

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club Celebrates 110 Years

by BD Tharp

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May the Twentieth Century Club will celebrate their 110<sup>th</sup> year anniversary with a luncheon and fashion show featuring clothing worn over the last century. Larry Hatteberg will interview Mrs. Louise Caldwell Murdock (Liz Hicks) who founded the organization on January 3, 1899. Phil Fish will be presenting an audio/visual history of the Club.

The original mission of the club was to provide support of “literary, educational, and scientific undertakings and support of the fine arts” in Wichita. This non-profit organization began with a membership of over 100 women.

This ladies club has been active all of this time and the mission has grown with it. They have not only made an impact on the women of Wichita but also the city itself. These influential women have impacted the Judicial and Penal systems, improved schools, helped with city beautification and zoning, and even aided the women’s suffrage movement.

They survived and grew in membership during World War I, the Depression, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. They contributed to the Wichita community through art exhibits, concerts, civic theater, extension courses, social events and supported the community through it all.

In 1923, the Club purchased the Colonial Revival styled-home of Judge R.A. Sankey at 536 N. Broadway. After remodeling the house they opened what would be the first permanent headquarters for a Wichita women’s club. During the renovation they added an assembly room, a dining room, lobby, kitchen, and pantry to the downstairs area. The upstairs was remodeled as a suite for the Club’s resident secretary. That year the club member ship grew to more than 600.

In 1925 they created an addition behind the original structure to serve as a connector between the Sankey home and the auditorium, which was built in 1931. The auditorium seating capacity was 700, 450 seats on the ground floor and 250 in the balcony. The original leather seats are still in use today. The Club helped the local economy by obtaining labor and materials from local merchants and unemployed workers during the Depression to build the auditorium.

“The building is a Registered Historic Landmark,” said Ruby Weixelman, Past President and current recording secretary.

The Club sold the property in 2004 to a local group interested in using it for community events, music and theater productions. The new owners are restoring the house to its former glory in conjunction with expansion of restrooms and improvements to the sound system. Currently the Stage One theater organization has their offices on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor.

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club members still meet there every Tuesday and hold programs and cultural events.

The membership has generously used the proceeds from the sale of the house to provide scholarships for local organizations. Some of the recipients include the WSU Music Endowment, WSU School of Nursing, Wichita Public Schools fine arts programs, Food Bank, Friends University, Newman University, Victory in the Valley and YWCA Crisis Center. They also partnered with the Sunrise Rotary to build a playground in the Sedgwick County Park with handicap access.

Donnie Edwards, historical researcher shared some of the early works of the Club, many of which were decided by need. “They raised money to build a library in the meatpacking and stockyards area of the city. At the turn of the century schools were using a bucket and dipper for boys and girls to drink from. They raised money for the more sanitary drinking fountains to be installed.”

This group of women pushed for change that wasn't always appreciated by the men in the community. “They fought for separation of juveniles from adult jail offenders, and a matron for the women prisoners so they could also be separated from the men,” said Donnie.

In 1909 they funded a nurse to make home visits in the quickly growing city of Wichita. And in 1919 they brought Ross Crane from the Chicago Art Institute to lecture in order to raise money to plant trees to beautify the city.

From 1925 through 1941 the Club printed a newspaper called the “Twentieth Century Limited” which featured the first movie rating series and articles about members and current events. Beginning in 1929 Rea Woodman sponsored extension courses for club members in creative writing, crafts, calligraphy and arts classes.

“In World War II the members sold war bonds at Bucks Department Store and worked at the Red Cross,” said Donnie. The weekly membership meetings focused on how members could use food stamps and more efficiently run a home during the war.

“The parlor was popular for weddings during the 1930s and 1940s. And during the 50s and 60s members enjoyed teas, dances, luncheons, bridge parties, plays and musicals. It was the “in” club,” said Peggy Church, President.

Over the years the membership would have yard sales, spaghetti dinners, cookbook sales and “Night on Broadway” to raise funds for their various philanthropic programs. In the 1960s and 1970s the membership swelled to 900. “The Club has always been a great place for fellowship with each other,” said Donnie.

Club members are very proud of their social and educational programs and the support they give to the local community. “The programs keep us younger,” said Donnie.

“There are programs on everything.” The topics included in their weekly meetings alternate through the following departments:

American Home

Food

Art

Community Enrichment

Image & Fashion

Literature

Music

Following their weekly luncheon for example, they may feature book reviews, musical groups, community groups, local artists or fashion shows. “We give the local performing artists a venue,” said Donnie. The current membership is 85, ranging in age from 50 to 95.

Peggy Church shared a quote that she felt aptly described the philosophy of the club:

“Women do not grow old by living a certain number of years. They grow old by deserting ideas and hope. Years may wrinkle the skin, lack of enthusiasm wrinkles the soul.” – Author Unknown

For more information on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Club, visit their website at [www.20thcenturycenter.com/](http://www.20thcenturycenter.com/).