

Doris Coyne
Oral History
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How long have you been a part of the Harrisburg Civic Club?

“I have been an active member for over thirty years.”

Have you held many positions?

“No, I prefer to be a worker bee.”

Tell me how you first got involved with the club, and how that came about.

“We first moved to Harrisburg in 1975. My husband worked for AAA in Scranton and took a position with them in Harrisburg. We moved into Bellevue Park. Bellevue was a great place to move to because there was a real community. You did not have to be wealthy to live in Bellevue Park; it may have appeared that way, but that was not the case. My husband was a very social person and eager to interact with people. He was very friendly to people in the neighborhood. I got involved with the Board in Bellevue, and my friend Kitty from Bellevue encouraged me to join the Civic Club.”

What did membership at that time entail?

“[Civic Club] would meet every Monday at 10:30am and have lunch, and at that time there were about ten tables of eight [ladies]. These ladies lived for those Monday get-togethers. They would bring little gifts for their friends at the table like Hershey bars. That was their entire social life, so like clockwork, like church, “come hell or high water!” they were going to be there every Monday.”

“Kitty sponsored me, but I’d often go to the meetings on my own. I would approach a table and be turned away. The other ladies had been there so long, that they were very set in their ways and their smaller cliques of friends. They didn’t know that they were cliquey; they had just been doing things that way for so long. I kept at it until finally a table welcomed me in and they taught me all that I know about the Civic Club and the area [Harrisburg].”

“After lunch there would be a program. So there were four programs a month, and there were committees that were responsible for giving each program. After the program there would be tea – proper tea with sandwiches, cookies, and such. Many of the ladies had weight problems [alluding to the cookies as contributing]. For a while George Geekis would

visit with the club regularly and speak of politics and what was going on in DC. He would also play the piano, and the ladies just loved him.”

“Most women didn’t work then, so this is what they did. Once a month they played bridge. Up until maybe four years ago they had bridge once a month at the Civic Club.”

What kind of changes have you seen in the Civic Club?

“It’s a friendlier atmosphere...I guess that’s not fair. You could always find someone to be friendly; you just had to make the effort. Very seldom do you walk into an organization and they immediately welcome you. Before, people looked at the Civic Club and the conception was that you had to be very wealthy or socially prominent. It was believed to be [exclusive] just the elite of the city. That has turned around now.”

“The country went through a period where being a part of a civic organization gave you a mark of volunteerism; and you needed to do that sort of thing in order to get things done. We used to award nurses scholarships [for example], but now that need has been filled by the government and individual hospitals. You need to find different needs. Right now we need to keep the building standing.”

“The women then were very active in Civic Club. Today we have as many members as we can get, but what you need is people who can be at the meetings. That’s the difficult part, because today women are all working. Back then they were free all day. It’s still a wonderful place to get to know people. It still has a purpose, many purposes, and the main one right now is holding the building together! [laughs] Your mother [Marybeth Lehtimaki] is doing such a job with that! It should be a paying job! You can tell her I said that.”

“The Civic Club, thanks to ladies like your mother, is going to continue to be restored to its former grandeur. It takes a lot of hard work and people who are dedicated, and the group has so much drive right now, and that’s what you need.”

“Around 2000 they couldn’t find people who could devote the time that they needed to...Then Isabelle Smith brought new life to the Civic Club. That is when we established the Affiliates, and started getting grants and things of that sort. Then Nancy took up the cause and brought a bunch of people in. You see, you need warm bodies to get things done.”

“This new group under Beth has also brought in many people. There are a lot of new faces now, and that’s good. For years the group was lacking energy. The response would be, “I’ll do it because you need somebody”.

They lacked their own motivation. People like Beth Cornell; her mother was involved and brought her in. It's a legacy to ladies like her, and they need to keep the legacy going. There were not people like that around before."

What would you like to see in the future for the Civic Club?

"I would like to see the building with all of the renovations completed [laughs], but I'm not going to live long enough for that! I am already happy to see the vibrancy and dedication of the people now. It's just great! I just hope that the membership continues to grow with active participants."

- Interview conducted by Taavi Lehtimäki 2013