



## **FWC History The 1920s**

Ah, the 1920s. The suffragists, Margaret Sanger, Virginia Wolfe, Coco Chanel, and Bessie Smith were influencing American culture. Sonja Henie won the first of her 3 consecutive Olympic gold medals. Gloria Swanson and Mary Pickford were “the Bee’s Knees.” (Ann Arbor had had a movie theater since 1906.) Ford completed construction of the River Rouge Plant. The Ambassador Bridge opened. The Michigan Theater opened with an organ and a capacity of 2000. Harding and Coolidge were in the White House, while Marion Burton was succeeded by C.C. Little as U-M President. The Michigan Football Stadium opened with a capacity of 72,000. U-M elected its first woman Regent.

Meanwhile, the newly created Faculty Women’s Club was going through the growing pains of most new organizations. The definition of which women were eligible for membership seemed straight-forward enough in 1921 but ended up causing confusion despite numerous attempts to clarify it. Inexplicably, female heads of household for bachelor professors and teachers in the University High School became eligible, but not women who taught in the School of Music.

Initially, a current member was assigned to call on each eligible member to invite her to join the club, and then again to accompany her to the Fall Reception, but this, too, proved to be too difficult, especially as the university and its faculty grew.

Responsibilities had to be defined with more specificity. In November of 1922, the new Refreshments Chair resigned after a turf war with the new Clubhouse Chair.

The clubhouse turned out to be not to be the oasis originally envisioned. Not enough FWC women had the time to use it, and it was difficult to find FWC members to volunteer to be hostess for the day. The Board graciously allowed the Merrill-Palmer School, the YWCA, the law sorority, and others to use it, leading to wear and tear and scheduling conflicts. Meanwhile, the university had raised enough funds to build the Women’s League, as a counterpart to the men’s-only Michigan Union, and by the spring of 1929 the FWC moved out of the Clubhouse to rooms in the League.

In 1924, the day nursery in the clubhouse was taken over by the Merrill-Palmer School, which was developing formal academic programs in infant, toddler, and child development. The programs became popular and enrollment in the day nursery flourished, but in 1929, the Merrill-Palmer School also moved out of the Clubhouse. Attendance at the day nursery dwindled and within a few years, the section disbanded.

The original plan for two candidates for each office quickly fell in the face of reality and from the second slate onward, I believe, only one person had to volunteer for each position.



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They also realized that communication with members needed an officer of its own, freeing up the secretary. Postcard notices were, of course, hand-written, even as membership grew to 429 by the end of the decade. Thankfully, the public notices could be published in *The Michigan Daily*.

The dues were only \$1, so the club turned to selling cakes and charging for tickets to a series of dances they put on each year. One year 153 club members donated cakes, both for meeting refreshments and to sell. The extra money brought in by the cake sales was used to purchase the silver urns, and later the silver flower bowl and two trays that we use today.

Yes, there were growing pains, but there were a remarkable number of things that the FWC got right almost from day one, many of which we are still enjoying:

- The idea of sections where members with similar interests could meet in small groups
- The Fall Receptions to sign up for sections and welcome new members
- The Winter Events, which usually included husbands
- The Annual Business Meeting and Luncheons in the spring, and
- Joint Board Meetings to ease the annual leadership transition.

In addition, in the pre-television 1920s the FWC had dance parties, card parties, stunt parties, thimble parties, charades parties and formal and informal teas. Surely, some of the dances were informal, but many involved ballgowns and an orchestra in the Union Ballroom. In the 1920s, the games of choice were bridge, Mahjong and Monte Carlo Whist, which is similar to bridge. Stunt parties, involving costumes and brief skits, made friendly fun of well-known personages, like President Angel. [I envision it to be something like the National Press Club's annual Gridiron "roast" with skits.] A thimble party, I have learned, was "a chance to meet with other ladies and chat, but you were expected to bring along your mending bag and thimble so that you might work while you socialized."

By the end of the era, the original three sections (Day Nursery, Drama, and Athletics) had grown to six with the addition of the Art, Music and Garden Sections. There was a club-wide meeting every month of the academic year. One meeting each year was assigned to the Art Section, which would provide exhibitions and speakers on art-related topics. The Drama and Music Sections, separately and together, provided entertainment at several meetings/year, and the Garden Section provided flowers for the Spring Luncheon and other events.

WHERE DID THE CLUB GO FROM HERE? HOW DID IT WEATHER THE GREAT  
DEPRESSION?

Stay tuned for next month's Centennial History article.