

Woman's Christian Temperance Union

By Tom Riley

The Butler/Bloomington chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union was organized on May 12, 1885 by Mrs. P.A. Vreeland. Mrs. Vreeland was instrumental in establishing WCTU chapters throughout Northern New Jersey. The WCTU mission was to inform children and adults about the dangers of alcoholism and encourage them to abstain from drinking liquor, wine, beer, and hard cider.

Their first meeting was held in the hall of the Ball Brothers Building which was located just over the bridge in Bloomington. For years, the site was occupied by LaSala's Confectionery Store and is sometimes referred to today as King's Corner. At the time, the intersection was called Union Square.

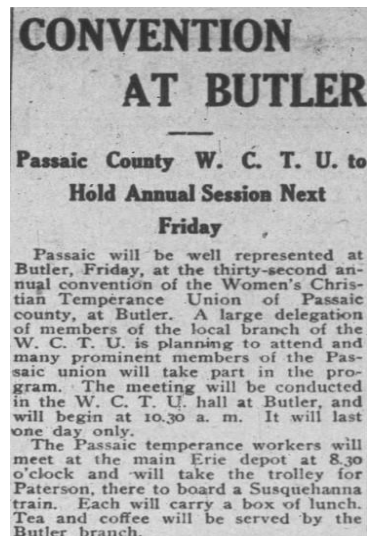


The WCTU national organization had its start in 1873 in Hillsboro, Ohio. When its most famous president, Frances Willard, took charge in 1879, the WCTU had grown into one of the largest and most influential women's groups of the 19th century. She expanded the organization's platform to include social reforms like child labor laws, public sanitation and health, prison reform, and women's suffrage.

Largely composed of white, conservative, Protestant women, the WCTU played a crucial role in shaping national temperance legislation. In fact, it was largely due to the advocacy of the WCTU and other women's groups that the 18th Amendment (Prohibition) was enacted in 1919. The 18th Amendment prohibited the manufacture, sale, importation, or transportation of intoxicating beverages everywhere in the United States. (Much to the chagrin of the WCTU, the 18th Amendment was repealed in 1933.)

They also sought to help recently arrived immigrants assimilate and achieve citizenship. Typically these activities included English language classes and courses in American culture. Between 1900 and 1920 the WCTU maintained a missionary center on Ellis Island to help start the Americanization process.

The WCTU was also instrumental in organizing women to become more politically active. At a time when suffragettes were considered radicals and alienated many American women, the WCTU offered a more traditionally feminine and “appropriate” organization for women to continue to advocate for the 19th Amendment which would give them the right to vote.



At its height, WCTU membership was estimated at 800,000 worldwide. That included not only chapters in the United States, but also organizations in England, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Finland, India, Japan, and South Korea. In 2001, the last figures available put the U.S. membership at 5000 and New Jersey’s at about 200. NJ’s membership was found almost entirely in the southern part of the state.

Early leaders of the Butler group were Mrs. P.H. Mead, Mrs. H.V. Day, Miss Camilla Reeve and Miss Clara White. Without a permanent home, meetings took place at the Butler School House, in the basement of the Baptist Church, and at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Bloomingdale. The situation was remedied when building developers Messrs. Howell & Noble gave the organization a lot on Main Street, Butler. The building at 158 Main Street was constructed and the upstairs was used for meetings and lectures, while the downstairs was rented out as a storefront. The WCTU nameplate still graces the top of the front of the building.

For almost a century the WCTU played an important role in our community. Their building was sold in the 1970s, but they continued to meet there into the 1980s. The funds realized from the sale of the building were distributed to local organizations like the Boy and Girl Scouts, Chilton Hospital, the Tri-Boro First Aid Squad and others.

By the mid 1980s, the long history of the local WCTU chapter came to an end when membership dwindled. Mrs. Lucea Ordish closed the door on the meeting room and sent the group’s remaining funds to the organization’s national headquarters in Ohio.

Sources: *Christian Science Monitor* Nov. 10, 1934, *Sunday Star Ledger* July 1, 2001, *Butler in Story and Pictures*, *Paterson Evening News* July 1, 1948, *Paterson Morning Call*, Aug. 5, 1955

