



JOHN BICKEL

State Sen. Russell Barlow (Rep.) addresses a league gathering in Tacoma, Wash. Seated next to Barlow is his Democratic opponent, Mrs. Louise Taylor.

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Even when they are sneered at as a bunch of ladies' sewing societies, the League of Women Voters takes no offense. They just keep on needling politicians, influencing history, fighting the things they fear: Dishonesty and bad faith.

# The League of Frightened Women

By WARNER OLIVIER

**A**T a recent meeting of the Cheltenham Township, Pennsylvania, League of Women Voters a young matron, making her debut at a league gathering, sat silently through the two-hour discussion of complicated phases of our international trade policies, her comely brow furrowed by the plows of inner concentration.

After the discussion was adjourned the newcomer thanked the ladies to whose spirited pros and cons she had listened. The discussion had convinced her, she told them, that she must join the league.

"I'm awfully glad I came," she said, "because I was so terribly confused about international trade. Of course," she confessed, "I'm still confused, but on a much higher plane."

The dauntless quality of this tenderfoot in the thorny patch of political rationalism struck instant and responsive appreciation among the leaguers, who know well that courage, if you have it, is a built-in quality, like original sin, while confusion is an acquired state of mind which can be substantially alleviated, if not wholly cured. One of the league's primary targets is the reduction of confusion on any plane, high or low, and to this end it labors with diligence and dedication at the national, state and local levels throughout the country.

If there are those who through lack of knowledge regard the league as an organization of bluestockings, they should have looked in at a group of summer cabins high in the Rockies near Denver, Colo-

rado, last April. They would have seen a score of women, dressed in slacks and dungarees, keeping fires going in the fireplaces—their only source of warmth—doing other household chores and discussing the Current Agenda of the League of Women Voters of the United States.

The biennial convention of the league had just been concluded in Denver and this group of ladies, who were the members of the national board, had been called into executive session in the summer cabins in Estes Park by Mrs. John G. Lee, of Farmington, Connecticut, the league's national president since 1950, whose liking for informality is as great as her abhorrence of stuffed shirts, whether worn by men or women.

Any onlooker at this gathering would have been witness to the influencing, if not the making, of American history. For that is a game which, consciously or unconsciously, the League of Women Voters has been playing since its inauguration in 1920.

Four years ago the Library of Congress accepted two tons of papers—roughly about 2,000,000 items—constituting the records of the League of Women Voters since its establishment through the year 1944.

It was said to be the largest single acquisition the library had ever received and it is one of the largest collections of nongovernmental papers in the library's Manuscript Division. Most significantly, it was the first time the Library of Congress had ever accepted the working records of any nongovernmental civic organization. Why should the Library of Congress break precedent in the case of the League of Women Voters?

Dr. Louise Young, who was assigned by the library's Manuscript Division to arrange the collection, gave a partial answer to the question. "There hasn't been a moment in your history," she told a league convention, "when you weren't engaged with the most important issues of that particular time. There isn't any kind of scholar who is interested in the record of human activity who will not find your records useful. They are already doing it. They are clamoring to get them on the shelves."

The League of Women Voters is not only an American phenomenon but a unique organization. While it is tiny when compared with the great service or labor organizations, it has the true aim and power of David's slingshot. Politicians have vast respect for the league and what it can do. They have seen it spearhead or help to spearhead—and win—fights for the Food and Drugs laws, the improvement of the merit system in government, the entry of displaced persons, the reorganization of Congress, civilian control of atomic energy, reciprocal-trade agreements, the mutual-security program and the United Nations—to name a few.

After Julia Lathrop proposed the revolutionary idea of grants in aid from the Federal Government to the states for maternal and child welfare services in her famous Annual Report of the Children's Bureau of 1917, the League of Women Voters was largely responsible for needling a reluctant Congress into giving the idea legislative life in the Sheppard-Towner Act, a forerunner of the Social Security Act of 1935, which opened the door to the grants in aid which enabled the nation to survive the depression of the '30's.



JOHN BICKEL  
The league's Camas, Wash., "votemobile" helps register farmer Mike Marugg and his daughter.

Not long before her retirement, Katharine Lenroot, who had helped make the Children's Bureau one of the great governmental social agencies of the world, credited the League of Women Voters with the success of the bureau.

"Everything that the Children's Bureau has ever done," she said, "has been made possible by the support and the background that the league gave it in its early years."

The League of Women Voters is an answer to the question so frequently asked: What chance has a mere citizen in a vast country like this to make his voice heard or his influence felt on issues of importance to his country and himself?

It has fewer than 130,000 members. It operated nationally in 1953 for \$230,828—a budget which might well force the National Association of Church Mice to regard itself a pretty-well-heeled group, after all. Most of what the league does spend goes for research and printing. There are thirty-nine paid members of its national staff. Elected officers serve without pay. The league housekeeps with a stern eye for economy. When the staff has used a pencil until the stub is too short for further use, it is not thrown away. It is saved for a board meeting. The league has found from its experience that its own board mem-

bers are no better than those of other organizations in the matter of inadvertently carrying new pencils away from board meetings.

The league is organized locally in all the forty-eight states, the District of Columbia, Hawaii and Alaska. The local leagues are split up into units. The Minneapolis, Minnesota, League, for example, has fifty-one units. Dues are usually three dollars a year. The local leagues concern themselves with problems of local government, but every member of a local league is automatically a member of the League of Women Voters of the United States. Local leagues contribute part of their income from dues and contributions to the state league, which contributes part of this income to the national organization.

The national officers include the national board, which operates as a sort of executive committee. The supreme policy-making body of the league is its national convention, held every two years. At the convention, the league's program for the coming biennium, called "the Current Agenda," is decided upon. The national officers and the national board are governed by the decision of the convention. On alternate years, when the convention does not meet, there is a national council attended by the national officers and board, the head of each state league and an additional delegate from each state league.

As between parties and candidates the league takes no stand. It can espouse only issues. No officer of the league, national, state or local, can run for political office or be an active party worker. The fidelity with which the league adheres to this principle was recently illustrated in amusing fashion. A presidential commission was to be appointed and a White House adviser asked the league to suggest the names of some of its members from whom a selection might be made for a possible appointee. Though the commission would be nonpartisan, the league was told, it would be desirable to know the party affiliations of the ladies whose names were suggested.

Mrs. Lee and her administrative assistant, Miss Muriel Ferris, had no trouble in thinking immediately of five members of the national board who could capably sit on the commission and were free to do so. They found, however, to their surprise, that in no case were they certain of the party affiliations of the ladies. Having known the ladies fairly well over a period of years, they thought they could pretty well guess to which party each belonged, and just for the fun of it, they made their guesses. Somewhat ruefully, they found that in every case they had guessed wrong.



OLLIE ATKINS  
At the league's national headquarters in Washington, D.C.: Miss Muriel Ferris, executive secretary; Mrs. John Lee, president; Mrs. Robert Leonard, first vice-president.



JOHN BICKEL  
League members of Camas register William Pratt, 93, as a voter. At election time, they'll take him to the polls.

As the league is numerically small compared to the total electorate, as it has nothing which could be called a war chest in the way of funds, as it neither espouses nor opposes candidates and threatens no reprisals, what is the source of its undeniably great influence with politicians? One answer is that the politicians are never quite sure what the league will do next.

In 1948, the House Ways and Means Committee's Subcommittee on Tariffs was considering a bill for the three-year extension of reciprocal-trade agreements. The league, which favored the extension, and other organizations asked the subcommittee to hold a public hearing on the bill. The subcommittee chairman, Rep. B. W. Gearhart (Rep., Calif.), took a poor view of this.

"I can't see," he was quoted as saying, "that any useful purpose would be served by listening to spokesmen for a bunch of ladies' sewing societies reading statements prepared by the State Department."

The league took no offense over its brusque dismissal as a "ladies' sewing society." It simply took a few timely stitches and whipped together, with other organizations, an open public hearing on the bill at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington. There was considerable advance publicity for this event and fifty-odd organizations, representing some 60,000,000 citizens, sent representatives to testify.

On the eve of the Mayflower hearing the Republican steering committee announced that it would advocate consideration of a one-year extension of the bill. The action was significant in that the subcommittee had not yet reported on the bill. The Congress subsequently voted for the one-year extension. And Mr. Gearhart—who denied he ever made the sewing-society remark—was defeated for re-election.

The league is effectively active on all levels of government. This activity includes such homely chores as riding for hours on streetcars or buses to distribute literature, or sitting all day in supermarkets to persuade citizens willing to learn about issues at stake to carry a league pamphlet home with the groceries. If an election is coming up, the pamphlet will probably be what is called the Voter's Guide, and will list the candidates for office in the voter's district, with their records and position on pertinent issues.

The activities of the league at the state and municipal levels are as various as the issues that raise their complex heads everywhere. And once given an issue, the league, state or municipal, will go to town with it. Many persons have learned this, sometimes to their great annoyance. Mrs. Malcolm Hargraves, of Rochester, Minnesota, now a member of the board of the national organization, during her presidency of the Minnesota league was stopped on the street by a gentleman who observed, somewhat peevishly, that "this country is in a mess" and why didn't the league do something about it? A few months later, during a Minnesota legislative session, league representatives were testifying in support of a piece of pending legislation. It was legislation of which Mrs. Hargraves' friend didn't approve. He telephoned her and demanded angrily, "Why don't you women stay home and mind your own business?"

On the municipal or local level the 959 leagues throughout the nation are continually active with projects for better community government and living. They reconstitute the city fathers, they modernize old jails, cam-

paign for juvenile-detention homes, modern garbage-disposal plants and a thousand and one other projects which need to be done.

Though a league publication has commented wryly that "getting the council-manager plan adopted is usually about as easy as persuading an eight-year-old boy to invoke God's blessing on the aunt who sent him two suits of underwear the previous Christmas," many local leagues have waged long fights to get this kind of government, and usually these fights have been successful.

In San Antonio, Texas, for example, the league worked for a full decade for a new city charter with council-manager government. It feels it had a definite part in finally persuading the electorate to vote two to one for the new government in 1951. A year before, the Des Moines, Iowa, league was the recipient in New York of the national Lane Bryant Annual Award "in recognition of outstanding volunteer services to the community" for its successful campaign for the same thing.

Another routine league chore, performed on a nationwide basis, is interviewing congressmen and senators at least once a year, and oftener if it seems desirable. The task of interviewing congressmen is undertaken by the league or leagues in the congressman's district. Senators customarily are interviewed by a group from the state league.

Many of the local league task forces assigned to the interview of a congressman make it a small social event by inviting Mr. and Mrs. Congressman to tea, perhaps. After these interviews a form entitled Report of Congressional Interview is filled out. This form gives the name of the congressman, his district, state and party, the subjects discussed and the view of the congressman on each, and the attitude of the congressman toward the league.

The higher you go up the league ladder, the more demanding is the job. The national officers certainly work as hard—perhaps they work much harder—as the top officials of a busy national corporation. The election of Mrs. Lee as president in 1950 was in the nature of an experiment, because until that time the national president had made her home in Washington during her incumbency. Largely because of this requirement, no married woman had headed the League of Women Voters of the United States since its organization, when Mrs. Maud Wood Park became its first president.

As the membership of the league is largely composed of married women—all the members of the present national board are married—the league faced something of a dilemma. To select only women without families as presidents would sharply curtail choice, but to ask a woman with a family to spend all her time in Washington would be asking too much. Mrs. Lee was elected with the understanding that she would spend every other week in Washington, which she does, commuting by plane to her home in Farmington, Connecticut, for weekends.

Even with this arrangement, Mrs. Lee accepted the job only after prolonged soul searching, the souls searched including her own, her husband's and her children's. The two older children were grown and off on their own, and the two younger ones were away at school, and they and Mr. Lee felt strongly that Mrs. Lee's acceptance of the job would be in the nature of a family contribution toward making a world which had grown almost un-

bearably grim perhaps a little less so.

In her report to the league's biennial convention after her first two years in office, Mrs. Lee said:

"Without infinite understanding and support on the part of my husband, and the co-operation of my household in Farmington, plus the patience and dedication of the resident board and staff, the difficulties of living a divided life might have been insurmountable. Happily, the co-operation has been unending and I have managed to commute regularly from home to the office without any major crisis. The horse has had no exercise, the old setter is mournful beyond belief and the new kittens have been legion. But the humans, curiously enough, seem to be bearing up quite well."

However well he bears up, Mr. Lee is nonetheless an unsung American patriot. During the days, as the assistant director of research for the United Aircraft Corporation, he can while away the hours with observing the eccentric behavior of wind in tunnels, conning the so-far-unpromising methods of abating the sonic bedlam of jet planes or jousting with any number of such esoteric matters. But as he spends his weekday evenings alone every other week, a pro-tempore widower, at the Lee home on a high hill near Farmington, he may well entertain moments when he is grateful, in an un-Nathan Haleish sort of way, that he has but one wife to give for his country. For the lovely, grayish-blue-eyed Percy Maxim Lee is the kind of wife and woman who would make a house in which she was accustomed to preside seem very empty when she is not there.

Mr. Lee is not alone in being a loyal league husband, for most of them soon become league fans and are proud of their political-minded wives. The attitude of one busy banker is fairly typical.

"I take my politics from my wife," he said stanchly, "because she has time to study these things."

Of course, not all league husbands are tame. When the state president of the league in one of the Southern states wrote a letter several years ago to local leagues in the state extolling the work of the Office of Price Stabilization, her husband, a business executive, wasted no time or finesse in setting things right. He snaffled her mailing list and sent a letter of his own to each of the local leagues.

"My wife," he wrote succinctly to make his own position on OPS quite clear, "is crazy."

The experiment of a part-time president has proved remarkably successful. During Mrs. Lee's first four years in the job, membership in the league has increased more than 35 per cent, continuing a growth it began under her predecessor, Miss Anna Lord Strauss, of New York.

But if the league were ten times as large as it is, its size would not explain its remarkable influence on the pattern of American political history. Probably one of the most compelling reasons for its strength is its determination to squeeze any issue dry of its pros and cons, and to examine these as intelligently and unemotionally as it can. This method makes for unbiased judgment insofar as any political issue can be definitively judged. The members of the league know what they are talking about and what they are voting about.

The New Year of 1950 brought a moment of critical decision to the league. An old friend and member who

had died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, had made the league the residuary legatee of her sizable little fortune.

"But," wrote the attorney for the executors of the will, "a matter has come up which requires immediate attention." The "matter," it appeared, was a female French poodle named Roule, a live asset of the estate, and the immediate attention she required was the attention female dogs customarily require when they have the cyclic notion of tossing their inhibitions over the windmill. Roule's condition was not without legal as well as canine precedents, but there was a complication. The league's benefactor and Roule's late owner, just before her death, the lawyer said, had arranged for the importation from Connecticut of a highly pedigreed Rover who even at that moment was roving by plane to Santa Fe. In this crisis the executors felt themselves powerless to act and the league must decide whether the marriage arranged between Roule and the emplaned Rover should be permitted consummation. Would it, please, make its decision known by return mail?

The league, being no dog in the manger, sent its blessings by airmail, but, in making this hasty decision, it violated its historic policy of never taking a defined position on any issue without prolonged study of all its implications. Had the league followed its habitual methods in this case, Roule and Rover would have become as well known to league members throughout the country as Romeo and Juliet, and probably a great deal more comprehensible. An ambitious study of the affair would have been initiated by the league's research staff. The backgrounds and medical histories of both principals would have been fine-tooth-combed. The league would doubtless have computed incidence of ectopic pregnancies among females of the poodle family and made an objective study of the desirability of increasing the canine population of New Mexico.

A basic publication would have been prepared treating the affair exhaustively and with the most complete objectivity. There would have been consultations with the country's leading authorities of veterinary gynecology and veterinary pediatrics. The findings of all these studies and the publications resulting would have been made available to the 959 local leagues throughout the nation, together with a bibliography covering all the main and most of the tangential questions involved.

When this painstaking pursuit of the truth in its many phases and guises is transferred from the realm of the facetious to the field of issues on whose determination the league correctly believes the fate of the United States as a nation may well depend, the importance and value of the League of Women Voters in today's world becomes apparent.

An example of this is the nearly two years the league spent in studying the Bricker Amendment before taking a stand against it. Members of the national staff interviewed proponents and opponents of the measure. They kept in constant touch with the Senate Judiciary Committee, attended its hearings and reported on them. In The National Voter and other league publications continuous and extensive information on both sides of the question was made available to members throughout the country as the basis of group discussions. These are held in thousands of league units, and reports of them pack

the league's filing cases at national headquarters.

From these reports it was evident that the great majority of league units and members were opposed to the amendment and the league at length announced it was opposed to the resolution. Mrs. Lee wrote to President Eisenhower setting forth the league's opposition. State presidents of the league were called by long distance and, especially in states whose senators appeared to be wavering, all the influence of the league and its members was brought to bear to convince the undecided. The New York Times cited the league as one of the several agencies which had contributed most to the defeat of the proposed amendment.

When the time came to speak about the Bricker Amendment, to stand up and be counted, the league could speak with an authoritative voice because it had taken infinite pains to know what it was talking about. It is a shining example of democracy working as it should work all over the free world. What compels members of the League of Women Voters to go to the endless trouble they do go to in order to inform themselves about political issues in the world today?

The average member of the league today is a youngish mother of two or three children. The key word is "mother." The intelligent woman in this extending era of world wars and world cold wars cannot escape acute apprehension of the fact that today's world is a grimly threatening world. It is no disparagement of the league to judge that today, in the 1950's, it is an organization whose driving forces are compounded of much greater self-interest than they were in 1920 when it was founded.

In 1920 the long battle for woman suffrage had been won here. The organized suffragists were all dressed up in their war paint with no place to go. It was Carrie Chapman Catt, then the grand old lady of the suffragist movement, who suggested and was the god-mother of the League of Women Voters. Naturally, its organization was something more, and something more significant, than the mere sublimation in the hour of victory of the militant forces developed in the long fight for equal suffrage. The women who had borne the brunt of the fight, who were

the chief architects of victory, felt a grave sense of responsibility to educate themselves and the women they had enfranchised in the duties of citizenship. They believed, to quote a league publication, "that a nonpartisan organization could provide political education and experience which would help in the development of citizen responsibility and contribute to the vitality of our representative system of government."

The league was organized to educate, and education was and is the keystone of its arch. That has not changed. The league since its organization has spent, and is spending, millions of man-hours—or to be more exact, woman-hours—in studying the problems which government must face and decide. It comes up with answers, based on profound study and research, from which bias, prejudice and partisanship have been eliminated so far as is humanly possible.

Mrs. Lee sometimes thinks of the league, in a paraphrase of a Rex Stout title, as The League of Frightened Women. This fright has nothing to do with hysteria. It is the opposite of panic. It is the fright that must seize any intelligent and relatively informed person who looks realistically at the mid-twentieth-century world and recognizes its alternative imperatives. It should be, and in the case of league members it is, a constructive fear which makes them only more intrepid in their determined and dedicated fight to win for their children, if not for themselves, a less grim and a more gracious world in which to live.

Percy Maxim Lee, the daughter and namesake of Hiram Percy Maxim, inventor of the Maxim silencer, has helped bring about and is herself a symbol of the new spirit of the league. She has the ability, invaluable to a presiding officer, to listen to long and involved discussions, wrapped up in swaddling *non sequiturs* and errant perorations, and to strip them in a few words to their essential bones. When she is conducting a meeting she stands, because she feels she has things under better control when she is on her feet. At conventions this can become an endurance test, and behind the podium she does a good bit of fast footwork in changing back and forth between her "standing shoes," an old, comfortable and friendly pair, and the smarter pair she slips into

when her feet are likely to come under the thousand or so pairs of friendly but still female eyes.

Though she is tactful and diplomatic, Mrs. Lee can nonetheless on occasion be surprisingly direct. In any unexpected encounter with a metaphorical bull, she is quite likely to seize him by the horns, probably as much to her own surprise as that of the bull. Her younger daughter, Nan; one of four children, says of her mother that she has "decency, honesty, sincerity, dependability, curiosity, energy." A bull finding his horns seized by this synergetic team of virtues would be well advised to lie down and take it easy.

Mrs. Lee has brought the human element into an ascendancy in the league it has not had before. In the early '40's the leadership of the league, while intellectually brilliant, had to a certain extent tended toward the ivory tower. In 1944 there was a convention revolt—Mrs. Lee was one of its leaders—and the officially nominated ticket was defeated by a rump ticket, and Miss Anna Lord Strauss, of New York, became the president. Under Miss Strauss' regime there was begun a much closer *rapprochement* between the national leadership and the members throughout the country. This tendency has continued and been accelerated under Mrs. Lee.

It is Mrs. Lee's belief, and it is shared by other leaders of the organization, that the league cannot be a law unto itself—that it must not run too fast for its contemporaries of the American electorate to keep up—that it must, in other words, want the things that other reasonable American citizens want. It is a temptation for any intellectually elite organization to lose day-by-day elbow contact with its fellow citizens, to get out of touch with them, eventually to operate in the vacuum of its own egocentricity. But the butcher, the baker and the modern candlestick maker who is a dues-paying member of the IUE (CIO), the conservative doctor, lawyer, merchant and chief, are, in the last analysis, the people who decide how things will go on election day.

All these citizens form the main stream of American political thought and action. Any political-action organization which, through institutional egocentricity or mere uncontrolled

knight-errantry, started crusading off in another direction would soon dry up. Mrs. Lee has therefore insisted that the league be human and sociable and keep its elbows rubbing those of its fellow citizens.

One of the two items on the Current Agenda of the League for 1954-1955 is the Development of Understanding of the Relationship Between Individual Liberty and the Public Interest.

"Our job will be accomplished," says the league's The National Voter, "as we succeed in developing each citizen's awareness of his basic heritage of individual freedoms and its relation to the present-day world. . . . With other groups and individuals, leagues will attempt to breathe new life and meaning into familiar concepts found in the Bill of Rights; concepts affecting the relationship between the free citizen and his government, such as 'due process of law,' 'searches and seizures,' 'to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation,' 'to be confronted with the witnesses against him,' and 'to have the assistance of counsel for his defense.'"

Mrs. Lee is frequently asked, "What do you want to see the league accomplish this year?"

"I have tried to think this through," she says, "and I have only one answer. I want the League of Women Voters to be a beacon light of honesty and faith in a country confused by smog. Honesty, in terms of its being true to its fundamental principles and concepts; faith in its indestructible belief in truth and in the human being.

"In the league we may remember to advantage the words of Francis Bacon: 'To say that a blind custom of obedience should be a surer obligation than duty taught and understood, is to affirm that a blind man may tread surer by a guide than a seeing man can by light.'"

Mrs. Malcome Hargraves, commenting on an important project of the Minnesota state league, noted that it could be achieved only through the calling of a state constitutional convention. She put a great deal in a small nutshell when she said, "To do that we shall need patience and longevity. We are women and we have both."