

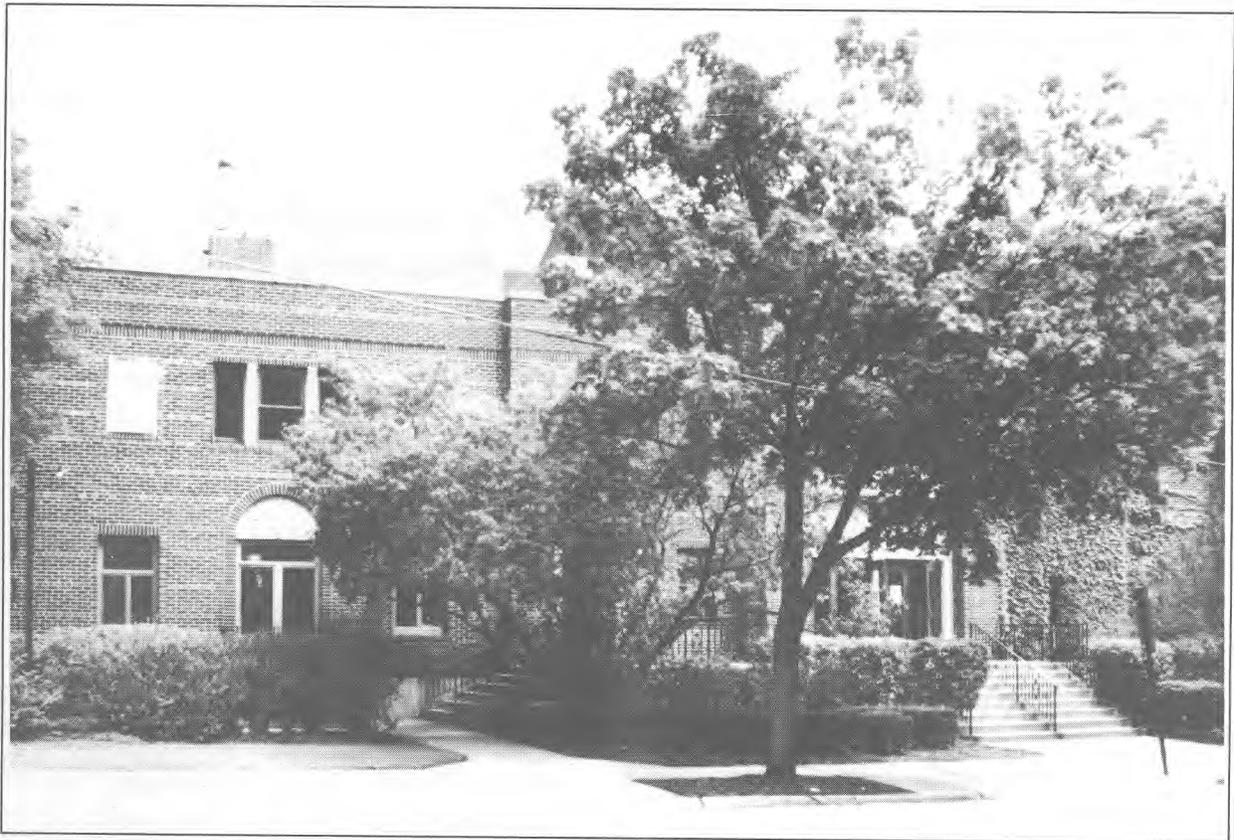
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# NUGGETS OF HISTORY

VOLUME 34 FALL 1996 NUMBER 3

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## ROCKFORD WOMAN'S CLUB 100th ANNIVERSARY



Landmark building at the corner of Park Avenue and North Church Street houses the Rockford Woman's Club.

PHOTO: PEGGY JENSEN

## FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK

In this issue, we recognize the 100th anniversary of the Rockford Woman's Club. Known during its earliest years as the Rockford Federation of Women's Clubs, this organization has made substantial contributions to the community at large. In addition to cultural and educational programs, the club offers friendship and socialization opportunities for members. Divided into departments, each emphasizes a unique aspect.

*Nuggets* contributors include past president--and 50-year member--Carolyn Plummer and current president Nancy Whitlock. Plummer's research into the club's history provided a text for presentations she's given to various local groups. An edited version appears in this issue. Whitlock, a great-great niece--by virtue of her marriage to Jonathan Whitlock--of the club's illustrious Jessie Spafford who served as president for 43 years, brings the club into its second century.

  
Peggy Jensen, Editor

### ROCKFORD WOMAN'S CLUB PRESIDENTS

|   |                                     |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1897 - 1901 Mrs. Seely Perry              | 1901 - 1902 Mrs. Ella Giddings Root |
| 1902 - 1905 Mrs. Adaline Thompson Emerson |                                     |
| 1905 - 1906 Mrs. Seely Perry              | 1907 - 1950 Miss Jessie I. Spafford |
| 1950 - 1954 Mrs. Duncan Stewart           | 1954 - 1956 Mrs. John Parker        |
| 1956 - 1960 Mrs. Fred Horton              | 1960 - 1962 Mrs. Harold Johnson     |
| 1962 - 1964 Mrs. Bert Youngquist          | 1964 - 1966 Mrs. Harry F. Carlson   |
| 1966 - 1968 Mrs. Bruce W. Johnson         | 1968 - 1970 Mrs. Dean A. Olson      |
| 1970 - 1972 Mrs. Leland Fetzer            | 1972 - 1974 Mrs. Richard Seehausen  |
| 1974 - 1976 Mrs. Ruth Clark Nihan         | 1976 - 1978 Mrs. John H. Plummer    |
| 1978 - 1980 Mrs. Thomas E. Brown          | 1980 - 1982 Mrs. Melvin C. Stutsman |
| 1982 - 1984 Mrs. Thomas W. Johnson        | 1984 - 1986 Mrs. George J. Johnson  |
| 1986 - 1988 Mrs. Thomas Moore             | 1988 - 1990 Mrs. David Apell        |
| 1990 - 1992 Mrs. Remy Smith               | 1992 - 1994 Mrs. Gareth Eberle      |
| 1994 - 1996 Mrs. Robert Mitchell          | 1996 - 1998 Nancy Whitlock          |

# ROCKFORD WOMAN'S CLUB, 1897 -1996

Adapted from a speech by Carolyn Plummer

The club's importance stems from monumental involvement in cultural, educational, philanthropic, and social functions of this community

In the latter part of the 19th century, women who wished to grow intellectually, to socialize, and to work together in philanthropic and civic endeavors formed small literary clubs. Rockford had at least 20 small women's clubs in February 1887. Then Mrs. Seely (Marie) Perry invited representatives from all groups to her South First Street home to consider merging for greater effectiveness.

Within a few days, 13 groups voted to federate. Rockford Woman's Club was born. For the first seven years, however, it was known as the Federation of Woman's Clubs of Rockford. First two items of business: a constitution and election of officers. Perry was elected president. Now a club department is named in her honor; another is named for her daughter, Marie Forbes, also an active member.

## EARLY PROJECTS

From the beginning, Rockford Woman's Club prospered, grew, and fulfilled its chartered object: "general philanthropic and literary work and civic improvement." Some early projects included the following:

- They equipped traveling libraries and sent them into 35 schools. They purchased and placed photographs of art and sculpture masterpieces in public schools to enrich curricula dedicated mostly to the 3 Rs.
- Health and welfare of children concerned the women in an era before governmental aid. The women gave free milk to needy children, provided medical care for families unable to afford it, and cared for neglected children.

and tucked in long skirts in order to work the soil. They planted and tended huge vegetable gardens on vacant lots throughout the town and gave produce to the poor.

- The club induced the appointment of one of its own members to become the first county probation officer and then paid her salary for many years.
- Club members worked to secure the first appointment of a woman to the Board of Education in the early 20th century when women rarely received leadership roles in the male-dominated society. And the club fought and won the battle to have domestic sciences taught in public schools.

### **DEPARTMENTS ORGANIZED**

As the club grew it sought better ways to accomplish its purposes. To allow members to diversify and to intensify their interest, departments were organized. They included American Citizenship, American Home,

Health & Child Welfare, Education, Garden, Literature & Art, and Philanthropic.

Focusing on civic endeavors, they successfully obtained passage of Rockford's first pure milk ordinance and lobbied for construction of a new jail. They called for vast improvements in city playgrounds and paid a director's salary for several years. Women's Suffrage and the eight-hour work day also received attention.

### **LONG-TERM PHILANTHROPIC PROJECTS**

In 1907, at the request of the Board of Education, Rockford Woman's Club initiated, equipped and ran a lunch room at the city's only high school. (Located on South Madison Street then, it now houses Board of Education offices.) Dedicated club members served as many as 1100 students and teachers daily, five days a week, for 18 years, in this the first of the club's long-term philanthropies.

A second long-term philanthropy--a

settlement house--grew out of the need for a social service center due to a large influx of immigrants. In 1913, the women opened Montague House in a building owned by the Rockford Park District in South Park, 1500 Rock Street. Classes included English, American culture, and cooking with American products, as well as all subjects necessary for obtaining United States citizenship.

By 1928 when such a facility was no longer a necessity because the number of immigrants had diminished, the club shifted gears. They addressed a current area need for a large recreation center as their third long-term philanthropy. At 604 Wall Street (now the home of New Zion Baptist Church), the club built a substantial brick building complete with gymnasium, showers, and meeting rooms plus an outdoor playground. Having transferred the name Montague House to the new facility, the club now offered more classes and programs to improve the quality of life. Thousands of children and adults participated in cooking, health and academics classes; music

lessons and practice opportunities; sports; and varied social functions. Rockford Woman's Club owned the building, paid for its upkeep, and funded a professional staff. Club members served as volunteers.

Next, when that community recreation center was losing relevance and importance to Rockford and its citizens, club committees once again researched needs. A Senior Activity Center, at 982 North Main Street, became the club's fourth long-term philanthropy. A pioneering effort in 1961--few existed nationwide and none in Rockford--the center served seniors for 30 years. Rockford Woman's Club owned, equipped, staffed, and supported a center which became a beehive of constructive activity and fun for hundreds of seniors annually. Their philanthropic efforts complemented those of the sponsor.

But that project, too, lost its relevance due to a proliferation of centers and activities for seniors in other sectors of society. So, in January 1992, Rockford Woman's Club began

yet another major philanthropic endeavor. They gave use of the North Main Street facility to the Rockford Area Literacy Council, an organization that seeks to help 32,000 area adults who are functionally illiterate. Rockford Woman's Club pays for utilities, upkeep and insurance; and encourages its members to become volunteer tutors.

### **THE CLUBHOUSE**

The organization's clubhouse is recognized as the only such woman's club facility in the country with its own theatre, restaurant and art gallery plus meeting rooms, lounge areas and a custodian's apartment. How did this clubhouse come into being?

For its first 20 years, the club was without a permanent home. By 1907, the club boasted 1000 members. Meetings were held in churches, the high school auditorium, and the YWCA. Without a central office and no private meeting areas for the club as a whole, its committee and departments, it was difficult to administer the organization.

Jessie I. Spafford stepped into this set of circumstances as president in 1907--a position she would hold for 43 years. The daughter of pioneer settler Amos Spafford who had arrived here in 1839 (five years after the city's founding date), Jessie belonged to a prominent local family. Spaffords founded the banking institution now known as BancOne. Jessie graduated from Vassar as a Phi Beta Kappa, taught Math and Physics at Rockford College, and served as a vice-president of the bank.

To meet the need for a permanent home, a committee conducted searches. By 1915, while several properties were being considered, Jessie Spafford had the exciting task of announcing a monumental gift. Land at the corner of N. Church and Park streets would be donated for the clubhouse. The donors included members of the Emerson and Talcott families: five daughters of Ralph and Adaline Talcott Emerson and their children, and Adeline's sisters-in-law Mrs. Wait (Grace)Talcott and Mrs. William A.(Fanny C.) Talcott, the club's fourth president. In addition, the

five Emerson daughters pledged two-fifths of the cost of the new building--up to a maximum of \$25,000--a tremendous amount in World War I-era money.

The Emerson family home stood north of the present club property where the Mendelssohn Club now stands. Ralph Emerson had purchased it in 1858 when he and Adaline Talcott married. A modest home then, it underwent changes and improvements until it became a 30-room mansion with many glassed-in porches. The property extended to Park Ave. on the south, to North Main Street on the east. As each daughter married, she received a plot of Emerson land on which she and her husband built a home. One portion of land--occupied now by the theatre--belonged to the Talcotts. At the time of the gift, some properties still contained homes. All of the women had been instrumental in the founding of the club and were, or had been, active in its administration and activities.

Adaline Emerson Thompson, taught at Rockford College, and was the third

president of RWC.

Harriet Emerson Hinchliff's family funded a long-standing annual foreign affairs lecture.

Mary Emerson Lathrop, musician. Benefactor also of Mendelssohn Club, circa 1950.

Belle Emerson Keith, artist. The Keith home remains as the only one of the family enclave still standing. It now houses the Burpee-Wood Funeral Home on North Main Street Mrs. Keith founded Keith School in her home so that her daughter could study French.

Dora Emerson Wheeler.

## CONDITIONS

The donors attached several conditions to their generous gift. First, the clubhouse was to be a memorial to their mother, Adaline Talcott Emerson, who had died a few months earlier. Today, her portrait hangs above the fireplace in the clubhouse living room, aptly named the Memorial Room. Second, "a room for art treasures" because of the artistic talents of Belle should exist. The club's art gallery bears her name. Third, provision

should be made for meeting rooms available, at nominal rent, for the Daughters of American Revolution (DAR) and the Rockford Art Association. The latter used the facilities until they acquired their own. The DAR continues to meet here and one small room on the second floor has been reserved for their records and memorabilia. By 1918, the building had been completed.

### **THEATRE/FOOD SHOP**

An integral part of the building, the theatre seats about 900. Features include its own entry, lobby, box office, dressing rooms, lighting and sound systems, projection room, stage curtains and a Steinway piano. It is used for all-club meetings and Tuesday programs. Presenters have included guests such as Amelia Earhart, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Margaret Bourke-White, Hal Holbrook and Dr. Joyce Brothers. In addition, community groups may rent the theatre for concerts, recitals, plays, lectures, movies, and religious services. First Night entertainment on New Year's Eve takes place here.

The Food Shop originated in 1920

in the lower level of the clubhouse. It soon outgrew its space. In the late 1930s, Mary Emerson Lathrop gave additional land for expansion of the original building. The new section included the Food Shop's main room, the entry and the Sun Room. The Food Shop not only serves club functions, but it's open to the public for lunch, Monday - Friday. To serve the community, reservations may be made for meals, parties, receptions accommodating up to several hundred people.

\* \* \* \* \*

For 100 years, thousands of members and their leaders have given freely of time, talents and treasures, not only for personal enhancement and for the well-being of the club, but also for a continuing and charitable presence in the life and culture of this community.

*For more about Adaline Talcott Emerson, see "A Victorian Love Story," Nuggets of History, Summer 1995, Vol. 33, No. 3.*



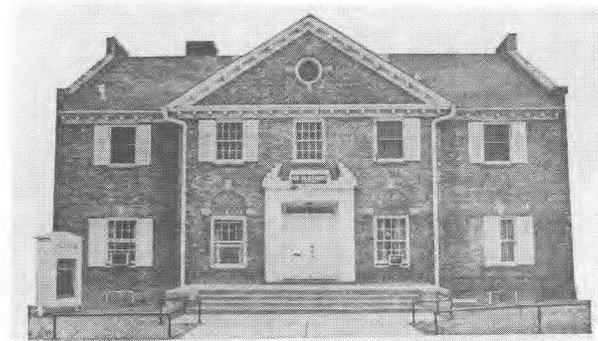
Past presidents Mrs. Dean Olson and Mrs. Harry F. Carlson pose beside portrait of Jessie I. Spafford during plans for the club's 75th anniversary.

Photo courtesy Rockford Register Star.



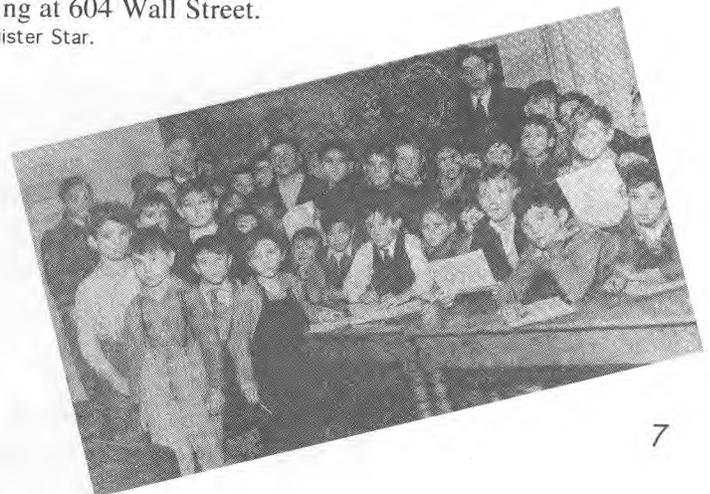
Once the home of Woman's Club benefactor, Belle Emerson Keith, this stately mansion now houses the Burpee-Wood Funeral Home.

Photo: Peggy Jensen



Later New Zion Baptist Church purchased and modified the building at 604 Wall Street.

Photo courtesy Rockford Register Star.



Activities at Montague House included Christmas parties, basketball, art and dance classes.

Photos furnished to Rockford Register Star by Venera Balsam, Stan Goral, Charles Wild, Katie Buchmann.



Senior Activity Center, 982 N. Main St., 1961  
 Photo courtesy Rockford Register Star



A groundbreaking ceremony celebrates a proposed 1967 addition to the Senior Activity Center. Building committee chair Nancy Olson presides.  
 Photo courtesy Rockford Register Star



Woman's Club committee members Phyllis Duclon, Nancy Olson, Lis Pearson and Ruth Clark (Nihan) served during construction of addition to the Senior Activity Center.  
 Photo courtesy Rockford Register Star.



Food Shop Dining Room, 1996  
 Photo: Peggy Jensen

## PRESIDENTIAL LETTER

To celebrate our 100th anniversary, we have set the stage for a Gala Year!

In June we hosted a House Tour. In spite of heavy afternoon rains, the event was well received. Jonathan and I had the honor of opening our home, the Spafford House, for that tour. We decided it would be appropriate to honor five generations of Spafford and Whitlock women who were or are club members.

Jessie I. Spafford was president during construction of the wonderful building RWC occupies today. I have the pleasure of being president during the 100th-year celebration, including a Designer's Showcase in September and a Birthday Party in February.

If you haven't had lunch lately at the Food Shop or visited our theatre, please do. We would love to see you. If you are interested in joining RWC, please contact us.

Sincerely,

Nancy Whitlock  
President.

## CALENDAR

October: Opening Day luncheon/cards. Baritone Timothy Quistorff. "Political Parties" lecture. "The Torajan, Mountain Survivors," Philip Dedrick.

November: "Great Trips Around the World," Wm. Stockdale. "Hats," Bill Bowen. "Midway Village," Kathleen Juni, president.

December: "Holiday Music." Greta Wiley, book dramatist.

January: "Hawaii Travelogue." "Our Rock River," Nels Akerlund. "Magical Realism in South American Literature," Elvira Ventimiglia.

February: Anniversary Party with music by Joel Ross Trio. "Meet Mr. Lincoln," Pastor Dick Anderson. Virginia Noerr, Gallery Artist of the Month.

March: "Hidden Talent: Women in the Theatre," Margaret Raether, NAT. "Women in Art," Laura Johnson, Rockford Art Museum. "Becoming the Woman You've Wanted," Rockford poet Christine Swanberg.

April: "Orchids," Warren and Darlene Carlson. Greta Wiley, book review. Annual meeting.

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Statement of Purpose: To enlighten and to educate people about their place of residence, to entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to treasure and to honor.

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