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## Tampa's Womens Clubs, 1900-1930

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**MRS. WILLIE LOWRY**



**MISS KATE V.  
JACKSON**

-Photo courtesy of  
LU DOVI



**MRS. AMOS H. NORRIS**

-Photo from  
HAMPTON DUNN  
COLLECTION

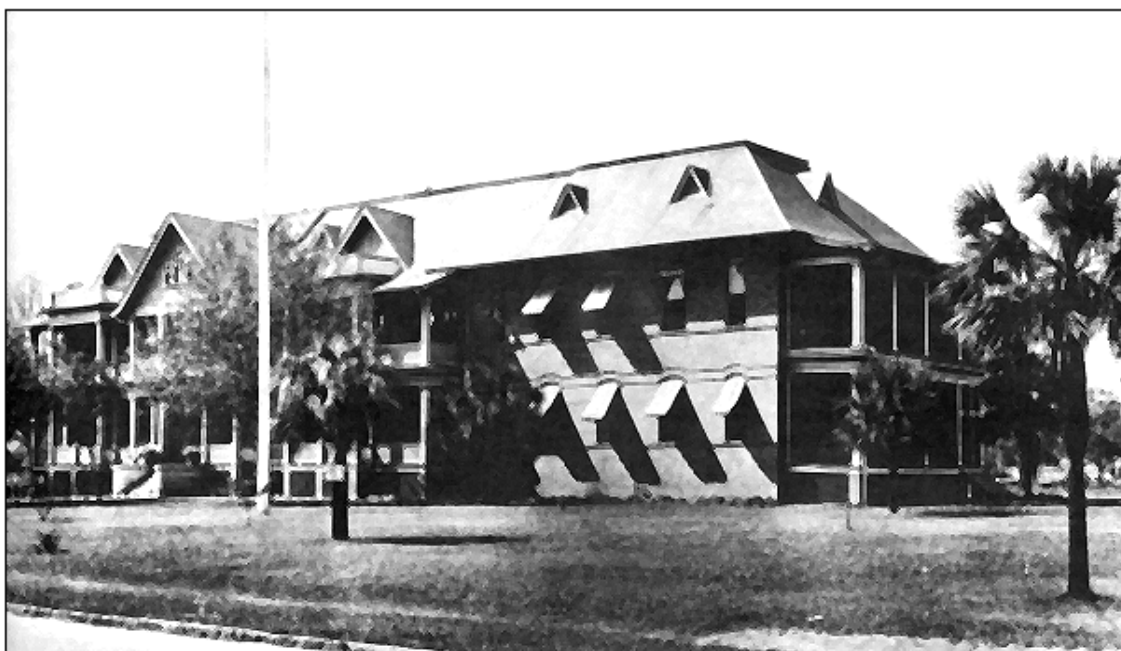
## **AMONG PIONEER TAMPA WOMEN CIVIC LEADERS**

### **TAMPA'S WOMENS CLUBS, 1900-1930**

**By MARYCLAIRE CRAKE**

The women's clubs movement in Tampa flourished during the early years of the twentieth century. From 1900 to 1930, the activities of local women's organizations broadened, membership rolls increased, and members became extremely influential not only in their communities, but throughout the state and country. In addition, through the establishment of city, county and state federations, women's associations combined individual clubs into cohesive organizations that battled for common interests, creating a powerful lobby for the passage of laws important to women.

In the early 1900s, women's organizations were devoted mostly to the arts. One of the oldest Tampa clubs was the Friday Morning Musicale. Founded in 1902, the Musicale's organizational meeting was held at the Twiggs Street home of Mrs. W. H. Ferris, an outstanding music teacher and organist for St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. The first officers selected by the sixteen charter members included: Mrs. Ferris, president; Mrs. Charles Marshall, vice-president; Miss Frances Louise Dodge, secretary; and Mrs. Douglas Conoley, treasurer.<sup>1</sup>



**WOMEN SOUGHT USE OF OLD HOSPITAL BUILDING**  
**Florida Fair Snakes Gordon Keller Away**

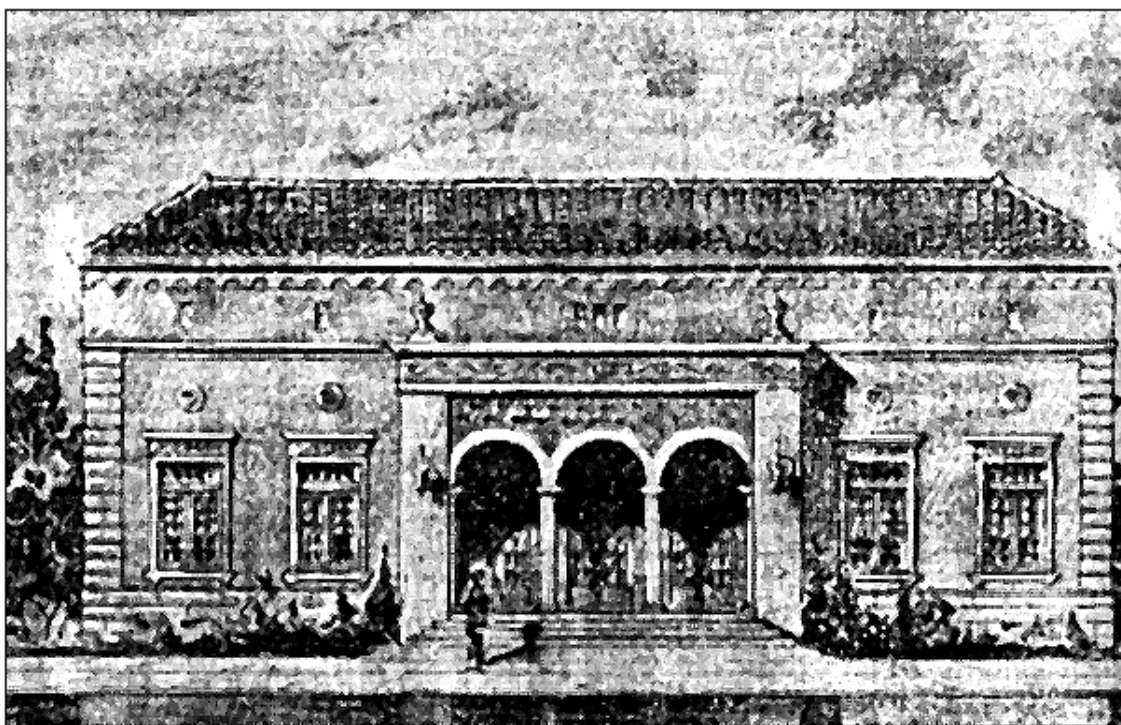
-Photo from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION

At each Musicale meeting, a specific composer received the attention of clubwomen. The program consisted of a roll call to which members responded with bits of musical news, a paper about the chosen composer's life, followed by four musical numbers selected from the composer's works. The early Musicale also categorized members into musical departments - piano, soprano, contralto and chorus. As the club expanded, additional departments were added including violin, orchestra and organ.<sup>2</sup>

**'GREAT MUSICAL TREAT'**

Only five years after the club's founding, members of the Musicale secured a contract with Madame Marc Ella Sembrich guaranteeing her \$2,250 to perform a concert at the Tampa Bay Casino. Since the

total contract amount would be derived from ticket receipts, the Musicale assumed no financial obligation. In announcing that Madame Sembrich would sing in Tampa, the Tampa Morning Tribune captioned her front-page picture with the words, "World's Greatest Singer Coming Here." By securing an opportunity for Tampanians to hear Madame Sembrich sing, the Musicale clubwomen achieved an artistic coup. Sembrich had performed in Paris, London and New York, and there was a worldwide demand for her appearance. The Tribune noted that few great singers would have responded so graciously as Madame Sembrich since in Tampa there was "no stepping stone to higher fame, nor any original jury to write a world verdict of approval." The Tribune also paid tribute to the women of the Musicale by thanking them for a "great musical treat."<sup>3</sup>



### **Musicale and Federation to Meet Here**

**CLIPPING from The Tampa Daily Times, June 27, 1927, shows architect Frank Dunham's plans for club house for Friday Morning Musicale and Federation of Women's Clubs on Horatio St. The structure was expected to cost \$50,000.**

Although numerous clubwomen devoted their time and talents to artistic endeavors, others promoted philanthropic goals. The Tampa Civic Association, for example, worked to cultivate high ideals of civic pride and promote the improvement of home and community surroundings along with better living conditions. Organized by Kate V. Jackson in the spring of 1911, the first officers of Tampa Civic included Miss Jackson, president; Mrs. W. S. Oppenheimer, vice-president; Mrs. Willis B. Powell, community vice-president; Mrs. Sydney B. Gibbons, correspondence secretary; Miss Elizabeth Askew, executive secretary; and Miss Maggie Belle Varty, treasurer.<sup>4</sup>

### **PLAYGROUNDS FOR KIDS**

One of Tampa Civic's most important projects was securing public playgrounds for the children of Tampa. Soon after the organization of the club, the members adopted a playground resolution requesting that the city council purchase selected playground sites. To attract attention to their project, the clubwomen regularly attended city council meetings for several weeks and presented the councilmen with their club's playground resolution. The clubwomen insisted that they would continue to attend (even if it meant delaying their summer vacation) until the city council took definite



**MRS. LYLE GRIFFIN**



**MRS. ALBERT ADAMS**



**MRS. S.W. JACKSON**

action. In 1913, the council did so, approving the purchase of three playground sites. The following year, with equipment provided by Tampa Civic, the first playground opened.<sup>5</sup>

Clubwomen were also staunch supporters of public libraries. Most clubs had a book collection pertaining to their own interests and activities. Although many of the club libraries were open to the public, members of Tampa's women's clubs saw the need for a larger and more diversified institution. As a result, local women's organizations worked to secure a Carnegie library for the city. In 1912, Andrew Carnegie agreed to furnish \$50,000 to the city of Tampa to build a free public library. Carnegie's only requirements were that city officials pledge to support the institution with no less than \$5,000 a year and provide a suitable site for the building.<sup>6</sup>

Tampa's clubwomen, organized into a library association, worked diligently to gain city council's acceptance of Carnegie's gift. Public disagreements erupted over the issue, however. A local insurance agent went so

far as to file suit to prevent the city of Tampa from accepting the Carnegie library. The petition for injunction requested that the library question be thoroughly tested by a public referendum.<sup>7</sup>

### **LOOKING GIFT HORSE IN MOUTH**

In October 1912, a special election was scheduled to decide the fate of Tampa's library. Voter approval, however, remained in doubt. The very name Carnegie antagonized many of the city's working class residents who were angered by the philanthropist's anti-labor activities. In addition, many citizens of Tampa still questioned whether signing a contract with Carnegie would truly benefit the city. They questioned his integrity and feared he might attempt to seize control of not only the library but also the city. Members of Tampa's women's clubs assured voters that Tampa, not Carnegie, would own the property and that the library did not even have to recognize Carnegie in its name but could be called the Tampa Public Library. The Tampa Morning Tribune concurred with local clubwomen stating that "there is

nothing in the contract that should be objectionable to any one and there are no strings to the gift of \$50,000.”<sup>8</sup> 18 The voters of Tampa narrowly approved the library referendum and agreed to accept Carnegie's gift, albeit not with open arms.<sup>9</sup>

By helping to acquire a library for their city, Tampa's clubwomen had taken bold steps into the arena of community activism. As their efforts expanded, so did the need for a women's club meeting hall. In 1915, Tampa's Woman's Club took the initiative in securing a clubhouse. It submitted a recommendation to its sister organizations suggesting that all clubs cooperate in leasing and remodeling the city park clubhouse in Tampa Bay Park.<sup>10</sup>

### **THE FIGHT GOES ON**

The women of the Friday Morning Musicale demurred, however, and decided that a remodeled building would not be adequate for their club's needs. Although opposing the Tampa Bay Park site, the Musicale clubwomen suggested another means of securing a clubhouse. All clubwomen could work toward obtaining sufficient names on a petition requesting a special election at which the voters would be asked to deed by gift a portion of Tampa Bay Park for the building of a suitable women's clubhouse. This suggestion aroused intense interest among those seeking a new women's club building.<sup>11</sup>

In March 1915, officers representing seven women's clubs appeared before the Board of Public Works requesting the land in Tampa Bay Park. Miss Mamie Dawson, president of the Musicale, explained the proposal. Members of the Board questioned whether the women should receive a lease and indicated that legally they could only lease

property for ten years. The board at first appeared willing to accommodate the women but requested a definite proposition in writing before taking action.<sup>12</sup> When, however, the clubwomen presented the board with the necessary written document for purchasing the land, board members notified them that the property could not be sold at that time. As a result, the clubwomen abandoned plans to secure a new clubhouse and returned to the initial plan of remodeling the Plant Park facility.<sup>13</sup>

Still without the convenience of a clubhouse some years later, Tampa's women's organizations met to discuss the possibility of forming the first league of women's clubs. In February 1921, representatives from several women's clubs including the Friday Morning Musicale, the Tampa Civic Association, the Students' Art Club, the United Daughters of the Confederacy, the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Tampa Woman's Club approved a motion creating the Tampa League of Women's Clubs. Officers for the first year were Mrs. W. F. Miller, president; Mrs. S. L. Lowry, Sr., first vice-president; Miss Elsie Hoyt, second vice-president; Mrs. C. J. Woodruff, third vice-president; Mrs. S. W. Jackson, recording secretary; Mrs. L. H. Lothridge, correspondence secretary; Miss Kate Jackson, treasurer; and Mrs. Albert Adams, auditor.<sup>14</sup>

### **KEYNOTES OF LEAGUE**

Community welfare and cooperation became the keynotes of the new League which sought to impart, encourage and promote the projects of all affiliated organizations without infringing on the work of individual clubs. The League worked to coordinate efforts of member clubs on questions vital to the home and the community, especially those affecting women and children. The

members of the League agreed that unity through federation would not only benefit the clubs but also offer opportunities for promoting civic and social progress.<sup>15</sup>

The first project of the local League embodied these ideals of social improvement. Due to the prevalence of tuberculosis in Tampa during the 1920s, the League began a crusade to fight the disease. The League's social welfare department researched the problem with the assistance of Dr. J. R. Harris, city health officer, and found a high percentage of tuberculosis among children, especially in poorer families. In 1922, two hundred and ninety-seven children attended the city tuberculosis clinic. Dr. Harris informed the clubwomen that in order for the children to improve their strength, they needed nourishment provided by the intake of at least two quarts of milk per day for each child. The members of the League's social welfare department calculated that providing one child with two quarts of milk daily would cost approximately \$7.50 each month per child - an expense few poor families could afford. League members responded by starting a milk fund campaign.<sup>16</sup>

### **100 CENTS TO THE DOLLAR**

The League's chairperson for the milk fund, Mrs. C.A. Miles, assured the public that one hundred cents of every dollar contributed would go toward milk purchases. Members then distributed milk bottles as collection devices to local stores for voluntary contributions. The League also sponsored several plays and musical performances which raised over \$2,000 for the milk fund.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the milk fund, the clubwomen continued to pursue the task of building a

clubhouse. In October of 1922, members of the Friday Morning Musicale voted to purchase a lot on the corner of Brevard and Horatio Streets for \$4,000. In order to borrow money to erect the club's building, the Musicale had to be free from debt and functioning on a sound financial basis. For this purpose, the Musicale's newly formed finance committee recommended raising regular dues from \$5 to \$10 and adding a new clubhouse fee of \$15 per year. Members also solicited donations from Tampa's business community and set up a citizen's patron list for those who contributed \$50 per year toward the clubhouse fund.<sup>18</sup>

### **MORE MOVERS AND SHAKERS**

By October 1925, the building fund showed a balance of over \$14,000. Several months later, the finance committee attempted to secure a \$48,000 loan to meet construction costs. A reasonable interest rate, however, could not be secured which delayed construction once again.<sup>19</sup>

### **TAMPA BAY CASINO**

While working for their own clubhouse, the Musicale clubwomen subleased space at the Tampa Bay Casino from the League, now known as the Hillsborough County Federation of Women's Clubs. In the summer of 1927, the federation received notice that the entire building had been leased to the American Legion as a clubhouse, forcing both organizations to locate a new meeting place. Federation members then received an offer from the city commissioners to lease the old Gordon Keller Hospital located at the fairgrounds. They discussed with the Musicale the possibility of remodeling that

building for use as a clubhouse. A few weeks later, however, the Fair Association objected to the lease being offered, stating that the fair needed the building for expansion. The women stood firm claiming the commissioners' offer took priority over the Fair Association's protest.<sup>20</sup>

To resolve the issue, the Fair Association offered the federation \$10,000 in cash if they would surrender all claims to the lease. Federation members accepted the offer and met with members of the Musicale to discuss a possible partnership in constructing a jointly-owned clubhouse. After several meetings of both boards, the members decided to form a corporation to build a clubhouse on the lot owned by the Musicale. The clubhouse opened in October 1927 at 809 Horatio Street and is presently used by the Friday Morning Musicale, the Hillsborough County Federation of Women's Clubs, a local radio station and various other organizations.<sup>21</sup>

With the completion of the clubhouse building, Tampa's women's organizations focused additional attention on local problems. An issue brought before the Woman's Club in 1928 was dancing in public schools. The president of the Hillsborough High Parent-Teacher Association, Mrs. John T. Adams, requested that the school board permit the use of the school for a student dance with PTA members as chaperones. The board, however, upheld a long-standing 12 rule against dancing in school buildings.<sup>22</sup>

### **'EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY'**

Following this initial rejection, the PTA solicited assistance from the Tampa Woman's Club. Members of the Woman's

Club adopted a resolution supporting the request of the PTA, which was presented to the board by Mrs. J.J. Saxton. She argued that students needed wholesome outlets for their youthful energies but also recognized that parents needed to know their children's whereabouts at all times. According to Mrs. Saxton, the Woman's Club viewed the dance as an educational opportunity through which the PTA would be "elevating the moral and social standards of the community's future citizens" by providing the proper surroundings under the right conditions and with the 11 supervision of parents and teachers at a social gathering of students." She urged the members of the school board to grant the request of the PTA and permit the use of the high school for student dances.<sup>23</sup>

Mrs. Saxton's resolution was opposed by Dr. Claude W. Duke of the Tampa Ministers Association. This organization supported the school authorities and urged the board of education to stand firm against efforts to divert "our tax supporting buildings from the purposes for which they were erected." Mrs. Amos Norris, another member of the Woman's Club, responded to Dr. Duke by stating that the school buildings belonged to the taxpayers and not to the school board and, therefore, the trustees were presumptuous in denying the use of the building to the PTA which was composed of property owners as well as parents. After reviewing both arguments, the school board still refused to permit student dancing in school buildings during the school term.<sup>24</sup>

Although unsuccessful in opening school buildings for student dances, the first thirty years of the twentieth century presented Tampa's clubwomen with opportunities and demands seldom envisioned by their founders. Women's clubs progressed from organizations dedicated to the arts to



associations contributing to their local community's civic and social progress. Through individual organizations and particularly through the Hillsborough County Federation of Women's Clubs, members succeeded in numerous endeavors which gave practical meaning to the federation's motto, "In Unity There Is Strength."

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Friday Morning Musicale History, 1902-43, Hillsborough County Federation of Women's Clubs Papers, Special Collections Department, University of South Florida Library, Tampa, Florida (Hereafter cited as HCFWCP).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, March 23, 1907.

<sup>4</sup> Tampa Civic 1911 Yearbook, HCFWCP.

<sup>5</sup> Lula Joughin Dovi, "I Remember Aunt Kate," The Sunland Tribune, 4 (November 1978), p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, October 20, 1912.

<sup>7</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, February 2, 1911.

<sup>8</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, October 25, 1912.

<sup>9</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, October 30, 1912.

<sup>10</sup> Friday Morning Musicale History, 1902-1943, HCFWCP.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, March 17, 1915.

<sup>13</sup> Students' Art Club Minute Book, 1912-1923, HCFWCP.

<sup>14</sup> Hillsborough County Federation of Women's Clubs Scrapbook, 1920-1935, HCFWCP.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Friday Morning Musicale History, 1902-1943, HCFWCP.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The Friday Morning Musicale is presently pursuing a historic preservation grant-in-aid for the clubhouse. The Musicale requested over \$188,000 for repairs. The structure is listed in the Hyde Park National Register District. Through the efforts of Mrs. John W. Rodgers, president of the Musicale and Federated Clubs, Inc. and Mrs. Irene Bradley, Musicale treasurer, numerous fund raising activities have been inaugurated. (Friday Morning Musicale Miscellaneous Papers, HCFWCP).

<sup>22</sup> Tampa Morning Tribune, December 7, 1928.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

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Tampa Morning Tribune.

Dovi, Lula Joughin. "I Remember Aunt Kate." The Sunland Tribune 4 (November 1978): 12-15.