Memories of the League of Women Voters

By Ruth Basom, April 1999

We were a benign army of energetic women who in the forties moved about the city of Alexandria in our beige all-purpose raincoats running the PTAs, being Cub Scout den mothers, leading Girl Scout troops, working in our churches and synagogues, and on the side exchanging recipes and tips on child rearing.

But we also had the League of Women Voters which engaged us intellectually in a way that we had veered away from when we exchanged career goals for marriage and children.

My memory of those early years in the League is blurred on the specifics, but here is what comes up on my mental computer screen. We grew to about six units of 15 to 20 women each who met in one another’s homes for twice-a-month morning meetings. All members were encouraged, expected even, to join one or more of the committees that did research on current local, state, and national agendas. Periodically, committee members fanned out to inform and lead discussions at the unit meetings and eventually arrive at consensus as to what action we endorsed.

qWe had monitors who attended all meetings of the City Council, School Board, and various commissions. Their reports were published in the monthly newsletter. We also had representatives who attended naturalization ceremonies in the courthouse and welcomed and gave out voter information to each new citizen.

The years immediately after WW2 were a time of idealism and hope. The Hitler horror had been stopped. The Marshall Plan was demonstrating our country’s high-minded intention to promote European economic recovery. And the establishment of the United Nations seemed a rational way to ensure a peaceable world. We thought we had the answers.

Like our League counterparts all over the country, we studied international commerce and the new monster of nuclear war. As a result of those extended studies and polling of its members, the national League came out firmly in support of both free trade and nuclear disarmament. I certainly concurred and since then have written many letters to legislators in support of both (though lately I’ve been having second thoughts about unfettered free trade).

Of course, we worked on state and local issues, too, even as we do today. But because our country had been thrust out of provincialism by the war, it was the international issues which at first drew many of us to the League.

When our delegates to the biennial national convention would report back to us that delegates from the southwestern states had once again pushed (though unsuccessfully) for water resources management as a national study item, we were unimpressed. In our well-watered state and with no thought of pollution ever flowing down the Susquehanna River to threaten our ready access to the Chesapeake Bay’s seafood bounty, we had other priorities. (Memories of fresh oysters and crab direct from the fishing boats that came up the Potomac to the Washington Harbor with their catch of the morning can still make my mouth water.

Though Alexandria as a southern city had separate schools for blacks, separate rest rooms, etc., the League had no color barrier. But we were not very successful in recruiting black women. Unlike us economically comfortable white women, many of them were necessarily employed outside the home—some as maids, some as cleaning women in those government offices across the river in Washington, D.C. And some of them were overworked teachers in our segregated schools.

As the Civil Rights Movement took hold, Leagues everywhere had a new imperative to work on. The South’s massive resistance to the 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation order was a burning issue for us in Virginia. And of course we were caught up in women’s accelerating push for equality. Our League’s patterns changed in response to all of this.

As some women were employed outside the home, attendance at morning meetings tapered off. Gradually evening meetings, now including more black women, became the norm. Women who had honed their skills in the began running for political office. Two of our own were elected to the state legislature. Some members became city officials. Others became legislative assistants to politicians of both parties. Still others—I was one of them—pursued career goals in the private sector. My participation in the League certainly declined, though never my enthusiasm for the organization and its purpose of promoting an enlightened and active citizenry.