

Women's Improvement League kept Normal clean and healthy

For much of its history, Normal could hardly be described as a “twin city” of Bloomington. In 1870, for instance, there were only 1,116 Normalites, or just 7 percent of Bloomington-Normal's combined population, which was 15,706 back then. By 1900, the town's population had grown to nearly 3,800, but that was still just 14 percent of the combined total of 27,081.

In fact, the town didn't start to grow in any appreciable sense until the 1960s. Today, Normal accounts for about 40 percent of the Twin City's population of more than 132,000, making it a true “twin” of Bloomington.

Perhaps Normal's small size, historically speaking, helps explain why for years town officials depended on a group of no-nonsense, strong-willed, civic-minded women to organize and fund the town's garbage collection and park and recreation programs.

Established on Jan. 30, 1907, the Normal Women's Improvement League made an immediate impact by organizing clean-up days and regularly scheduled garbage pickup in a town that had never had much of either.

During the early 20th century, there was a progressive push to promote hygiene and municipal sanitation as a means to reduce the spread of disease and promote a healthy citizenry. Remarkably, refuse collection and garbage pickup remained the Women's Improvement League's responsibility until 1919, when the town finally assumed this most basic of municipal services.

Bloomington-Normal, with its comfortable number of educated and well-off women through the years, has long been home to dozens of vibrant societies and clubs active in community betterment and the wider world. Back in the late 19th and early 20th century, at a time when the social, economic and political lives of women were greatly circumscribed by the patriarchy, their incredible reservoir of human capital—dynamic, empathetic, intellectual and powerful—was often channeled into community orientated causes and campaigns.

Leadership in the Normal Women's Improvement League, as with most local clubs and societies from the period, was all-white and skewed toward the upper middle-class. One of the founders and longtime officers was Fannie C. Fell, youngest daughter of Normal's “first family,” Jesse and Hester Fell.

Early members included Matilda Hildebrandt of Hildebrandt's Drug Store, a fixture in uptown Normal for several decades; Margaret Van Leer, who with her husband Bird Calladay (B.C.)

Van Leer, lived at Broadview Mansion on Fell Avenue; and Jennie Gowdy, a well-to-do widow from the Minneapolis, Minn., area who likely came to Normal to be with her daughter Chestine, an ISNU teacher.

Privileged though these women were, let it be said that they weren't afraid to get their hands dirty. And anyway, there was more to the Women's Improvement League than picking up garbage.

For instance, from its very beginning the league sponsored school-age gardening programs, which dovetailed well with its interrelated goals of promoting good citizenship and town beautification.

Among its many early activities, there was an annual tulip show in the spring, followed in the fall by one for asters. The third annual schoolchildren's aster show was held in mid-September 1909 at Normal city hall (this building still stands, though today it's the two-story side of the popular uptown eatery D.P. Dough.) "There were 117 entries," reported *The Pantagraph*, "and the flowers were all beautiful, showing that the children had taken great care and interest in the planting and raising of them."

Birds alighting in Normal also had a reliable ally in the Women's Improvement League, as increasing the size of the "feathered tribe" was another of its longstanding goals. A rummage sale in the spring of 1914, for example, raised money to purchase a number of bird fountains and baths, which were then placed about town.

In 1916, the league organized Normal's first Boy Scout troop. They did so by raising funds to hire a troop leader, though with the understanding that the local scouts were to assist the league in its ongoing sanitation work.

Other than garbage collection, the improvement league made its biggest mark with Fell Park, Normal's oldest public space. For years, miserly town officials all but neglected the square. "The plat of ground has been called a park for years, but never gave one that impression when looking at it," noted a disapproving *Pantagraph* in the spring of 1909. "The park as it now stands is useless except that it contains the Normal water tower. A few trees are scattered around the area and the lawn is uncared for."

From its establishment onward, the Normal Women's Improvement League was the leading advocate for the underutilized space, though its membership had little success getting the tight-fisted town to do much of anything. Eventually, these frustrated women took matters into their own hands.

From 1922 to 1955, with the exception of a few years in the 1930s, the league organized, paid for and operated supervised play programs and other recreation activities at Fell Park. Each season the league hired one or sometimes two playground supervisors, who were most often female physical education majors from ISNU. Initially, the town did little more than keep the grass cut and provide water for the drinking fountain.

Funds to support Fell Park programs were raised through various means, including semi-annual paper drives. In Nov. 1930, during the Great Depression, the league collected 5 truckloads of paper worth \$20, or more than \$300 today, adjusted for inflation.

The Normal Women's Improvement League ran the playground and other recreation programs (such as a children's theater) until 1956 when the town—at long last—began devoting public dollars and resources to a newly established parks department.

Ongoing education of its membership was another of the league's missions. Several weeks after that Nov. 1930 paper drive, the women welcomed Helen Palmer, resident psychologist at the Illinois Soldiers' Orphans' Home in Normal, to speak to them about "juvenile criminality."

Highlights of the league's many successes over the years include everything from purchasing 17,000 tulip bulbs to donating \$8,000 for a theft-proof book return box for Normal Public Library.

Yet by the late 20th century, with an aging membership base and the increasing difficulty attracting new members, the decision was made to disband the league during its centennial year. Accordingly, the end came in late June 2007, 100 years after its establishment, with a coterie of longtime members gathered at Fell Park (where else?) to reminisce and share happy and bittersweet memories of all they accomplished over the years.

The league is gone but its legacy remains, and one cannot recount the history of the town of Normal without giving due credit to the Women's Improvement League.