



19<sup>th</sup> century factory workers  
in Aurora, and Chicago, Illinois



Typing  
classes were  
among the  
first YWCA  
strategies to  
help women  
compete for  
higher paying  
jobs



Early on, Columbus Ohio's leaders  
break ground and Toledo dedicates a  
grand new residence



## Our Centurion Sisters...Dynamic, Diverse, and Determined to Make a Difference

This article presents the early "herstories" of just a few YWCAs who have celebrated their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries. What better way to continue our Steps to Absolute Change than to meet some of the women who originally put the YWCA on the map. What situations prompted YWCA foundings? Who led these monumental efforts? What evolved from their work? And, what do we share with our foremothers?

### Chapter One: "The Sparks Were Flying"

It was 1855, in England, and a few women gathered to seek housing for nurses returning from the Crimean War, and, to improve the lives of women caught up in the Industrial Revolution. Here the YWCA was born. Then came the move of many of America's young women into our growing cities, their sights set on becoming self sufficient and finding a better future. As was the experience in England, what they found among the mills, bakeries and laundries were long working hours, poor and unsafe conditions, and few opportunities for healthy activities.

Concurrently in the US, a religious revival was being experienced, and as the plight of the new corps of working women became apparent, women serving the Lord saw a worthy application for their spirit and efforts. It was in this climate that the Prayer Union Circle and Ladies' Christian Association was formed in New York City in 1858, which evolved into the YWCA of New York City, and that a group of "benevolent ladies" gathered in 1859 to form the Boston YWCA, the first to use the name "Young Women's Christian Association." News of great opportunity traveled fast, and by 1890 there were 106 like-minded organizations that evolved into YWCAs.

### Chapter Two: "Who Goes There?"

There was Agnes, Harriet, Emma, May, Etta, Jessie, Minnie Moon, and, all those who went by "Mrs. George...." and Mrs. A.W.....". These women, some under 20 years of age, were leading ordinary lives, were students, were independently wealthy with a fervor for social betterment, or were perhaps a state's "First Lady." They met in small groups in a home or church, on campus, or, many times, in a room at the already established local YMCA. They were miles apart and had varying start-up organizational names, but subscribed to a common purpose and shared a common commitment -- to improve the lives of women as well as the conditions in which they worked and lived.

### Chapter Three: "You May Be Wondering Why We Asked You Here ....."

The reasons that compelled our foremothers to found YWCAs are all variations on the theme of meeting the needs of women, especially young women. Many YWCAs shared as their beginning purpose, "To improve the intellectual, social, temporal, and spiritual welfare of women, especially young women dependent upon their own exertions for support."

The YWCA of Columbus formed "To extend a helping hand to our toiling sisters." In Toledo it was "To serve women with sad and sorrowful stories who are in need of homes." Racine set out to "Ensure the symmetrical development of all young women for their highest physical, social, business, intellectual and spiritual interests and development." In Kansas City the YWCA was formed "To care for girls working in slime and filth, and long hours with starvation pay."

Dayton's first sense of purpose developed when women, after attending a YMCA meeting about leading men back to faith and religion asked each other, "How might we elevate the women in our midst?" The answer was, "To visit and relieve the poor," which volunteers soon discovered meant clothing, feeding, and sometimes even preparing people for burial.

In Springfield, MA, women representing several churches were active as a YMCA auxiliary, but realized they had higher priorities than subservient support for the financially plagued YMCA. They declared their independence and reorganized to meet women's needs.

**Chapter Four: "With Lightning Speed"**

St. Joseph, Missouri's YWCA founders met to consider organizing a YWCA one week in 1888 and secured and furnished an appropriate space, developed a program, and greeted the first participants the next week. They also, in two weeks in 1913, conducted a horse & buggy door-to-door campaign, yielding \$150,000 for a new building.

On November 4, 1900, in Kansas City, KS, YWCA State Secretary Agnes Radford met with other women to encourage the formation of a new association. By November 30, a rental agreement was authorized for a building "which has one large room downstairs, an upstairs fitted up for housekeeping, gas and bath, in good condition, and renting for sixty-five dollars per month."

**Chapter Five: "Who Me?"**

The world in these times was not known for facilitating the establishment of programs and facilities designed to meet the needs of women, and YWCA leaders needed to be creative, assertive, and sometimes even furtive in their efforts.

When the need for more program space became apparent in Toledo, YWCA volunteers approached a local doctor to share his building. He said he "wanted nothing to do with a group of loud praying women who would disturb his other tenants." Quick on her feet, leader Clara Farrar asked to confer with her committee, went to them, and whispered for all to bow their heads. Then she returned and said, "We have prayed that you will change your mind, Dr. Darst. We are a quiet company of Christian women and will in no way do you any harm." Dr. Darst, assured that prayer did not have to be noisy, permitted them to move in.

Toledo's provision of "reformatory work" involved visitation and religious activities "in the jail, houses of ill fame and the poor house." YWCA volunteers, however, weren't always easily admitted and sometimes had to find their way in via a connecting saloon.

The Portland, Maine YWCA secured a building to serve as a residence in 1873, but it came with a male resident who had little interest in leaving. The new residents established a democracy and promptly voted him out.

In Kansas City it was working conditions at the Armour Packing plant that prompted action from YWCA leaders. One Agnes Fassett not only made her way in to see KB Armour himself, but also convinced him to issue her a permit to visit all parts of the packing house and report about conditions and improvements needed. Upon her report of horrible conditions, Mr. Armour responded by taking action to make major changes for the good. When she went on to secure public access to water for the residents in the area she found herself negotiating with the 'hottest' gambler in town.



**Armour Packing Plant, and environs in which the first YWCA leaders of Kansas City worked**

**Chapter Six: "If We Could Just..."**

The women leading these young YWCAs were procurers of the finest kind, and sought in-kind contributions of furnishings and supplies everywhere. For the two jersey cows, hay, and stable space donated to the Dayton YWCA, volunteers responded with a heartfelt thank you. For the organ donated to St. Joseph, volunteers not only offered thanks for the instrument, but also for the box in which it arrived which was just what was needed for a coal bin.

**Chapter Seven: "Onward and Upward..."**

The role that Bible studies and religious activities played in YWCA work was indeed mighty during these early years, and, as described in the YWCA of Chicago's history, "was instrumental in developing an empowering culture." The doctrine reinforced the belief that each member had a right to have her voice heard. Associations also benefited from a newly emerging social philosophy. Instead of viewing women in dire circumstances as immoral or lacking enterprise, as did Chicago's Erring Woman's Refuge, the YWCA, especially in Chicago, "took their plight as a sign of the city's inherent social peril." Members volunteered with an innate sense that their efforts both mattered and had the strength of God's will supporting them. With their religious sense of purpose coupled with the immediacy of need, YWCAs became organizations focused on women's needs, and, ones that took a place at the helm of a new social movement concerned with the reform of society.

**Chapter Eight: "A Woman's Work...."**

With services built around vespers and prayer meetings, YWCA advocacy efforts during this time included improving labor conditions for women and aiding the others who were working to secure women's right to vote. Many connected with the World YWCA through World Fellowship activities, and educational, business skill building, physical fitness, Traveler's Aid, home arts, and cultural programs were steadily developed. Organizing "Chautauquas" and forums for current issues affecting women was popular. USO work developed during wartime.

The formation of Girls Departments became popular at the turn of the century, to help girls "face life squarely" and "to find and give their best." Girl Reserves followed, which evolved into Y-Teens, and the number of YWCA camp programs grew.



Kansas City camp leaders and Girl Reserves Harrisburg PA, founded in 1893, created many ways for young working women to gather, including the "RFOM" (Room for One More) and "TMTM" (The More the Merrier) clubs.



Advocacy and services were added early on that addressed women's need for shelter, medical services and workers' rights. Attention during the Great Depression included posting the slogan, "Who we buy a cheap dress?" to protest low wages many justified by the times.

In 1920, a Phyllis Wheatley Branch, named in honor of the 18<sup>th</sup> century poet, was organized in Harrisburg to serve the needs of women of color, and provided educational and skill building classes, social programs, and a residence. By 1955 full integration throughout the Harrisburg YWCA was achieved.



Racine YWCA Basketball Team

At the YWCA in Racine, WI, founded in 1894, physical programs, including basketball, were provided, as in these times it was "not appropriate for women to be active outside." "Business Girl Efficiency," language classes, first aid, sewing, cooking, and Sunday afternoon "parties for men in uniform" rounded out Racine's program.

Work of the YWCA at UC Berkeley started in 1898 by an all-student board. Volunteers first met new female students at the train station to help them find housing and to provide loans as needed. An active volunteer program was started to connect students with community organizations and schools. During the 1920s, this YWCA established a formal program to work with foreign students. In the 1940s, assistance was organized for Japanese-American students in internment camps. Studies conducted by the YWCA in the 1950s-60s which profiled discriminatory campus housing practices led to dramatic changes in University policy.

### Chapter Nine: "Housing Starts"

In Chicago in 1876, YWCA visionaries learned to work together toward consensus as they evaluated founding a residence as a way to address "the plight of young, single, self-supporting women." Some board members felt there was enough housing already, but after the president met personally with young women incarcerated in the county jail and shared her experience a shared commitment emerged for a common cause, "...a home for young, friendless shop-girls who earn small wages and endure cheap, vile boarding houses."

Medical services in Chicago were also inadequate and were not extended to "fallen women with incurable diseases." By 1877, a health dispensary was opened. Doctors and nurses donated time and supplies, and soon 200 patients were being treated per month. The YWCA swiftly moved into the public policy realm as well, advocating for women's rights in the workplace and medical services.



Chicago YWCA Millinery Class

Chicago YWCA service to women of color began in 1915 with a residence and educational programs. By 1927 a formal integration program was well underway. Racial justice was a core effort with specific attention given to combating anti-Semitism and the labeling of blood from white and black donors.



YWCA leaders often learned, first hand, about the subjects connected with their efforts, as in this YWCA anatomy class

In Toledo in 1870 the "ball of fire" of the organization, Harriet May Barlow, traveled to the Cleveland and Cincinnati YWCAs to learn what was being done about housing for women. She returned with strategies and recruited additional leadership, and soon the YWCA's first home was established and named, "The Home for Friendless Women."

In 1903 a cafeteria was established, involvement grew, and employment referrals, English classes, Traveler's Aid and lunchtime programs at area factories were organized. Soon property was purchased with an eye toward a new facility. During their capital campaign volunteers called on one significant prospect to whom they pointed out, successfully, that a YWCA residence and program space would be a greater tribute to his wife than the drinking fountain for horses that he reportedly had in mind.

Dayton YWCA volunteers, in 1870, started in horse and buggy rigs and traveled from home to home to provide assistance to the city's poorest women and families.



Dayton's First Home – Modest but Workable

Along the way, the need for a home for widows and destitute women became apparent, and was established.

These women were known for running a tight ship. The first residents of the home were referred to as inmates, and were expected to "listen to advice, and learn faithfully the duties belonging to their several spheres in life that they may become a blessing to themselves and others." House rules included rising at 5am, lights out by 10pm, and surrendering one's lamp to the matron at that time. By 1911, the atmosphere had relaxed a bit, and the residents were offered "a ride in a car through the countryside" as a real treat.

Dayton started their advocacy efforts in 1886, when legislators were urged to provide "better legal protection for women against assault."

The number of women of color coming to Dayton was growing in the late 1880s, and work began to establish services and integrated programs. Women of color started serving on the Dayton board in 1932, the first being Mrs. O.W. Evens who went on to serve on a national level.

In 1869, YWCA leaders in Portland, Maine saw needs among women who had arrived from Ireland to work as domestics. They visited them and offered assistance in the areas of employment, instructional classes and housing. In 1902 there was one month when 149 women and children roomed at the YWCA, and \$9,000 had to be raised quickly to cover costs. Later, physical programs were added, and a building donated. Ocean front campsites were secured in 1904 and Travelers Aid services were begun to meet the increasing number of arriving steamers and trains.

Portland's Public Affairs Committee was active, addressing societal needs of concern to women. The Portland delegation was present at a national YWCA meeting in 1894, voting for the resolution "That we draw no color line at the Convention." The committee also

also recommended improvements in Portland regarding working conditions, i.e. successfully influencing a private employment agency to stop sending girls to work in disreputable places. The association regularly attracted speakers on peace, suffrage, and racial justice.



**Chapter Ten: "It's Time To Eat"**

Many YWCAs started their work by fulfilling the needs of women factory and retail workers who did not have anywhere to eat lunch. The YWCA of Marshalltown, Iowa established one of the many "Noon Rest" cafeterias and programs by looking for, then securing second floor space in the downtown building shown above.

The Minneapolis YWCA, in 1890, turned their first attentions to provide the "only decent, affordable place downtown for women workers to eat lunch." As an outgrowth of the gatherings at the YWCA cafeteria interest in more services grew, and physical programs including a rowing club, bicycle club, and basketball team were added, with gusto. In 1893, a women's "Vigorous Exercise" class was halted when the police came to the door to see what was shaking the building.



As in Minneapolis, those attending cafeteria Programs became active in the YWCA

The Minneapolis YWCA secured the first building owned and operated by women in Minnesota. Then, the president, in 1911, thought it was time for a pool and raised \$10,000 to build one, even though the city fathers' opinion was that "the girls could do very well without one."

The YWCA also connected with the World YWCA early on through its "One Cent a Day Club" which raised funds for a YWCA in South America and funded a position there for 30 years.

A concerted effort in Minneapolis to involve women of color was begun in the 1930s and the first woman of color was named to the board in 1942. Full integration was achieved by 1945, including establishing the first racially integrated swimming program in the Twin Cities.

In Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1886, women working at the local General Electric plant had no peaceful place to eat, and YWCA volunteers established a "Noon Rest" cafeteria. Once familiar with the YWCA, these women attended Bible classes and formed social clubs. Business, sewing, cooking and German and English lessons followed, as well as housing and physical programs. Sex ed classes and a free women's health center were provided by 1901. Community Forums were presented with W.E.B Dubois, Ida Tarbell, Jeanette Rankin, and suffragette Carrie Chapman Call.

Fort Wayne is one YWCA that spent much time deflecting demands to merge with the YMCA. One part of the solution to put the matter to rest involved setting themselves apart, in grand style. In 1978, the St. Vincent Villa was purchased. The property, significant architecturally and a historic landmark, creates a campus like environment conducive to the development of women and girls.



**Fort Wayne's welcoming entrance**

**Chapter Eleven: "Give us Your Tired...."**

The YWCA of Western Massachusetts, in Springfield, was founded in 1870 "to assist and advise young women and to provide relief work among women in the city." Volunteers visited the sick, "bringing comforts to women coping with misfortune," and, "relieving the weary wife and over-taxed mother, with husband sick and many little ones to care for."

The YWCA in Springfield was one of the first to expand services to women's families. A free kindergarten was established in 1882 and then the city's first playground. Their own building was designed in 1884, and once completed, volunteers prayed for a week before moving in. With the new building came an employment bureau, sewing, health and fitness classes, a library, and clubs "for a safe social outlet for women having no other respite from domestic burden."

The YWCA was serving 1 out of 3 of the area's working women by 1900 and with sights set high, their motto became, "doing for any and every young woman what she needs most."

In Kansas City in 1900, the West Bottoms area was noted for its slaughterhouses, and, 54 saloons within a 2-block area. Publicly, it was felt that "No moral woman would be seen there." When YWCA work began it was with a dual focus on immediately changing working conditions at the Armour Packing plant, and, providing supportive services to the women in the area. From here the YWCA grew along the lines of many, with programs to build "health, knowledge, spirit, and service among women and young women."

Kansas City's racial justice work has been based on advocacy and action. Through the 1960s YWCA volunteers traveled and joined civil rights marches, and discussions titled, "Wednesdays in Mississippi," were regularly featured to improve understanding and race relations, and to address issues of race, poverty and unemployment. Today, 70% of the board is women of color.



Chicago's proud membership looks to the future. Now it is 2002, and each of these YWCAs along with nearly 300 sisters continue to build, among women, bridges to the future for learning, health, empowerment, safety, caring service, and, each other.

With these bridges comes our collective ability to continue to evolve and meet the ever-changing needs of women and girls. And, with these bridges comes our collective power to continue to change lives, and, our communities for the better.