

## The First 90 Years of AAUW of Vermont

I have been given the task to tell you about 90 years of Vermont AAUW history in 15 minutes. So, I will focus on events that broke barriers existing at the time.

A group of Vermont college women explored the formation of a Vermont Branch of AAUW in April 1920. They were particularly unhappy with Governor Clement and his stand on women's suffrage. He claimed that allowing women to vote would infringe upon the rights guaranteed to men in the Vermont Constitution. Events moved quickly after the initial meeting; the Vermont Branch was officially chartered on October 6, 1920, in Burlington High School.

What is remarkable about this charter meeting is that 67 Vermont college women attended. They came from cities and towns all over Vermont. Some had travelled by train for an entire day to participate.

By early 1921 the membership exceeded 100. It included a number of female college professors and administrators and the wives and daughters of some very prominent Vermont men, such as past and future governors and the Vice President of the United States (Calvin Coolidge). These women had status and influence and many of them knew each other before they joined AAUW.

In 1922, Vermont AAUW hosted a New England AAUW Conference at the University of Vermont. It was attended by AAUW members from all six states. By this time the first three local Vermont AAUW branches had also been established. I find it extra-ordinary that in less than 2 years Vermont AAUW had become a full-fledged statewide organization and was recognized by college women in New England.

From the beginning, the women of Vermont AAUW made better education for women a priority in their programs. But in addition to their support for college women, they established a program that was unique within AAUW. They decided to focus their energies on the improvement of the 1,100 one and two room schools in Vermont.

Writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a charter member, was appointed to the state board of education in 1921. She facilitated the inauguration of a program of standardization for Vermont rural schools.

Receiving the "standard school" or "superior school" plaque became a source of pride for the town as well as the school. This program was supported by the 1921 legislature with an appropriation of \$10,000.

Due to a "back to the towns" movement, the 1923 legislature allocated only \$3,000 for standardization, effectively gutting the program.

Vermont AAUW members organized a tremendously effective campaign for better financing of small schools. They succeeded in increasing the legislature's allocation for rural schools tenfold from \$3,000 to \$30,000. At this time the average annual salary in Vermont was approximately

\$1,000; teachers typically earned \$750. So \$30,000 was the equivalent of approximately 1.5 million in today's dollars.

How did they do this?

During the six months before the 1925 session of the Legislature, they blanketed the state with 2000 posters! Just think of the logistics of printing and distributing 2000 posters in 1924!

They sent postcards depicting schools "before" and "after" standardization to influential citizens. They spoke at civic forums, town picnics, old home weeks and other traditional events all over the state.

They brought their campaign to the people. They understood that without the pressure from the towns' people, the legislators of that time would have balked at increasing state funding for any local project. (That hasn't changed very much today.)

From 1924 to 1952, Vermont AAUW held an annual College week for all college women of Vermont. This event was a combination of alumnae reunions, a program of speakers on relevant topics of the day, and an AAUW annual meeting.

We have most information about the Ninth College Week. It was held from June 25-27, 1934 at Breadloaf of Middlebury College. The meeting was attended by approximately 150 women according to the notes of Alice Burrage, Vermont AAUW president.

The Alumnae Associations of Middlebury, Holyoke, Radcliffe, Simmons, Smith, Wellesley and the University of Vermont had separate events and guests of honor. There was a play, sightseeing, and several lunches and dinners with addresses by college professors, college presidents, and college deans.

The 1934 AAUW annual meeting included a detailed report on "Parent Education in Vermont" and "A Study of Rural School Progress in Twenty Vermont Towns from 1924-1934". Dr. Katherine McHale, Executive Secretary of National AAUW, was an honored guest from Washington DC.

Imagine the organization and travel that such a meeting of 150 college women required!

The last College Week program in the files is dated 1951. It also took place at Breadloaf. By that time the list of colleges with reunion activities had expanded to 43. One of the many signs of change: the 1951 program no longer offers transportation to Breadloaf from the Middlebury railroad station.

I joined the Bennington Branch in 1962 at the age of 24. By that time I had earned an MS in Physics and worked in a laboratory with a large number of men. I needed some women friends, and I was anxious to learn about something other than science.

What hooked me? In 1963 AAUW started to study modern China as a national AAUW study topic. This was 8 years before Kissinger's secret trip to China in July 1971! My first position in AAUW was as branch leader of the China study group. We read European books and papers; there were no American sources because mainland China "did not exist."

Since then Vermont AAUW has taken on many projects and broken a number barriers. I will list only a few.

We published the small book *Those Indomitable Vermont Women* containing biographies of historic and contemporary Vermont Women. It has been updated and reprinted numerous times and has been used in a number of women's studies courses in Vermont colleges and high schools.

We helped a Brattleboro Museum curator to assemble a traveling museum exhibit entitled "Those Indomitable Vermont Women." It was exhibited in nine museums and venues in Vermont. The large panels with photographs and text were accompanied by period clothing for women in some of the museums.

We collaborated with Vermont Technical College on the comprehensive Women in Technology Project. This project included a summer technology camp for 7th and 8th grade girls, a speakers bureau for Vermont schools, and a program for Girl Scouts. A shadowing program paired high school students with college students at Vermont Technical College, and college students with professional women in technology.

With partial support from the Educational Foundation, Vermont AAUW produced a brochure and a professionally edited video tape of Summer Technology Camp at VTC as a fund raising tool. Vermont branches solicited funds from local businesses to fund individual girls at technology camp. The project received the second Progress in Equity Award from the Legal Advocacy Fund in 1988 and was the first comprehensive STEM program within AAUW.

Vermont AAUW assisted in the creation of a gender inclusive Vermont Constitution and promoted its passage by two legislatures and a vote of the people. AAUW member Louise Luring was appointed as one of two "public members" of the Commission that created the document. The process was not completed until January 1995 after an affirmative vote by the voters of Vermont.

We have much to be proud of –

Happy Birthday AAUW of Vermont!

Gudrun Hutchins --- April 24, 2010 State Meeting