



After 50 years, which way will the league march?



Library of Congress photo

'We go

The league could become even more politically active, increase emphasis on women's rights, and reach more inner-city residents and young people. It would emphatically like more marchers — from both ends of the economic spectrum. But it will remain a thoughtful band that considers issues carefully before crusading.

By Susan Hunsinger

Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

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Second Section

Saturday,

February 21, 1970

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lems for league study. One of the most
appropriate places to work for equal
opportunity, league women are learning,
is in the suburbs, where most members
live.

"Our essential effort must be focused
on ourselves . . . and on our own com-
munity institutions which are racist
and exclusive and which perpetuate
poverty," said Mrs. Smith, now legisla-
tive chairman for the Massachusetts
league board. She referred to school
textbooks, suburban industry and
church rosters, and the exclusion of
low-income housing.

Leagues all over the country are
studying zoning laws and how to make
them more flexible. The November,
1969, issue of Current Review, a national
league publication, identifies the vari-
ous exclusionary zoning practices and
suggests ways to curb them.

The Los Angeles league is working
to reduce the suburbanites' fear of the
"invasion" of low-income housing and
multiple family dwellings. "The league
has joined with realty groups and fair-
housing councils in sponsoring seminars
to explain housing needs, to show that
low-income housing does not mean an
instant slum or ghetto," says Mrs.

says. By the time the general problem
had become specific in Vietnam, she
thinks public — and perhaps league —
attitudes were already too polarized.

The absence of these issues may result
partly from league procedures — which
are as time-consuming as they are dem-
ocratic. Before an issue can be added
to the league program, a substantial
majority, or "consensus," must agree on
its importance for league study. At the
local level, the only opportunity to sug-
gest an issue is at the league discussion
meeting.

League procedures, according to Mrs.
Benson, should allow for the member
who cannot be present at the meeting,
and, perhaps, for the suspicion that
"meetings are getting more and more
out of style." But the league is reluctant
to introduce any mechanism which
might lead to the mere registration of
opinion rather than considered judg-
ment.

Some of the league's traditional pro-
cedures — such as the parliamentary
meeting — are proving inappropriate in
the inner city. League members find that
voter registration is no longer equiva-
lent to voter service: many inner city
residents have to be convinced of the
power of the vote, or of testimony before

WHEN THE LEAGUE WAS founded 50 years ago, it was thought that every woman should join," says Mrs. Bruce B. Benson, current president of the League of Women Voters of the United States.

The founders, who had just won the 72-year-old battle for women's voting rights, felt responsible for educating the 20 million people they had helped enfranchise.

But the idea that the league was something for everyone was unrealistic, says Mrs. Benson. "Many people don't want to be involved even in a peripheral way with a citizens' government-oriented group."

Nevertheless, Mrs. Benson thinks "the potential of the league is infinitely greater than its present membership" of 160,000 women. In 1970—the 50th year for the league and women's suffrage and the 100th anniversary of Negro suffrage—the league is trying to achieve a more representative membership.

More black members

In the past few years the league has been concentrating on increasing its membership among minorities. Black membership has risen—nationwide.

The Alabama league president, Mrs. Sarah Cabot Pierce of Montgomery, says about one-quarter of the attendance at her league meetings now is black.

But, in essence, says Mrs. Benson, the wife of an Amherst College physics professor, "We are missing the two ends of the economic spectrum. We have very few wives of corporate executives and we have very few poor women."

The Alabama president, whose husband is in the insurance business, explains "there are not very many businessmen who approve of their wives getting involved in controversial issues. The native boys prefer the Junior League."

The lag in membership among the poor is in part attributed to attitudes unintended, but nevertheless expressed.

But members of minority groups—as well as poorer whites—may have felt uncomfortable at the meetings, often held in the homes of the well-to-do. Similarly, Catholics may have been reluctant to attend meetings held in Protestant churches. Now the league favors holding public meetings in public places.

Perhaps the most important determinant of league membership is the nature of league activities, which focus on broad issues and the structure of government.

"I think we have to accept the fact that we are a primarily white, middle-class group," says Mrs. Mary Grace Smith, former president of the Boston league. "Some people can't afford to be volunteers of [the league] sort. It's more important for them to use what leisure time they have to work on matters of immediate community interest"—such as upgrading the ghetto school rather than trying to abolish the Electoral College.

Even the middle-class, well-educated women who have always formed the league's hard core now have less time for volunteer activities. For many of these women—upon whom the league has depended—are going to work.

"This trend has already had a tremendous impact on the league," says Mrs. Benson. In an attempt to adapt itself to the schedules of working women, the league now holds more meetings at night and at lunchtime downtown.

And the league has for the first time embarked on a nationwide fund-raising drive for \$11 million—in part to pay professionals to do the routine office work formerly done by volunteers.

The league also wants the money to reach young people. "We have learned by experience that young people, even the biggest activists, are interested in using democratic processes to bring about change," says Mrs. Benson.

Last summer the league used \$100,000 of its education budget to recruit and transport 150 "highly politicized" young people—ranging from Black Panthers and SDSers to the Young Americans for

child health, the Social Security Act of 1935, and the Muscle-Shoals proposal for public-controlled power facilities in the Tennessee Valley in 1933.

● Government reform—establishment of the merit system of hiring federal employees, 1934-40, and revision of state constitutions in Pennsylvania, Michigan, California, Iowa, Hawaii, and Florida.

● Foreign policy—every renewal of the Trade Agreements Act beginning in 1934, and recent U.S. efforts to ease trade restrictions with Communist China.

● Water—the Water Resources Planning Act of 1965 and the Clean Water Restoration Act of 1966.

When asked what the concerned citizen could do about water pollution, chairman of the President's Council on Environmental Policy, Russell B. Train, replied recently, "Join the League of Women Voters."

Implementation stressed

But why join the league rather than a strictly conservationist group? The league, says Mrs. Benson, works to see that federal legislation gets implemented on the state and local level.

"It's not enough to lobby in Congress," says Mrs. Benson. "You have to follow it through. . . . You have to know who the polluters are, how much money they need to stop, what to do with the sewage, and you have to press all government levels for the money for treatment plants."

The league has always tackled highly political, or controversial, issues, but rarely those divided on a clear-cut party basis.

One of the league's problems is finding room for new issues, since the old ones don't fade away, they just expand. Water resources, for example, has been on the league program for 14 years. As if a sign of the program to come, the Massachusetts league board already includes an expert on thermonuclear pollution.

Equal opportunity also presents a never-ending number of public prob-

The Uruguayan experiment

Uruguay: A Contemporary Survey, by Marvin Alisky. New York: Frederick A. Praeger. \$6.50.

By James Nelson Goodsell

Uruguay's existence as a tiny buffer between two giant neighbors, Argentina and Brazil, has been called an historical accident. That description is correct in a sense, considering the way the British found themselves encouraging the two larger countries to put a chunk of land between them. But such a description fails to take into account the important role Uruguay has played and continues to play as an articulate, independent voice in Latin America.

As Marvin Alisky writes, "Uruguay has been a social laboratory, an inspiration to other Latin American nations seeking polit-

ical freedom." It is from this standpoint that Mr. Alisky unravels his survey of "Latin America's Switzerland." He quite correctly sees the Uruguayan experiment in representative democracy as unique in Latin America, although he clearly outlines the problems that Uruguay faces as a result of its social welfare experiments.

Recalling Winston Churchill's famous comment about democracy being the worst form of government, except for all the other forms that have been tried, Mr. Alisky says: "Uruguay seems to be the worst Latin American nation, except for almost all the others." This may cause some Latin Americans to blanch, and certainly will cause some Uruguayans to raise eyebrows, but Mr. Alisky points out that "despite economic pressures," Uruguay has not given up

"its broad-based democracy and genuine representative government." At the present time, with military rule in almost half the countries of Latin America, much of which borders on dictatorship, the Uruguayan accomplishment is all the more impressive.

Mr. Alisky's book is really a primer of Uruguay and could serve as a model for series on Latin America's 24 independent nations. Very little is left out, although many instances the reader would obviously have to go elsewhere for more detailed information. But for the general reader, this is a superb introduction to Uruguay. The geography, history, and current events of the country are all treated with enough description to afford an ample look.

Perhaps most important, Mr. Alisky points out that Uruguay basked in the advantage of having had a European guar-

la health, the Social Security Act of 1935, and the Muscle-Shoals proposal for public-controlled power facilities in the Tennessee Valley in 1933.

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Barbara Margerum, Los Angeles league president.

Not feminist group

So far the national league has focused on the rights of minorities, but not, interestingly, on those of women. However, three state leagues—Alaska, Iowa, and Tennessee—have recently expressed interest in studying women's rights.

"It's a little hard to say why the league has not been interested in these issues" pertaining to the legal and financial status of women," says Mrs. Benson. "There has been a conscious, and perhaps unconscious, effort not to be a feminist organization, but to be a citizens' organization in the broad sense."

One of the broadest citizen concerns—the Vietnam war—has also escaped League study. "It's too bad that the League didn't get involved in studying the whole problem of national liberation way back in the 1950's," Mrs. Benson

the city council—or housing authority—techniques which are second nature to the league.

Some members disagree about the group's primary function. "The league has one of the same divisions as the church," says Mrs. Benson. "The individual salvation-types vs. the social activists."

Some think the league's purpose is to educate the individual citizen to decide which action to take. The other trend is to say, yes, the role of the league is education, but you won't get needed changes unless you act in an organized political fashion.

Demonstrations argued

How organized is the league ready to be? The Massachusetts league closed its office last October 15 and urged members to participate in Vietnam Moratorium Day discussions. The national league participated in the June, 1968 Poor People's Campaign march when it got to Washington.

"As league president I feel that demonstrations are a useful political tool, guaranteed under the Constitution," says Mrs. Benson. But she has been severely criticized by some members who feel that demonstrations are not a "league-like" way to influence public policy. "They seem to forget we got the vote by demonstrating," she adds.

No matter what emphasis league members put on political action, they agree that numbers make a difference. The Massachusetts league, which has the largest number of local leagues and 12,000 members, has more influence than the Mississippi league, with 375 members, or the Alabama league, with 700.

At the national league convention in May, there may be a move to speed up league procedures to allow for a little more action, a little less discussion. While the Alabama president feels her league would prefer not to move so fast, she says, "Maybe that's the kind of world we live in."



By Peter W. Main, staff photographer

Mrs. Bruce B. Benson
League of Women Voters president

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Perhaps most important, Mr. Alisky points out that Uruguay basked in the advantage of having had a European guaran-

tee of territorial integrity in the 1800's, when such a guarantee counted. Without this British support, the historical accident might not have survived the vagaries of Latin American history of the past century. But survive it did and, aided by a homogeneous European population, Uruguay thrived. By the turn of the century, a prosperous Uruguay was ready for the social experimentation of José Batlle y Ordóñez—experiments which turned a somewhat feudal society into a welfare state.

Economic problems, particularly since the end of World War II, have brought serious dislocations to Uruguay. Labor unrest of almost unprecedented magnitude has beset the tiny land for the past decade and production in factories and in the fields has fallen off sharply. Economic collapse has

threatened repeatedly. The problem for Uruguay now is one of solving this critical situation.

Mr. Alisky asks: "Can a nation that exerted every effort for civil liberties and welfare benefits evoke a consensus that will stop fomenters of work stoppages from sabotaging economic growth?" The answer is in doubt. Mr. Alisky is on balance hopeful, but his analysis will leave many readers uncertain. The solution, he says, includes the expansion of the private sector of the economy while the public sector is kept at its current, high level.

Mr. Alisky's writing on Uruguay has appeared from time to time in these pages. This book is not, however, a compilation of these articles, but rather a fresh, concise, and instructive survey of one of Latin America's important nations.

. . . From the bookshelf