, the weak, and the indigent. Only the Equal Suffrage Association may have exempted itself from this function. While most of the groups were not exclusively charitable organizations — and were supplemented by minimal state charity, benevolent aid societies, and related church groups — the aid the women’s clubs provided was pervasive. Such charitable action varied from serving as well-organized, easily mobilized sources of relief during large-scale disasters to providing individual aid to elderly and indigent persons. The ubiquitous presence of the women’s groups made them readily available, and their tightly structured districts allowing them to function rapidly. This charitable work, however patchy, was essential in an era when government was organized solely for law and order and the protection of private property. The predominant laissez-faire concepts of economic and governmental relationships insisted that welfare interfered with the “proper” functioning of private enterprise, and thus, with little or no government welfare operations, human aid had to fall to the private sphere. Women’s organizations constituted the most important part of that sphere.

Relief work was often directed at aging or suffering members of the immediate organization. Educational funds, drought and disaster relief, and benevolence for their elderly members were concerns for club members. However, the relief work also went beyond helping cases known personally. The Friends in Council, an elite study club in Lawrence, provided intermittent sums of money to various needy individuals and organizations from 1875 on, and by 1897 it was donating a set sum annually to the Associated Charities of Lawrence. In Hugoton in 1913, the town and county women formed a woman’s club to, among other things, organize their welfare efforts. Although primarily educational and social in purpose, almost every PEO chapter in the state engaged in philanthropic work, and by 1925, the state organization had combined this relief work into its “welfare and trust fund.” The Parsons City Federation included in its philanthropic work “visiting committees for hospital and relief work” and dealt as well with the care of a group of settlement children from Kansas City. In Emporia, the Social Service Club sewed layettes for expectant mothers, and the Lyon County Association of Rural Club Women sewed clothing for the inhabitants of the county poor farm. The DAR, the WRC, the WCTU — all defined charity as part of their regular business. The women who did this work, however, were quite aware of controversies over the motives and adequacy of private charity. Mother Bickerdyke, famous for her work with veterans and Kansas immigrants, continu-

19. See the printed minutes of the annual meetings of the WCTU of Kansas, 1881–90, bound as W.C.T.U. of Kansas, Minutes, 3–12 Annual Meetings, 1881–1890; Library, Kansas State Historical Society. See also Proceedings of the Third Annual Communication, Grand Chapter of Kansas, Order of the Eastern Star, 1878 (Fort Scott: Monitor Steam Publishing House, 1878), 10–11; and Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Communication (Ottawa: Daily Republican, 1882), 41–42.

20. Again, to quote Austin: “How the women of our town, an important majority of them, loved that organization [the WCTU]! . . . with what pure and single-minded ardor they gave themselves to learn to serve it, legal technicalities, statistics, Robert’s Rules of Order, the whole ritual of public procedure. Only women who recall how far back in social evolution the ritual of mass behavior began know how hard it was for them. During those first years there was scarcely a meeting in which they did not more or less come to grief over parliamentary procedure, or one in which somebody was not hurt in her feelings to the point of bursting into tears. And then they would hold hands and sing a hymn and begin all over again. With the result that for precision and directness in the conduct of public meetings, American women finally reduced our Senate and Houses of Representatives to shame.” (Earth Horizon, 142–43).


22. However, because members of the Equal Suffrage Association were inevitably involved in other organizations, distinguishing what was done in the name of what organization is often difficult. See, for example, letters dated late November and early December 1912 for reforms which the suffrage workers wanted to consider, having gotten the vote. Box 5, Lucy Browne Johnston Papers, Manuscripts Department, Kansas State Historical Society.
ally prodded the WRC to systematize and destigmatize its benevolent activities. The Friends in Council in the 1890s studied contemporary scientific theories about poverty and relief work and acknowledged that “the poor shall be helped to help themselves” and that the “people shall work not for but with them.” These were relatively avant-garde concepts. By 1902 the club members were studying Jane Addams’ *Democracy and Social Ethics*, especially the chapters on “Charitable Effort,” “Household Adjustment,” and “Industrial Amelioration.” Their study had some effect on their own relief efforts, but it was more important in training individual members of the club, such as Genevieve Chalkley, in the sociological approaches to charity. Chalkley became important in industrial reform and legislation in Kansas in the teens.54

The women’s study of social theory preceded their involvement in public forums on poverty and crime. However, by 1909, at the Kansas Conference of Charities and Correction, one afternoon was given to members of the Kansas Federation of Women’s Clubs and the WCTU, who presented papers on “Temperance versus Dependency, Degeneracy and Crime” and “Public Playgrounds.” This professional activity was supplemented by attempts to provide structures and institutions which would enable the poor to become self-sufficient. In 1907 the WCTU sent missionaries to the immigrants of Crawford and Cherokee counties to teach the miners’ wives to use sewing machines and to speak English. In 1919 the YWCA in Emporia set up canning and sewing lessons. In 1913 the Hutchinson Mothers Club not only started a rest room (lounge) for country women but also began a highly successful day nursery for working mothers.55

By 1909 the *Club Member*’s editor, Elizabeth N. Barr, was lecturing to a diverse audience on the institutional causes of poverty and crime:

> The long and short of it is, the slums are a part of our economic system. It pays to herd people into close, filthy quarters and house them in such a manner as would be against the law if they were cattle. It does not pay society but it pays the landlord and our economic system was not made for society as a whole but for the large property owner.

She went on to say that “disease also is a product of the economic system,” and “the prostitute is a product of the keen and losing struggle for bread.”56 The Club Member was a magazine which devoted regular columns to the patriotic work of the DAR and WRC, yet at that time the editor saw no contradiction in these activities. Even in a popular women’s magazine, criticism of the economic system could be linked to patriotism.

Another extension of relief work involved establishing homes for the indigent or helpless and persuading the state to take over these endeavors. Sometimes individuals were credited with the work of establishing such institutions; for example, Mrs. C. H. Cushing in 1868 spearheaded the founding of the Home for Friendless Women in Leavenworth. She got the state to help her fund and maintain the building and, in 1881, she founded the Kansas and Missouri Social Science Club, a group of educated women concerned with social problems of the sort she had attacked.57 Fanny Rastall persuaded the WCTU to organize the Girls’ Industrial School at Beloit in 1888; this home for adolescent girls (which became a state institution in 1889) was a favorite charity for clubs throughout the state.58 Other homes established or aided by clubs included the Protective Home for Colored Aged and Orphans, supported by the North Leavenworth WCTU, Rescue Homes (for reformed prostitutes) in Wichita and Kansas City, and the Carry A. Nation Home for indigent women in Kansas City, by the WCTU. The WRC funded the Mother Bickerdyke Home at Ellsworth for the widows, mothers, and sisters of Civil War veterans for four years before it became annexed to the State Soldiers’ Home. It also aided the Fort Dodge Soldiers’ Home, the Sol-


25. *Journal of the Eighth Annual Convention of the Department of Kansas, Woman’s Relief Corps, Auxiliary to the Grand Army of the Republic, Held at Atchison, Kansas, February 24, 25, 26, 1892* (Abilene: Reflector Publishing Co., 1902), 5–6; *Friends in Council, Minutes, October 29, 1889, December 19, 1893, January 15, 1901, April 2, 1901.* In the years following 1901 the members of the Friends in Council were continually involved in discussion and activities of civil and charitable importance.


27. *Club Member* 7 (October 1900): 13.


liers' Military Home at Leavenworth, and the Soldiers' Orphans' Home At Atchison. The PEO, Order of the Eastern Star, and other groups provided homes for the aged and indigent among their membership. This is but a partial listing of charitable institutions founded and funded by women's clubs. Once established, the women's next duty was to give these institutions permanence by persuading the state to take them over. The work of the more loosely organized federated clubs was generally to furnish and give aid to already established institutions, for which they provided money, clothing, coal, food, furnishings, books, and so forth. More importantly, they lobbied the state to take over the funding and maintenance of these institutions. However, even after the state assumed the facilities, women's clubs remained active and interested. The Friends in Council in 1896 discussed a letter telling of the effort made by Hutchinson women's clubs to secure a library for the reformatory at Hutchinson and sent money to aid the clubs in their efforts. The Topeka Federation of Women's Clubs collected sewing materials so the girls at the Industrial School (by that time a state institution) could make extra money. In 1906, each member of the Good Government Club sent a book to the Boys' Industrial School, and in 1920 the club investigated the Crittenton Home and its needs. And the PEO furnished a room in the Wichita Children's Home in 1910 and a room in the Christian Service League in 1921. This is a small sample of what the clubs did for the charitable homes which had already been established and funded by the state.

However, the work of investigating, reporting, petitioning, lobbying, and voting for better conditions within established institutions was more important than the charities of the clubs. The Emporia Women's Club in 1912 investigated conditions at the county home (the poor farm) and as a result of its investigations, petitioned for a new one. In 1908 Alice Haldeman, in conjunction with the State Federation's work with the Girls' Industrial School, wrote to Mrs. W. A. Johnston in despair over the living conditions at the school: "I would do most anything I could to do away with those dreadful dormitories." The women's clubs lobbied the state government to provide single rooms for the school, knowing that self-esteem and dignity were important for rehabilitation. Johnston, while she was president of the KEA in 1912-13, was appointed an inspector of the state charitable and correctional homes and, along with Genevieve Chalkley, made official reports to the governor. The Club Member in 1907 reported that the State Federation was investigating civil service reform in charitable institutions. The Friends in Council urged the City Federation to take up the question of establishing a hospital in Lawrence. The Council of Women, a group made up of the presidents and vice-presidents of the statewide women's organizations in Kansas, lobbied for five years for industrial farm reformatorys and for dormitories for women at the colleges. The act of working in and for these institutions made the Kansas women aware of conditions which led to poverty, disease, and disorder and gave them valuable information about government procedures.

The women's clubs took up local civic work as part of their municipal housekeeping responsibilities. They lobbied for street paving, sidewalks, and parks and playgrounds, and they established rest rooms (lounges) for women coming to town from the country. An adjunct of the library establishment movement was the highly successful "traveling libraries." Initially funded and staffed by women's clubs, the traveling libraries consisted of trunks of books which could be sent to any church, school, or club requesting them; the organization would receive fifty books for six months. By 1899 the state legislature passed a law establishing the Traveling Libraries Commission, and the women's work was reduced to the promotion and extension of services.

Public education had been one of women's concerns since Catharine Beecher made her plea for women to become schoolteachers in the 1840s. In Kansas the constitution allowed women to vote for

30. Ibid., 41-51; Women's Relief Corps, 4; Hale, "Club Movement in Kansas," 422, 427; Hartley, Our Golden Heritage, 236.
31. Friends in Council, Minutes, March 31, 1906; Club Member 8 (February 1910); 3; Good Government Club, Topeka, Minutes, March 17, 1906, Good Government Club Papers, Manuscripts Department, Kansas State Historical Society; Hartley, Our Golden Heritage, 32.
34. See, for example, the reports to Gov. Walter R. Stubs on the Girls' Industrial School in Beloit (January 7, 1913), the State Home for the Feeble-minded (May 11, 1911), the Kansas School for the Blind (December 14, 1911), the State Orphans' Home (February 19, 1912), the Olathe State Hospital (April 1, 1912), and the Boys' Industrial School (May 11, 1911), box 2, Lucy Brown Johnston Papers. Johnston was only one of the visiting committee; Genevieve Chalkley was mentioned by name in the February 19, 1912, letter. Note that many of these visits came during the 1912 suffrage campaign. See also Club Member 4 (March 1907); 12; Friends in Council, Minutes, May 6, 1902; Women's Clubs Clipbooks, 4:107.
school boards from statehood on; thus schools were natural places for the clubs to focus their attention. The WCTU led the way by inserting scientific temperance instruction into high school and normal school curricula. The temperance instruction was not merely propagandistic; it had the students performing chemical experiments on alcohol in order to describe its physical properties, and it used many modern "hands-on" techniques to give students science lessons. The study clubs took up other specific educational causes. The members read papers on educational theory and learned about the kindergarten movement, about diseases spread by the common drinking cup, and about inequities in female teachers' salaries. In 1894, after arguments over involving itself in practical work, the Friends in Council undertook on-site investigations of the Lawrence High School. It looked at heating, ventilation, teaching methods, and deportment. In the end the club called for female school board members, made specific recommendations to the school board, appointed a committee to see that its recommendations were implemented, and returned to its studies of Chaucer. Many other clubs, in a tradition which continues today, provided scholarships for women in high school, normal school, and college and pushed for practical courses of study in an era of classical training. PTAs called for playgrounds and school nurses. In 1914, the Leavenworth Civic League established a night school for boy and girl wage earners. 37

Another aspect of civic improvement was the clubs' concern for pure food and water and municipal sanitation. The WCTU made pure water an important part of its campaign against liquor, for obvious reasons. The Friends in Council studied sanitation, reservoirs, pure food bills, meat inspection, communicable diseases, and so on. These studies were generally not attached to specific recommendations for action, but they prepared the way for reformers. By 1908, Dr. Samuel J. Crumbine, the first Kansas public health official, could say, "Many of the reform movements, both

political and sociological, have had their birth in Kansas... [Danger to the public] has been lightened and the future results are much more hopeful, because of the hearty cooperation and support of the club women. In 1909 the Kansas City Council of Clubs took up the campaign for public health. The members protested against rubbish in the streets and called for a better garbage collection system. Through their emphasis on public health, women became aware of the concerted efforts needed to make an impact upon government. They learned how to exert pressure against a slow-moving, reluctant governmental structure, and each campaign in which they were involved gave them experience for the next reform.

The next phase of reform work was legislative — lobbying for child labor laws, pushing for hour and wage legislation, insisting upon thorough enforcement of liquor laws, and fighting for woman suffrage. In some of these reforms, the women were heavily influenced by the social theory and activities of urban areas. Settlement house work, with its emphasis on social reform going beyond band-aid relief, was watched closely by Kansas women. College women from Kansas gained firsthand experience in settlement houses, and Jane Addams' books were studied in the literary clubs. Because Addams had a sister in Girard, Kansas, she had frequent speaking engagements in the state. In fact, she was one of the few outside campaigners in the 1912 suffrage referendum campaign. The concept of the Consumers' League was debated in study clubs and gained credence because the club women knew it was a powerful force for reform. The presence in the state of radical newspapers, and of the Grange organizations and Farmers' Alliances, made Kansas a place where sweeping reforms seemed feasible.

Prohibition was law in Kansas before the Kansas women were highly organized. However, enforcement of prohibition was their ongoing concern. When Carry Nation took her ax to saloons, she was not attacking hole-in-the-wall operations; she broke elaborate mirrors over grand backbars and exposed places which arrogantly and blatantly disregarded the law. Municipal suffrage was gained in Kansas precisely because women felt they needed control over liquor; in 1887 the WCTU, with its political structure, joined the KEISA to win the city vote for women. The antiliquor reform forces, with their understanding of the misery of women dominated by alcoholic husbands, their fears of teenage drinking, and their comprehension of the inadequate safeguards of women's rights, tied their reforms to woman suffrage.

Kansas had always been a leader in the campaign for women's rights. Clarina Howard Nichols lobbied the 1859 Wyandotte Constitutional Convention for woman suffrage, and while she lost that battle, she gained women the unprecedented right to acquire and possess property and to retain equal custody of their children. The first state referendum for woman suffrage in the United States was held in Kansas in 1867, and although it did not succeed, the battle went on. In 1894 another statewide referendum was held; attempts to bring the issue to a referendum were made again in 1904 and almost every year thereafter until 1912, when pressure from all the organized women's groups caused the amendment to be passed.

The large number of women who were involved in a variety of clubs and organizations enabled the reform-minded to influence and mobilize their clubs. Mrs. S. A. Thurston, the WCTU member responsible for getting the state to take responsibility for the Girls' Industrial School in 1889, was the treasurer of the Kansas Equal Suffrage Association in 1912. F. G. Adams wrote to Susan B. Anthony (November 26, 1885), about the joint efforts of club women for suffrage:

Among the influences tending to increase the suffrage sentiment in Kansas, may be mentioned those growing out of the active part women are taking in the discussion of political, economical, moral and social questions, through their participation in the proceedings of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, the State Temperance Union, the Woman's Social Science Association, the Kansas Academy of Science, the Grange, the State and local Teachers' Associations.
and many other organizations... and in the part they take in discussions, they show their capacity to grapple with the political, social, and scientific problems of the day, in such a manner as to demonstrate their ability to perform the highest duties of citizenship."

Other women used their membership in organizations to reinforce their suffrage sentiments. Margaret Hill McCarter, a prominent member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and a popular novelist, continually called for suffrage for women, as did attorney Lilla Day Monroe and Elizabeth Barr. All three edited the Club Member in the years immediately preceding 1912. Monroe appeared before the State Federation of Labor to call for suffrage in 1908 and every year thereafter until state suffrage passed in 1912.

The variety of organizations to which the suffrage women belonged was impressive. Johnston, for example, was president of the 1912 KESA, a temperance worker (although apparently not affiliated with the WCTU), a prime mover in the Traveling Libraries movement, a member of the Atlantean Club in Minneapolis, Kansas, a member of the Good Government Club in Topeka, a national official in the General Federation, a member of the Kansas Social Science Club, a member of the Westside Forestry Club, Topeka, and a founder of the Woman's Kansas Day Club. She was not extraordinary in the diversity of her memberships, only more fully recorded."

That these women were interested in larger legislative issues leading to social reform can easily be documented. Lilla Day Monroe called for endorsement of suffrage by the state federation of labor unions through the following resolution:

Whereas, There are over five million women employed in the industries of our country, assuming the same risks and responsibilities as the men; and

Whereas, The employing class use all their political power to defeat any legislation tending to improve

Supporters of woman suffrage posed with Gov. Arthur Capper (front row, left) on the steps of the capitol in August 1916.
the condition of the women and girls toiling in factories, mills and sweat-shops; and
Whereas, Women have no way through political action to better their condition; therefore, be it
Resolved...that we pledge ourselves to do all in our power to procure for women political freedom and the privilege to participate in the management of our government. 46

In March 1887, one month after municipal suffrage was passed, the age of protection for girls was raised from ten to eighteen years. The WCTU and the KESA had worked for this legislation, hoping to keep adolescent girls out of the clutches of pimps and white slave traders. Immediately after the 1912 suffrage amendment passed, letters flowed in to Johnston with pleas for reform measures. From La Crosse came a plea against a bill to exclude women from jury duty and for an eight-hour maximum working day for women. The Wichita City Federation of Women’s Clubs endorsed a resolution for a minimum wage bill and a mother’s compensation act (what is now called Aid to Dependent Children). Requests for materials on citizenship education to prepare women for the vote flooded the suffrage headquarters. Dora F. B. Mitchell offered a hope that the passage of suffrage would encourage women to study the industrial system and economic conditions of the country. Other requests included lobbying for a bill for equal property rights for women and instituting a close study of the age of consent for girls. 47

From their inception, the KESA, the WCTU, and the WRC supported and campaigned for better laws and better law enforcement. State prohibition (1880) was a primary focus of their activities, but as other problems surfaced, the women’s clubs joined professional groups to work toward amelioration. For example, the State Child Labor Organization, under the direction of the National Child Labor Committee, had club woman and ardent suffragist Lilla Day Monroe as its first vice-president in 1908; Catherine Hoffman, of Enterprise, was also active in the organization. Gene-

46. Proceedings of the Twelfth Annual Convention of the State Society of Labor and Industry Held at Topeka, Kansas, Feb. 3, 4 and 5, 1908 (Topeka: State Printer, 1908), 538.
47. Susan B. Anthony and Ida Husted Harper, eds., History of Women Suffrage (Rochester, N.Y.: Susan B. Anthony, 1902), 4:651; letters to Johnston from Dora F. B. Mitchell, December 6, 1912; Campbell Bell, January 3, 1913; Sadie Kendall, January 7, 1913; H. C. Wirick, January 23, 1913; Mattie Brit Hail, January 25, 1913; Minerva C. Babbs, January 27, 1913; Mrs. Park Morse, January 23, 1913, all in box 5, Lucy Browne Johnston Papers.

Like many women of her day, Lucy Browne Johnston was involved in a variety of activities. Her own interests ranged from temperance and woman suffrage to the traveling libraries movement.

view Howland Chalkley, who joined Johnston on her inspection tours of state institutions in 1912, became the first female member of the three-person Industrial Welfare Commission, established in 1915 to oversee working conditions for women and children. 48

The work of Kansas women’s clubs was prior to, although absolutely consistent with, the reforms associated with progressivism. The measures for which the women fought were, even in 1880, progressive reform items. The institutions the women built were, at their own behest, taken over by state and federal governments. Kansas women’s actions were consistent with those of other reformist groups, like settlement workers, throughout the nation. But they were sometimes ahead of the larger national movement.

Finally, it is necessary to ask what ramifications these social welfare and reform activities had on history, particularly the history of women. It is clear that the women of Kansas, as well as elsewhere, helped move the country away from single-minded laissez-faire economics. The clubs successfully insisted that the state had a responsibility for human welfare; they also gave impetus to the professionalization of welfare services. However, it is not so clear that the women's activities had any effect on changing conventional ideologies about the nature of women and their proper sphere. Evidence that those basic ideas were unchanged lies both in the specifics of the social reforms advocated and in the diminishing of women's activities around 1920.

Although an agricultural depression plagued the farm states throughout the 1920s, during those years the club women decreased their welfare activities, until by 1925 they had returned to the private "lady benevolent" stances of the 1870s. The conservative politics of the nation were mirrored in Kansas; by the early twenties, the DAR and WRC were restricting their public activities to Americanization programs, centering around anticommmunist propaganda. They no longer involved themselves in reform or charitable activities. The League of Women Voters, formed from the equal suffrage associations, began a chapter in Wichita in 1919 but acquired no statewide support. The Good Government Club, a Topeka-based suffrage organization which never joined the League, in 1925 distributed jingoistic hate literature against urban social reformers' efforts to nationalize a child labor law.9

How is one to account for this narrowing and reducing of the widespread programs of earlier years? One answer certainly lies in the ideology of the reform movements, an ideology which can be readily observed through an analysis of the club women's activities.

Jill Conway points out, in her essay on Jane Addams, that "new ways of behaving do not necessarily evoke any new view of the female temperament."58 Kansas women, through their organizations, engaged in a myriad of public activities, moving swiftly and forcibly out of their domestic spheres. However, the slogans which pulled the women from their homes and the reforms for which they lobbied show they did not change the traditional view of woman's place. The WCTU insisted that suffrage was desirable in order to maintain the home; it called for "Home Protection." This slogan ignored women's basic rights or women's need for emancipation from the domestic ideology. It insinuated that reforms were necessary to bolster the health of women's private domestic sphere. Likewise, the cry of "municipal housekeeping," around which many club women rallied, generalized the concept that women were naturally best at that which resembled domestic duties. In some ways these slogans were political ploys to engage women who were against the more radical ideologies of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and to allay the fears of males, who viewed the women's rights movement with alarm. But while such slogans aided a short-term success, in the long run they paved the way for the failure of the emancipation of women and thus cut short women's full movement into the public sphere. The Kansas women were like the urban reformers Conway speaks of — "aggressive, hard-working, independent, pragmatic, and rational in every good cause but that of feminism."51

An analysis of the reform activities of the women's organizations verifies their preoccupations with reforms which spoke only to appropriate domestic issues. Women called for prohibition to save homes from the depredations of alcohol. They worked to protect children through advocacy of child labor laws and strict truancy laws. They inspected schools and institutions for sanitary conditions and moral behaviors, natural concerns of the domestic sphere. They worked for mothers' pensions to keep homes together, and for the reformation and rehabilitation of prostitutes to save their boys from venereal disease. Other reforms were based on the concept of women's natural frailty and mothering duties. The club women lobbied for minimum wage and maximum hour laws to give working women living wages; they did not advocate equal pay for equal work. The clubs supervised working conditions for women, inspecting business operations, for example, to be sure female clerks had seats provided for them. They did not insist upon similar amenities for male clerks. In part, they felt male clerks, through their unions, could provide for themselves; however, they were also operating under the assumption that because women were trailer and because they might become mothers, they were in need of extra protec-

49. Of particular interest is the club's commendation of the DAR's attack on Florence Kelley, general secretary of the National Consumers' League. In this item, entitled No. 2 of Series Club Women and the 20th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, the child labor amendment is called a "Communistic measure" and an entire piece of red propaganda and its proponents labeled "Wayfaring Welfare." "Miscellaneous and Undated Material," Good Government Club Papers. The Good Government Club was organized in 1905 as a lobbying organization for suffrage and social reform, and almost all the Topeka suffragists including Johnston belonged to it in the teens. At that time it lobbied for minimum wage and maximum hour laws and for state child labor laws.


51. Ibid., 174.
tion. When the equal suffrage and temperance workers advocated a woman's right to refuse connubial relationships, they did not do so in terms of her right to her own body. They did so in terms of the health of the unborn children. In other words, the activities of the women involved the welfare of others, particularly children, and ideas about women's particular fitness and responsibility in the domestic sphere. Thus, while women engaged in activities which were far removed from their domestic enclosures, the specific reforms advocated did not touch the basic domestic ideologies of their lives. The miles which club women traveled, their sophisticated networking systems, their public speaking and political lobbying, their enormous success in achieving social reforms must be admired. Women's clubs pulled women into a public arena and taught them how to act, and they acted effectively. However, they did not examine the bases of their actions. They did not concern themselves with women's equality and thus left untouched the problems which so haunt us today.

When the women who joined organizations and worked to clean up the streets found that most of their immediate goals were achieved, they returned to their homes, as tradition would dictate. There, however, they found their work diminished. Local, state, and federal governments had taken over most of the specific activities in which they had been engaged previously; prohibition and suffrage, which had been their most important concerns, were achieved. In going home, women could place their faith in domestic tranquility, in democratic procedures, in the votes of their own sisters. Yet their home sphere was narrowed by the success of their activities. They no longer had crusades to spur them to aggressive, independent action. In their clubs they were reduced to single, sometimes erratic issues such as flags in the schools and antibolshevism, or to Tuesday teas and bridge parties. Whatever their public successes, they had to go back to the domestic enclosure, now more limited than before, because that was what they had fervently extolled in their public crusades. Women's clubs, by the 1920s, were diminished in scope and reduced to the trivialis-ties they had so long eschewed.

Whether this diminishment was a national phenomenon remains to be studied. Certainly the figures of national importance to feminist consciousness — Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, Charlotte Perkins Gilman — did not acquire the national adulation of Frances Willard or Jane Addams. Recent studies of Addams and Willard verify that in their writings and speeches, they too fell into the trap of domestic idealization.

Local club histories, most written some years after the time period studied in this paper, reveal an ignorance of the welfare and reform activities of the groups. The social functions of the clubs are expanded upon in the histories, while the reform activities are all but ignored. Only in contemporary documents — newspaper articles, conference schedules, magazine reports — and in letters and diaries do the extent and impact of the clubs reveal themselves. And after 1920 or so these same documents reveal the changed nature of the women's organizations.

Women's clubs in frontier Kansas adapted themselves to the social environment and proceeded to re-form it. They did so collectively, not individually, and in doing so formed the base for a humane society. Members studied problems, like alcoholism, that defied easy solutions. In doing so they enriched their own and others' lives. They were feisty, intelligent, thoughtful, and hard working. As civilization they succeeded in being the conscience of the frontier.

Footnote: 52. Conway's essay is the single most important analysis of the insidious effects of domestic ideologies on women reformers. However, Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870–1930." Feminist Studies 5 (Fall 1979): 512–29, n. 7, argues that the bonding between women, exhibited in the women's organizations, is an essential quality of feminism and suggests that "any female-dominated activity that places a positive value on women's social contributions, provides personal support, and is not controlled by antifeminist leadership has feminist political potential" and is "prefeminist."