

The Women's Albany College League

Mrs. Clarence Greene, Mrs. Fletcher Linn, Mrs. F.I. Fuller, Mrs. John Lewis, Bessie Mann, MRs. Ralph Mort, Elizabeth (Mrs. Charles W.) BoDine

Long intrigued with seldom-told stories of women's voluntary organizations and auxiliaries, about 25 years ago I came across the special story of the Women's Albany College League, later known as the Women's College League. Within the Lewis & Clark archives are papers by and about the League, formed by 101 women in October of 1923 to assist in promoting the welfare of Albany College. Remarkably, at the end of its first year, the League included 1,160 members, who paid dues of one dollar per year. Although Albany College was a Presbyterian school, membership in the League was not confined to Presbyterian women, and the organization boasted "key women" in six geographical districts of the state. Their primary goal was to construct and furnish a women's Building---"a thoroughly practical building" to serve as a women's dormitory along with dining and social space.

For forty-four years, from 1923 to 1967, when the League was dissolved, the women raised funds for their various causes through teas, plays, lyceums, rummage sales, chain lunches and bazaars. In the dark depression days of 1933, when Albany College struggled financially and couldn't afford to hire a "field agent" to collect on pledges, the League took on the difficult task. Over \$10,000 was raised through a variety of creative ways. For example, a Portland soap manufacturer, caught by the depression and unable to meet his pledge, gave the women \$250 worth of soap. The women, in turn, gave the college a check for \$250 and sold the soap to friends.

One Albany president described the League as "the most dedicated and effective auxiliary organization any college could hope for." The League loaned the college money for dormitory construction and remodeling of buildings, paid for landscaping, contributed to library purchases, and helped finance a new gym. One League member, Bessie Mann, served for a period during the depression as Dean of Women and Head Resident for the dormitory—without pay.

League women started saving in 1923 for a "women's building," but Albany College always seemed to have other priorities in mind. Finally, in 1931, a foundation for the women's building was poured, only to be roofed over later to serve as chemistry laboratories.

Beginning in 1940 and into the early months of WWII, Albany College, although burdened by debt and lacking accreditation, sought a new president and a permanent site in Portland. Weatherly Heights, twenty acres on Mt. Tabor, appealed to several trustees, but the College could not meet the asking price of \$32, 500. Then word was out in 1941 that the new home for what came to be known as the "Cinderella College" might be the 65-acre M. Lloyd Frank Estate, "Fir Acres." Aaron Frank, trustee for his brother's estate, was impressed by the College's choice of Dr. Morgan Odell as president and agreed to

sell the overgrown and neglected estate, which had been built at a cost of \$1,300,000, for \$50,000, a gift price eventually reduced to \$46,000.

On behalf of the Board of Trustees, C.W. Platt, Secretary of the Board, sent a formal proposal to the Women's League, asking them to contribute all their cash and bonds to the purchase and to forgive promissory notes on loans to the College. In return, a promise was made to the League: "The Board will dedicate the principal residence or mansion house as the Women's Building and use said building as a women's dormitory and social hall, and make the same available as the residence of the dean of women and for college work in home economics, with only minor uses for other college purposes."

Soon Executive Board members of the Women's League were brought here in cars to the Frank Estate, a visit described in the organization's minutes of July 1941:

Upon our arrival at the Estate, [our president] Mrs. Mort explained to us that the Board of Trustees were negotiating with the owners for the purchase of this property for the College, and that the Board had expressed its willingness to dedicate the principal building or mansion house to the Women's College League as a women's building. Mrs. Mort wished the Executive Board to thoroughly inspect the property with this idea in mind.

After the tour, the recorder continued, "We assembled on the lawn in front of the Mansion, and Mrs. Ralph Mort called the meeting to order by asking for guidance, by a Circle of Prayers, from the members."

The League voted unanimously "to turn over our assets to Albany College in consideration of the dedication of the 'mansion house' on the Lloyed Frank Estate as the 'women's building'." As Martha Montague wrote in her history of Lewis & Clark College, "The Albany College Women's League stripped its treasury for the project." Additionally the League resolved to raise funds to furnish the "Women's Building."

One June 29, 1942, one day prior to completion of the purchase of Fir Acres, account of the Women's League showed a net worth of \$14,477.77, including over \$6,000 in cash assets, US Savings Bonds, and Albany College bonds, and about \$8,000 in Albany College promissory notes, which the League forgave. The League also released the Board of Trustees of its promise to repay \$9,591.64 invested by the League in dormitories on the Albany campus.

A conservative calculation of the League's contribution to the June 30th purchase is about 14% of the total sale price of \$46,000. (If we include forgiveness of promissory notes, the contribution is about 30%. If we include write-off of the Trustees' promise to repay the League's dormitory investments, the figure is over 50% of the sale price.)

With the help of the League, newly named Lewis & Clark College opened in September of 1942, for 135 students. The L&C Bulletin reported: "The women of Lewis & Clark College are especially fortunate in having the main house, or mansion, designated as the

Women's Building." A picture of the "Women's Building" was included with an explanation that it housed administrative offices and served as a "girl's dormitory."

The 1942-43 catalog includes this description: "The Women's Building is named in honor the Women's League of Lewis & Clark whose years of untiring devotion and financial aid helped make possible the purchase of the new campus. It is a 35-room house in the style of a Tudor country house, beautiful, durable, and complete." A sheet of floor plans reads: "The Main House is now known as the Women's Building-- built in 1924/25 at a cost of \$350,000."

College catalogs from 1942 into the early 1950s show "The Women's Building." But the 1949-50 Yearbook, the year Aiken Hall, a women's dormitory, was completed, and the 1951 campus map, the year Stewart Hall, another dorm for women, was finished, designate the building as "Palatine Manor." Archive material identifies an administrative role in the name change: "The building was known as the Women's Building for a few year. This was not a distinctive name, nor an accurate one since it was also the administration building, and in the later 1940s the girls living in the dorm rooms were given the opportunity to choose the name. From the list submitted to them, the girls chose Palatine Manor, and this name remained until 1967 when the trustees changed it to Odell Manor."

Somewhere in our history the "Women's Building," and most importantly what it represented, were lost. A variety of names have been used: Lloyd Frank Estate, Fir Acres, Main House/ Mansion House, Women's Building, Palatine Manor, the Manor House, Odell Manor, Frank Manor House. The renaming of a building is not unusual in itself, but what of the agreements with the Women's League? What of the 44 years of work by Bessie Mann, Elizabeth BoDine, Mrs. Ralph Mort, and all the others?

Today, on the occasion of the 26th Annual Gender Studies Symposium— Our Voices Ourselves— we collectively honor, celebrate and give voice to the Women's Albany College League. The plaque is both an expression of our gratitude for the women's tireless efforts for the College and an important marker for future generations who pass through these doors.

As Lewis & Clark professor and poet Kim Stafford reminds us in "Having Everything Right":

We sift from our habits
the nourishing ways:
listening, remembering, telling,
weaving a rooted companionship
with home ground.

Remarks by Professor of Communications emerita Jean Ward on March 9, 2007