

# As We Began...

1919-1944

*(This section of this volume is a synopsis of Volume I which was written by Mrs. Geline MacDonald Bowman and Miss Earlene White, Past National Presidents, and published in 1944 for the celebration of BPW's 25th Anniversary. Although currently out of print, Volume I is available for further study at the Marguerite Rawalt Resource Center in our National Headquarters in Washington, D.C.)*

The nation was consumed by the 'war to end all wars'! The United States had joined the European conflict in 1917 and was busy with the work of switching from a civilian to a wartime economy. It was not until then that national leaders realized that there was no unified means to mobilize this country's womanpower in the event of an emergency. Secretary of War, Newton Baker, sent out an urgent call to make womanpower available for the war effort. The War Department learned that the women of the nation were organized into religious, cultural and fraternal groups. The only unorganized group seemed to be the business and professional women of the nation.

That information resulted in a survey conducted by the War Work Council, a group formed to further the war effort of women and comprised of personnel and department executives of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). They operated under government authorization with a \$65,000 grant established to organize any specialized group that might have particular value to the government in this war emergency. That was the beginning.

The YWCA, with its large network of well-established branches in nearly every state, made the necessary contacts with representative and influential women. It was their intention to initiate communication between women in many jobs and professions. An invitation was issued to two representative business and professional women from each state east of the Rocky Mountains to meet for a two-day conference in the Ann Fulton Cafeteria of the YWCA in New York City on May 11 and 12, 1918. There were 100 women in attendance.

A committee was formed to be known as the National Business Women's Committee. It was made up of 25 key women from among the delegates at this initial meeting. They called for an immediate survey of the Pacific Coast (since only one delegate from that area was in attendance) and called for an Executive Secretary who could give her entire time to further the interests of this new organization. The choice fell upon Lena Madesin Phillips, a newly arrived Secretary of the National Board of the YWCA.

Before Miss Phillips could begin her work, however, the Armistice was signed and there were no longer any war requirement needs. However, those women who had made the trip to New York would not be denied. What a good idea: a broad organization of women from all training, professions and disciplines! The Secretary of War felt that the formation of this organization was important enough to be considered as a post-war project, and he authorized the use of the \$65,000 to that end.

Plans were made. The National Business Women's Committee divided the nation into five districts and placed an organizer in each one. Women were anxious to be a part of this new endeavor. By March, 1919, organizing was going so well that the Committee recommended to the War Work Council that State Federations now be formed and

*During these years when we were focussed on the establishment of this organization, the world became a different place to live. Prohibition was passed in addition to the Women's Suffrage Amendment. Daylight Savings Time was introduced into this country for the first time and Air Mail service was begun between New York City and Washington. Thomas Alva Edison had invented both the camera and recorded sound by this time and a new industry in Hollywood was founded. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were the royalty of the movies and Charlie Chaplin made us laugh. "Gasoline Alley" was our comic strip of choice in the daily paper. We didn't really notice the Russian Revolution which began during this time but were terribly frightened by the influenza epidemic which swept this country killing over 400,000 citizens. Missouri had just become the last state to institute compulsory school attendance when we met there for our first convention, and the inflation in New York City had risen 79% during the war years! Milk was now 15¢ a quart! Dial telephones were introduced and a new typewriting speed record was established by Margaret B. Owen in New York City. She typed 170 words a minute with no errors!*

invitations be extended to a national meeting to be held in the center of the country.

Delegates were called to the first national convention of this new permanent organization of business and professional women. It was held in St. Louis in July, 1919. The response was overwhelming! There were 212 delegates from 45 states (three missing) and over 400 in attendance. They overflowed the downtown Statler Hotel!

It was hot in St. Louis with no air conditioning and no microphones to make speeches easier. The heat wrinkled those linen suits and high-necked blouses. However, the women were embarked on a mission which could not be discouraged nor denied.

The meeting was called to order by a temporary chair, Florence Spencer, one of the five district organizers. In the absence of a gavel, she borrowed a wooden box of pins to rap for attention. Each day, a bulletin called "Can Happen" (the first BPW magazine) was distributed to the delegates. Three days later the delegates had accepted the organization's new name: The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs; adopted a constitution; and elected its first national president, Gail Laughlin, a California attorney.

There was much interest in the founding of this new organization. Good Housekeeping magazine wrote: "From the heart of this group, the future of America looks very fair indeed. The newly-born Federation of Business and Professional Women has a glorious future....The weight of its influence will be felt in the coming elections....Politicians are watching it even at its birth. They see the handwriting on the wall, and know that woman's day has dawned." It should be noted, after all, that women were about to vote for the first time in the upcoming 1920 national elections.

The new Federation came out of its first convention with a solid record of accomplishment. It had urged the opening of all Civil Service examinations to women as well as to men, and it had asked that official rank be given to all nurses who had served in the World War. It had endorsed the principles of both a Federal and a State Employment

Service and had recommended that the Federation tabulate all possible information regarding working conditions for women.

Before the group left St. Louis, it had set a structure that would last 75 years and beyond. Committees were named: Legislation, Research, Publicity, Finance and Membership. An Executive Director—Lena Madesin Phillips—was named and the delegates voted to pay her the yearly sum of \$5,000. A magazine was planned immediately in order to communicate with the membership. It was called *Independent Woman*.

The first headquarters for this new Federation were established in the Flatiron Building at the intersection of Fifth Avenue and 23rd Street in New York City. It had a staff of three.

Before the first year was over, twenty-five State Federations were formed plus a Federation which included all of the New England states. One of the early tasks taken on by the organization (in addition to building membership) was the collection of data for a directory of business and professional women.

Over 500 women attended the second convention held in St. Paul, Minnesota, and established an exhibit area, state breakfasts and dinners, and state caucuses for the first time. They have continued to be a feature at national meetings throughout the years.

The 'roaring '20s' were swift and hectic. Women began to be liberated from traditional roles and the country took note. With the rise of modern corporations, millions of white-collar jobs opened up for young women and many of those women now had high school diplomas for the first time.

Education was important to this fledgling organization and resulted in a plan for close cooperation with business schools of all types. Scholarships to 300 business schools were initiated by local clubs and state federations during the early years. Members worked hard to encourage girls to complete their high school education and set up opportunities for young women to secure additional vocational education. Every urban school was encouraged to 'adopt' a rural school. Vocational luncheons at national conventions began in order that women with similar jobs could share experiences and problems. Clearly this was the beginning of today's networking.

During the 1920s the Federation selected an emblem, adopted Mary Stewart's Collect, chose green and gold as the organization's colors and established Business Women's Week with the slogan, "A Better Business Woman for a Better Business World." Dues were raised from 25 cents to \$2.00 yearly and there was a surplus in the Treasury!

Legislation that would benefit working women was high on the group's priority list right from the beginning. BPW supported extending the merit system in government employment to cover more jobs. It wanted to see the appointment of women to supervisory posts in industrial groups and endorsed the movement to secure uniform marriage and divorce laws throughout the United States in addition to the bills which would grant independent citizenship to women regardless of what their husband's citizenship might be. From the beginning, three major issues shaped BPW's legislative agenda: elimination of sex discrimination in employment; the principle of equal pay; and the need for a comprehensive equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution to cover women's legal rights.

During these years, BPW had endorsed participation in the League of Nations and the World Court by the United States. It had also established an International Relations

Committee. Members wanted to be sure that peace was permanent. The organization worked tirelessly for the establishment, funding and substantive work of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor. It established the first national scholarship for working women: the Lena Lake Forrest Fund, which still exists today, and finally moved

from an annual convention (attended by over 1,000 women in 1927) to a biennial convention with regional meetings in the off-years which began in 1930.

There were two Goodwill Tours of Europe in 1928 and 1929 to establish communication with business women abroad. Fourteen countries were visited under the leadership of Lena Makesin Phillips. This effort led to the founding of the International Federation in 1930 with the U.S. Federation as a charter member and Miss Phillips as the International Founder-President.

The story of Business and Professional Women during the 1930s is really the story of this nation. During the Depression, the Federation helped its members develop new types of job opportunities and assisted various government advisory commission in dealing with economic problems.

The five-day work week was becoming standard procedure in these years in order to share the job with others who were out of work. The Federation gave its all-out support to the National Anti-Hoarding Campaign and participated in 'Prosperity Day' when everyone in every community was encouraged to make at least one purchase in order to stimulate business.

The first biennial convention was held in Richmond, Virginia when BPW again stressed the value of a better education that would produce better citizens for the United States. Members also were encouraged to register and vote in all elections to achieve the legislative priorities set by the organization.

BPW worked to prohibit legislation or directives which denied jobs to married women. Members lobbied hard for the removal of legislative language that permitted job preference to the unmarried or, in the case of a married couple, preference for the husband. They called for the first time for equal pay for women, and took the first poll of political candidates running for local, state and national

*What a decade! The nation boomed after the war years. Women could vote. Women left the farm and took jobs in the city. Women bobbed their hair and raised their hemlines. The country was singing pure silliness such as "Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-Der-E", "Barney Google", and "Yes, We Have No Bananas". The symbol of female liberation was none other than the automobile. In 1922 women were seen driving the open road and by 1925, there were advertisements crafted to appeal to women who had jobs and money to purchase an auto. Median earnings for working women were \$1,545. Agatha Christie began her writing career and "Abie's Irish Rose" swept the New York stage. Marie Curie, co-discoverer of radium, was presented by President Warren Harding with a capsule of radium worth \$100,000, contributed by American women, to aid in her research. The first woman governor in U.S. history, Nellie Ross, was inaugurated Governor of Wyoming. Walt Disney introduced Mickey Mouse, and George Gershwin composed "An American in Paris". KDKA-Pittsburgh came on the air and radio became a fixture of our lives. Amelia Earhart (a BPW member) was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic Ocean and Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel. Life was really the 'Cat's Meow'! We lived it up and there was no end in sight to the prosperity we planned in America. However, on October 29, 1929, it all came crashing down around our heads. The Depression had begun.*

office on: "issues relating to the progress of women, and, in particular, of self-supporting women".

In 1929 BPW had begun to fund a dream of Lena Madelin Phillips: to move the national office from New York to Washington to take better advantage of the political and legislative needs of the organization. That, of course, had to be placed on 'hold' during the Depression. However, that did not deter BPW from developing the organization and moving it closer to that end.

The Richmond convention adopted a 10-year Objective for the Federation: "To develop leadership in economic thinking to the end that its membership might help reconstruct this social order in such a way as to enable both women and men to develop whatever capacities they might possess and to be adequately rewarded for their labors."

BPW participated in some early coalition work at the national level. There were meetings and close cooperation between BPW and the American Association of University Women, the National League of Women Voters, the National Woman's Party, and the Young Women's Christian Association. They met together to establish a working relationship in their organizations to effect economic security, efficiency in government, sound educational standards and international cooperation.

During the 1930s BPW compiled the first Handbook of the Federation and was the first organization to have a uniform national program and to publish guidelines for the use of the local clubs. "Legislation A-B-Cs" also made its appearance to point to the increased interest and activity displayed by the membership. After a two-year intense study, the Equal Rights Amendment was elevated from a Resolution to a full plank on the Legislation Platform. Endorsement came at the 1937 Biennial Convention in Atlantic City.

Leadership Institutes were set up at the local level to increase womanpower in local communities. National President Geline MacDonald Bowman was asked to meet with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to express BPW's goal of expanding roles for women and its insistence that employment discrimination needed to end. BPW also supported a national plan for unemployment insurance and dealt with the employability of women, particularly of older women, who often found themselves unemployed when employers began to hire young and inexperienced women whose services might be obtained for a lesser salary. BPW also called for a Cabinet-level Department of Education and directed its own effort toward the appointment of trained vocational counselors to assist young people in the nation's secondary schools in choosing a career. Jury service for women was fought for in every legislative hall.

Because of the Federation's participation in studies by the League of Nations and the International Labor Organization, BPW became aware early in the 1930s that the rise of dictators to power would result in pushing the status of women still further back in the dictator-ridden countries of Europe and Asia. Germany had begun to restrict its women from any participation in public life. In China the government was beginning to tell its women how high their collars could be, and was regulating the length of their sleeves.

To keep the membership aware of these actions against their colleagues in other countries, and to be alert to any discriminatory actions that might take place in the U.S., the *Independent Woman* established two departments: Capitol Comments and Woman

and Her World. A part of the International Relations Committee work centered around assistance to women refugees who had fled from hostile political regimes in other countries.

The Federation made a direct request to the President of the United States to appoint a woman to the Supreme Court in 1938, and it was very clear in its opposition to any protective legislation that would deny women employment opportunities regardless of either domestic or international crises!

*With little or no extra dollars to spend, Americans centered their activities around home and family. We loved the new comic strip, "Blondie", and played Monopoly with a vengeance. Jigsaw puzzles and hand work (knitting, woodworking, etc.) occupied our fingers. 1,300 banks closed; 4.5 million Americans were unemployed. Governor Nellie Ross had now become Director of the U.S. Mint, and Arkansas sent to Washington the first woman elected to the U.S. Senate: Hattie Caraway. BPW lost its aviation pioneer, Amelia Earhart, over the Pacific Ocean in 1937. The Golden Gate Bridge opened as did the Baseball Hall of Fame. We saw a King (Edward VIII) give up his throne to marry an American (Wallis Simpson), and we saw Frances Perkins become the first woman cabinet officer (Labor Secretary). Our music reflected the times: "Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?", "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?", and "Stormy Weather". The Dionne Quintuplets were born; "Life" magazine was founded; the rhumba was our dance; and John Dillinger was killed. Prohibition was repealed. Imperialism continued on two continents and the Women's voluntary Services was founded in Britain by Lady Reading. We read John Steinbeck and Daphne du Maurier. Rogers and Hart kept our spirits up on Broadway with "The Boys From Syracuse". Gershwin wrote "Porgy and Bess" and jazz became 'swing'. We went to the movies and saw "Gone With The Wind". More to the point, however, we saw the establishment of the 40-hour work week and a ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court which provided a minimum wage law for women.*

Storm clouds of war were hovering overhead as Dr. Minnie Maffett became President in 1939. She guided this Federation for four years during the war and into the completion of its first 25 years of existence. Business and Professional Women were better prepared to mobilize womanpower for World War II than they were for World War I. In the intervening years the Federation had surveyed their membership and ticketed them into a master file. This would allow the government to call upon specialized services of business and professional women as they were not able to do during the first conflict. Moreover, the machinery was ready for instantaneous mobilization should that be necessary.

BPW issued a pamphlet, "Women Need Their Jobs" to guard against the age-old trend of pressing women into service in a period of crisis, and then sending them back home when the emergency was over. A BPW delegation also met with the War Department to press for equal pay for those women called to do 'men's jobs' as a part of the civilian work force. BPW went to bat for "Rosie the Riveter".

The organization called for a "coordinated war effort rather than a variety of sporadic efforts." It supported the admission of women into the fighting forces in the WACS, WAVES and SPARS, and campaigned strongly for the commissioning of women doctors into the Medical Corps of the U.S. Army.

"Strengthen Democracy for Defense" was the theme used as the Federation geared up for war.

All programs and efforts were aimed towards the country's needs. BPW urged its members to work with health officials to insure community health services could meet all basic and emergency needs. Federation members helped set up canteens for service men and

served as hostesses. They took first aid courses and ran Red Cross blood banks. They enrolled as air raid wardens and nurses aides; joined ration boards; and supervised local salvage committees. They donated funds to purchase mobile kitchens to send to the British BPW Federation. These members saved cooking grease for defense, rolled bandages and struggled along with the rest of the country on rationed tires, gas, sugar and food.

BPW switched its educational funds into scholarships where training could be directed to the war effort, and put its support into the drive for the recruitment of 55,000 students to swell the ranks of wartime nurses. Regional conferences were cancelled because of transportation difficulties but the Federation urged its membership to meet in smaller groups to discuss the role of women in postwar America. They continued to urge a role for women on all boards and commissions; objected to the National Service Act which barred women over fifty from the armed forces; declared the organization "unalterably opposed to any and all strikes or stoppages that impede the war effort"; and notified the government that following the end of hostilities, they expected that "qualified women would be included in the United States delegations to the peace conference."

Business and Professional Women went all-out in the campaign for the purchase of War Bonds. Its membership surpassed everyone's expectations and reached the \$10-million mark for which BPW was given a Liberty Bell Award from the War Department. Despite the war, BPW kept its interest in women of other countries. It granted a fellowship for a study of employment and training facilities open to women in South America, and began its longtime support of a nurses training program for the Republic of China.

Since its founding, this organization had remained steadfast for a better life for women through two world wars and the Great Depression. It was pledged not only to vitalize the processes of democracy within its own group but also to make its influence felt on a national and a world level. It believed in an equitable distribution of the good things of the earth and a greater measure of both opportunity and justice for the average woman.

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was twenty-five years old!