

## **Interview with Laura Scherfenberg**

**Interviewed by Grace Landin for the Heritage Education Commission**

**Interviewed on March 4, 1986**

**Laura Scherfenberg - LS**

**Grace Landin - GL**

**GL: Before we start our specific questions, I want to see what would be your reaction to this statement: "Some social historians feel that some of the early women's groups, such as the missionary societies and the WCTU, provided arenas outside the family over which women had a considerable measure of control in the pioneer days. These women, through the organizations, learned to speak in public, to organize, to raise and manage money, and to realize how they were excluded from public politics." Now what would you think about this statement, Laura?**

**LS: I think that's very, very true. The women hadn't realized how much was done outside the home that really affected their homes; and when they got these organizations started, it made them realize that there were things they should be interested in that they hadn't had a chance to do anything about in the past. It's also interesting to me because in 1872 Annie Whittenmeyer and the Methodist Bishop organized what was called Ladies' and Pastors' Christian Union, and both the missionary societies and our Women's Christian Temperance Union were upshoots of this organization; they were really started from this Ladies' and Pastors' Christian Union. It was in 1874 that our national WCTU was organized.**

**Now, in Moorhead we have a national WCTU, we have a state, and there's also a world organization. There are more than 70 nations in the world organization. Our Moorhead WCTU has been in existence for a long time--I don't know about the first Moorhead WCTU. I know there was one before 1948; and I found a place in the Archives in some material there that said they had 77 members, but that's all I could find out about the early one.**

**But in 1948 some women met in the home of Mrs. F. D. Fritch to organize a Moorhead WCTU. It was Mrs. H. C. Nordly, Mrs. P. M. Sandness, Mrs. F. W. Zank, Mrs. John McCann, and Mrs. Fritch; and they got their organization started--well, they didn't really get going until July. At that time they elected their officers--Mrs. Fritch was elected President; Mrs. Nordly, Vice-President; Mrs. Zank, Secretary; and Mrs. Fritch, Acting Treasurer. At this first meeting, Mrs. Rachel Reynolds was a member and she is still a member. That means that she has been a WCTU member for 42 years. Mrs. W. R. Davis was another one who was at the organizational meeting and was a member for many, many years. Mrs. Esther Lee also was there. Mrs. Nordly was the mother of Sara McCormick; I thought that was interesting. And Mrs. McCann's sons are still living here in Moorhead and are willing to help us in WCTU when we need it.**

**In 1951 they had a very discouraging year. They hadn't been able to have any meetings all year--in the winter the weather was so terrible, they couldn't have meetings; and in the spring months there was a lot of sickness. So they met in August of 1951; seven of them met in Mrs. Fritch's home to decide whether they should disband or whether they should try to keep going, and they voted unanimously to continue. They elected officers then. Mrs. Zank was elected President; Mrs. Nordly, Secretary; Mrs. Fritch, Vice-President; and Mrs. Prindle, Treasurer; and they voted to meet the first Friday of each month. And that's when we meet now--we still meet the first Friday of each month. Some of those early members were Mrs. Mark, Mrs. Esther Mike, Mrs. Myra Selberg, Mrs. Lucy Jacobson, Mrs. Harry Littlefield, Mrs. Ralph Lee, Olive Hubbard, Elnora Gilbertson, Nettie Overbye; Ida Melberg was one, and when she couldn't come to meetings any more, both she and Mr. Melberg were very careful to always get her news sent to the Treasurer. She was very interested to the time of her death in the work of the organization--the Union.**

**GL: Who belongs today now?**

**LS: Well, we have 23 women members. We also have honorary members. The men can join, but they don't come to the regular meetings. Sometimes there's a special meeting where the men come. The women who join are a group of Christian women who believe in total abstinence. Anyone who joins has to sign a pledge that they will not drink any alcoholic beverages.**

**GL: Is that their only membership requirement, then?**

**LS: Yes, that's the only membership requirement.**

**GL: Now what are some of the goals and purposes of your program?**

**LS: Well, it's Women's Christian Temperance Union, so the Christian work, I think we could say, comes first. We work to help our immediate families and members of the community to be better Christians. That's one thing we're trying to do. And then the temperance part--we try to help people, especially children and young people, know the dangers of alcoholic beverages and drugs and tobacco. Then, along with this, we try to help people live happier lives. We do such things as visit shut-ins and people in the hospital; and we help missionaries do similar work like that.**

**Now, some of the services we provide--they are mainly education. We do a lot in the educational field. When the teachers in the public school have a workshop in the fall before school starts, we take our temperance material--the material that gives the bad effects of tobacco, drugs, and alcohol--we take that over to the workshop. And one year we gave out 1300 pieces of this material to the teachers. We don't just pass it out; we have a couple of tables with the material displayed and when the teachers have their coffee break, they stop and see if there is anything they can use in their work. Another way that we educate the young people is through a temperance camp; it's called Youth Temperance Camp in spring. Each year we've tried to send at least one young person to that camp. In the spring there is a temperance week; it's called Youth Temperance Education Week. We get the**

young people in the youth temperance group--we have a state organization--they go to the Governor and get a proclamation, and we have leaflets that we pass out to the children in our grade schools. That's one way our work has changed. We used to give these leaflets to the high school students; now the teachers and the police officers working with young people, the counselors, have all told us that they are pretty much settled in their habits by the time they are in high school--that the children in the grade schools are the ones that are starting to use the drugs and the alcohol, etc., that we need to give our leaflets to grade school children. It keeps going down lower and lower.

**GL:** How have you funded some of your projects that you're talking about now?

**LS:** We've had very few fundraising projects. We just say we need so much money, and we contribute. When we order these leaflets for the spring, we say in a previous meeting that they are going to cost so much and everybody contributes.

**GL:** And you've never had any trouble, then, balancing your budget, then, do you?

**LS:** Oh, we get awful close to zero [laughter], but we haven't had any trouble. And we believe that our money is there to be spent. We don't want to keep any big balance.

**GL:** Where does this group meet now?

**LS:** We meet in the homes. We've had public meetings, and the public meetings we generally have in a church. But the regular meetings are held in the homes.

**GL:** And that's every month on a Friday.

Is food a part of your meetings, then?

**LS:** Yes, we have changed our policy on food. At one time, we were having real lunches--I mean almost a meal. And it seemed that each hostess thought she'd try to get a little more than the last one had, so we were having hot dish and salad and dessert; we voted that no one could serve more than one thing with coffee.

**GL:** That's like many other organizations, too.

**LS:** We decided that the hostess never got anything out of that meeting. She could never be in the room with the rest because she was so busy getting her big lunch ready.

**GL:** Do you ever have any guest speakers at your programs?

**LS:** Yes, we have had quite a few guest speakers. One of our best meetings was a woman who had been an alcoholic, and I don't suppose they are ever completely cured; but she was not having any trouble any more and she talked and gave a very good talk. One time we had one of the young policemen talk and tell what their problems were in connection with

the drugs and the alcohol and juvenile delinquency and some ways that he thought maybe we could help. Then we've had ministers talk to us, too.

GL: Have you had any youth?

LS: Yes, we have had young people talk to us.

GL: Now, within your organization, can you identify people who have played key roles in the program?

LS: Well, we have had some very good presidents. Mrs. John McCann, Mrs. R. P. Haakenson, Mrs. Ernest Nelson, Mrs. Alta Wadlie, Mrs. Martha Davis; my mother was very active for the years that she was here; Carolyn Ward, Ruth Otteson, Mrs. Holtman.

GL: Have any of these been in leadership for the district or a state office?

LS: Well, right now, our President of the Moorhead WCTU is the District Corresponding Secretary; and I'm the District Promotion Director.

GL: What is the unique place of this organization in the community? The image, I should say.

LS: Well, we think that we have not done enough publicity work. We feel that people tend to think we are group of old ladies who meet to have coffee together and don't do much else. And we think we do quite a bit more [laughter].

GL: I'm thinking of an incident where you were speaking about the Chief of Police.

LS: Some years ago there was some trouble about our Chief of Police, and the City Council decided that they would not give him a raise in salary and that they'd give the other city officials a raise and that would mean that they didn't think he was doing good work and they thought that would probably mean that he'd leave. Then, some people talked to the Council members and they decided to have a public meeting and asked people to come and give their views. Our WCTU thought that the Chief of Police had been going very good work. He'd been enforcing the laws and we thought that was one reason some people were opposed to him. So we went with our ideas of what we thought of his work and that he had really been an excellent police officer; and when the meeting started the Mayor, Dwaine Hoberg, said, "Now, is there anyone who wants to say anything?" And everybody just sat, and I got worried for fear the Mayor would just say "Okay" and so I went down to the loudspeaker and in a trembling voice, I know, said what we thought about the good work that the Police Chief had been doing. And then several others came and talked, and the Council changed their minds. They decided to give him a raise along with the rest, and that trouble was smoothed over.

GL: I'm sure he was grateful to you.

**LS:** When I went out, he grabbed both my hands and shook them and told me how grateful he was.

We also worked to keep liquor out of the restaurants on Sunday. We worked very hard on that; we went to the Council meetings and we had brochures and advertisements; we won the first time--kept it out. But the second time, we lost.

**GL:** You've certainly shown how your organization has tried to change the community in a certain sense. When did you join, Laura?

**LS:** I joined back in '47; I joined in Spearfish, and then when we came here to Moorhead in 1952, it was a queer coincidence. The first week we were here we were sent to Mrs. Zank's house to get directions about where we were to go someplace, and my mother saw a WCTU magazine in Mrs. Zank's mailbox; so she asked Mrs. Zank if there was a WCTU here. Mrs. Zank said, "Oh, I'm so glad to find somebody that's interested in WCTU." So, we joined.

**GL:** And have you held any offices in that except the ones you've mentioned?

**LS:** I have been Treasurer for many years, and I've been Education Director for many years and I was also a Youth Temperance Council leader and a Loyal Temperance League leader. The Youth Temperance is high school age, and the Loyal Temperance League is young elementary.

**GL:** What has this organization meant to you?

**LS:** Well, I have felt that I was doing some good in the world [laughter], for one thing, and we have seen some good things happen. Several years I sent boys to this Youth Temperance Camp in the spring, and one father told me that nobody could have done a better job of explaining to him why he should not serve beer in the home. He said this 12-year-old gave him detailed arguments that were excellent, and he said that nobody could have done a better job. And that was rewarding.

Also, I've made some very good friends.

**GL:** I imagine that has expanded as you've been involved in the bigger organization itself. And you were speaking about a magazine. Does that still come out to the members?

**LS:** Yes, we have a national Union Signal, it is, and that has articles about--well, it's Christian and temperance both. We're interested in preventing pornography and indecent programs on tv and things like that, as well as temperance and Christian works--well, those are Christian works.

**GL:** The purpose of it, in a way, then, has had to change slightly with the advent of tv and things like that; you've had to concentrate your focus on something else a little bit.

**LS: Then we do have a state magazine, too, and that comes out once a month; and that gives news about what our local unions are doing and reports from our officers and things like that.**

**GL: Would you have any idea how many would be members, say, in the state of Minnesota?**

**LS: No, I don't know that.**

**Awhile ago we heard a man talk about people that work in Congress--the lobbyists--and he said that one of the best lobbyists in Congress was the WCTU one--that they seemed to be able to get their points across.**

**GL: Well, that speaks something for your organization, then. You're dedicated and intelligent people.**

**Have you anything more interesting about this group that you'd sort of like to sum things up a little bit or add some little stories about it?**

**LS: One of our good meetings, I thought, was where we had a public speaker and then a film and then we gave a list of the different things that our Moorhead WCTU had done in the past couple of years. And many people came up and said, "We had no idea that you folks did so much. You've given us a completely different idea of what WCTU is." And that was rewarding.**

**GL: What was your most serious obstacle that you had to encounter as a group?**

**LS: Well, I think it's this idea that they think we're just a group of old ladies that meet for social fun. And we really are hard working, and it's difficult to make people understand that we have some definite purposes.**

**GL: And what was your most personal satisfaction belonging to this group?**

**LS: Well, I think that it's being able to help young people. Through this group I've had a chance to work with many young people. One thing is that we have a poster contest in the schools every year and children have made beautiful posters; we had 48 last year; we have something like that every year. And our Moorhead posters have won in the district and one year one of our posters got first in the state. It's a big satisfaction to talk with these young people, too, and hear what they have to say.**

**GL: I wonder if you'd ever gotten any other material from other organizations similar to yours, like Mothers Against Drunk Driving?**

**LS: Yes, we have that and there's a Minnesota Council of something--I've forgotten what--it's lawyers; and we get material from them--very good material. We also get material from**

**the Minnesota Transportation Department. They have excellent material on the effects of alcohol on the road and what should be done so we don't have so many accidents.**

**GL: How about taking part in the drinking age level changing? Has this group taken an active part?**

**LS: Yes, yes, we have worked very hard on that problem.**

**GL: This has been most interesting. Thank you so much, Laura. As an educator and an interested person, it's been very fun talking with you. Thank you so much.**

**LS: Thank you.**

**[End of Interview]**