

Elsie Swenson
Oral History
2011

Background:

“I grew up outside of Waynesburg, Green County. I would always say that in twenty minutes I could be in Morgantown, WV. I graduated from high school in 1954, and I went to a commercial college in Washington, PA. I wanted to be a secretary, and had wanted to work for the FBI in Washington DC. My dad wouldn't let me go down there, even though I had an uncle who lived in Alexandria. Being the first and oldest child, my father never taught me how to drive. One day I was reading the paper, and they were advertising for secretaries in Harrisburg. So I called and he [the employer] was a local legislator, and I got my father to drive me into Waynesburg, and I interviewed and got the job.”

“The legislator that sponsored me was Steven McCann. He was the legislator for Green County, but at that time we [secretaries] were in a pool, so we worked for all of the members. Whoever came in [to office] next, we worked for them – Democrat or Republican, it didn't matter. I did that for two years, and then I worked for a new department (when it was passed by the legislature) that administered grant programs within the Department of Community and Economic Development. I got married the second year of that job. Mr. McCann became the Majority Leader in the House, and he asked me to come and work for him, and so I spent my last four years on “The Hill” working for him. The position was very demanding, and it was too much with getting married, so I didn't stay long.”

“My husband [Harold] worked in tourism, and set up the Tourism Department for the State, before deciding that he was leaving too. We owned a travel agency from 1961-1980. We ran for Mayor in 1969. [Harold was elected] They voted to have a stronger Mayor as the head of government. Harold was the first Democrat [Mayor] in 80 or 90 years. He didn't fire everyone who was [incumbent] in City Hall. He kept the good people who knew how to do their jobs regardless of party politics. Harold upset a lot of people, but it worked out fine. He was Mayor from 1970-1977.”

“During the time that he [Harold] was in office, I was actually making more money than he was. At that time, they paid the Mayor a salary of \$15,000/year. So I always teased him that he was a “kept” man. I worked, and that was a different situation than what most women did at that time.

It was unheard of, and because of that, a lot of people either liked me, or they didn't [for being gainfully employed]."

Joining the Civic Club:

"I got to know a lot of people during Harold's time in office, and then became a member of The Civic Club of Harrisburg. The Civic Club had invited him to speak, (which they would do with a number of political officials from time to time) and they invited me to come for tea. As his wife, they had me listed as an honorary member, so I would attend everything that they invited me to attend. At the end of [Harold's] second term, I became an active dues-paying member."

"I didn't keep a diary of the stuff that I did with the club, but much [of what we did] made the paper. Back then they had social news writers for the paper. As a regular member I helped to raise a lot of money and I went through the Chairs, and I eventually became President of the Civic Club."

Funny Story:

"At the time that I joined the Civic Club, it was mostly older ladies that lived in the city. They were basically unmarried women who lived on "The Hill", or were married but didn't have children. Most couples [with children] moved to the West Shore for the schools. My husband and I were not "dessert people", so I suggested to the committee that we have a "bake-less bake sale". The ladies just looked at me. I said, 'Well how many of you ladies have someone living with you [whom] you can just take a whole pie or whole cake to, who will eat it?' At the ends of these bake sales, these ladies were quating [taking home] whole cakes and pies. I tried to support these bake sales, but it was just a lost cause. So (finally) one of the members asked me how we would go about having a "bake-less bake sale", and I explained that we could do a club mailing, where instead of getting in to the kitchen and making something for a bake sale, they could just mail us a little check. After two years of proposing this idea, I finally got someone to agree with me. We always had over 100 members, so checks for five dollars added up. We made twice as much money [as before] and it was a great success."

"Then I suggested the bridge parties, because we had so many bridge players. Back in those days [the 1980's] we would get together every Monday. We would have meetings in the morning, and then have lunch, and then we would have a speaker. Every month we would have a Board meeting to schedule speakers for the month. Getting four speakers for each month was getting increasingly difficult. When I was President in the 80's, and we had a number of younger women join the club, and many of the older ladies liked to play bridge (like me). So we would play bridge, and

for five dollars [players] would get a prize and a bit of lunch. You know, for five dollars you wouldn't get all of that today. It was so well received that we ended up filling the whole upstairs with card tables, and we even brought in bridge instructors to teach the ladies that wanted to learn."

"It was a different era. Everyone wore gloves and hats - you don't see that today."

"There were a lot of political speakers at the meetings on Mondays. There were a lot of businesses in town, and if I remember correctly, there were a lot of banks. At one point, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the square was banks, so we had a lot of [banker] speakers. We would have someone with musical talent come; from the symphony, or just someone to play the piano. But [after a while] people got to wanting some money. They no longer came to play out of the goodness of their heart(s). Getting guests to come and speak was always a matter of "who knew whom", and if there were for example, a highways issue, we would have someone from Capital Hill come and talk to us about this issue. We didn't have to pay for that; we gave them a lunch, but speakers were hard to come by."

"I received two awards while I was with the club, but there is no record of it. We didn't keep records like that. They were internal awards, and so not advertised. The silver Gertrude Namen award, and another silver award. They were both silver, but not good silver. So I got rid of them at some point. I had to polish them all of the time, and I didn't need [want] to do that."

- Original interview edited by Taavi Lehtimäki 2013