

The War Years and After, 1941-1950

In September 1, 1939, the Germans invaded Poland thereby precipitating World War II. Although the United States abstained for two years, it ultimately was drawn into the conflict by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

The Woman's Club was not lax in that effort. The club formed a Home Defense Committee on June 11, 1941 devoting a full measure of energy to defense projects from 1940 onwards. Funds were appropriated to adopt both a British war orphan and a needy American child. A mammoth "Revue" featuring Westporters of stage and concert hall took place. Even a "ski patrol" was organized.

Then, there was "Bundles for America," a group with headquarters in the State Drive-in Cleaners store that collected and repaired clothing for servicemen and needy families. Over 3,800 pieces were distributed. And it continued after the war when the project became the Club's *Clothing Relief Committee*.

The war put a severe crimp in other endeavors. A daytime playschool formed in 1941 to entertain some 25 youngsters while their mothers took jobs in defense plants was dropped the following year because of transportation difficulties.

The effect of the war on the Town of Westport and its Woman's Club was not immediate. For a time, the usual bridges, dances, luncheons, and benefits continued apace

The war brought on a reassessment of priorities by the Club. One of the first issues to be considered was whether to continue the spring Fashion Shows and summer Fairs. This question was finally decided in the affirmative because, in the words of Fashion Show Chairman Mrs. Baldwin "you can stop manufacture of civilian luxuries in wartime, but you can't stop babies from needing milk". And under her strong influence, starting with "The Fashion Market - 1940" given in the "Y" auditorium in May 1941, the fashion shows became elaborate affairs with printed programs and paid commercial advertising. This particular event featured 80 models and 21 door prizes. Booth space was rented to 15 exhibitors and a raised runway was built to promenade the girls. Proceeds were \$595.

The next fashion show, the seventh, came ten months later and unfurled before 400 spectators "fashion trends towards South American colors...and flowing peasant lines." The amount realized was \$1,169. The "8th Annual Fashion Mart" presented in March, 1942, high-lighted "women in uniform" but netted only \$475 to the Club treasury.

Fashion shows suspended 1943 - 1946

But, because of war-generated difficulties, the fashion shows were suspended for the next three years. And at this point, the arithmetic of counting successive shows becomes somewhat fuzzy. Thus, while the "8th Annual Fashion Show" was in 1942, the "9th Annual Fashion Mart" was in May of 1947. And the "10th Annual

Fashion Show" was held in March 1950.

The 9th show in 1947 was by far the most successful of all, bringing the Club a net profit of \$2,394. Perhaps a particular boost was given to this affair by the Westporter-Herald that issued a special 8-page fashion supplement on May 8th just before the show. It may be that the Club's own news release: "Husbands may find the exhibit of corsets on living models an attraction" was responsible for drawing the 1,400 spectators who paid \$2 for an afternoon luncheon view and \$1.50 for an evening pastry-and-coffee peek.

The *Town Crier* newspaper laid the grounds, for the ultimate abandonment of the large fashion shows in the "Y" with an editorial on May 23, 1947 which pointed out the fire hazard inherent in an overcrowded auditorium with potential for a "Coconut Grove disaster" in Westport. Although one more large fashion show, the "Tenth Annual" was held in the "Y" after this editorial, subsequent shows were limited events held in the clubhouse on Imperial Avenue, with a much smaller return.

The birth of a Westport Institution... The Yankee Doodle Fair

As in years before, the backbone event that provided most of the wherewithal to support the Club's activities, was the annual Fair. The first such Fair, held after a two-year lapse, was a "Country Fair" scheduled for August 15-17, 1940, at the Thayer estate on Boston Post Road West and Sylvan Road. This property was of special historical interest, having been owned at one time by the great-grandfather of P. T. Barnum. As a further drawing card for prospective patrons, it was announced that "you may bowl on the green where Washington and Lafayette once drank from the old well, while waiting to have their horses shod at the old smithy."

Suzanne Conn, a Board Member, suggested that the motif of the Fair be patriotic and that it be sponsored by "Yankee Doodle"; From this suggestion came the *Yankee Doodle Fair of 1940*, the progenitor of a long and fecund line.



Admission to the 1940 Fair was free, and a small brochure issued at the time listed thirty booths including some very familiar standbys: Bingo, Fish Pond, Attic Booth and Hoop-la.

The grand prize was a Chevrolet automobile; and a contest was held to select the "most popular matron, man, and debutante in Westport" ... a contest that the *Town Crier* later deplored as "a gyp game won by the person commanding the biggest bankroll." But then, the *Town Crier* loved to needle the establishment. This fair netted \$4,962.

In August 1941, the fair was repeated at the Thayer place, this time with a western motif featuring a barbecued steer. A series of pithy cartoon announcements, "Yankee Doodle Says" was published in the newspapers, creating a publicity

breakthrough for the Fair. This event realized \$6,477.

For the next five years a Yankee Doodle Fair was held annually on Jesup Green "back of the Westport Town Hall where the old General Putnam Inn was." In 1942, the first children's fair - "a Fair within a Fair" - was innovated. Also, arrangements were made to have a plane drop leaflets on the local beaches advertising the Fair. Some of these bore numbers that entitled the holder to \$5 in War Savings Stamps.

In 1943, and for some years thereafter, the Farmers Almanac was consulted before setting the Fair dates. So successful was this method that not a drop of rain marred the proceedings for years - until the precedent-shattering Fair of 1950 when a downpour on the first day suspended operations for four hours, and a transformer failure on the second night caused a further loss of time. A vacant store next to the Fine Arts Theatre was made available to the Club in 1943 for use as a Fair office and storage depot. That same year, tickets were issued to servicemen allowing them \$1 each in free food and games. Wartime conditions were further in evidence by the presence of a WAC recruiting booth, by the requirement that "red rationing coupons" be surrendered for a chicken dinner, and by the grand prize, a \$500 war bond.

The August 1944 Fair was... if the reader will pardon the expression ...serendipitous. A *Fanny Farm* had been designated as a rest area on the Green. The *Town Crier* seized this idea to editorialize on the need for such facilities elsewhere. As a result, benches were placed on the library green to afford passengers using the bus stops at Main and State Streets similar benefits.

The 1945 Fair was uneventful, but the 1946 frolic produced some innovation. A nightclub atmosphere was fostered by engaging two specialty dancers for the 6:30 supper show. A *G.I. Pin-Up Baby Contest* was inaugurated; and the proceeds from one hour of the Fair on its second day (\$1,500) were donated to a fund for the care of several firemen who were victims of a recent truck explosion in town. It was estimated that 20,000 persons attended this Fair.

Because of an increase in the size and cost of the Fair, the next several events were held on the grounds of Bedford Junior High School. Here, from 1947 through 1950, the Fairs had as their respective motifs a *Big Top Circus*, a *Salute to Westport Artists*, *The Forty-niners* and *Westport - 1900*.

The growth of the Fair as a Westport institution led to its incorporation as a non-profit organization under Connecticut State law. Articles of association were filed with the Secretary of State on February 28, 1947, under the name "The Yankee Doodle Fair, Incorporated." At the same time a four-page set of by laws was prepared.

Although the Fair was a uniformly successful operation, its course had not been entirely smooth. In 1946, a patron brought suit jointly against the Woman's Club and the Town (finally settled by surety) because of injuries sustained at Jesup Green from stumbling "over a depression in the ground". A more endemic problem was manpower. Although the Club membership had topped 750 including the JWC

by May 1948, only about 50 dedicated club-women bore the brunt of the Fair work and through their leadership, hard work and high morale, gave this Westport tradition both form and substance. As many as 650 people were involved in mounting the larger Fairs, and as a result, many non-members were invited to participate as a means of community involvement. On August 14, 1948, the *Town Crier* took note of this state of affairs and editorialized that "it is surprising to an outsider how many of the members of the Woman's Club were not connected in any manner with the Fair and how many men and women who have no connection with the Club worked themselves practically into the hospital to put the carnival across".

Games of chance converted to games of skill

Other troubles were less serious in retrospect. A law of long standing on the State Statute books proscribed gambling; but by common consent the authorities had become quite myopic in respect to charitable endeavors. In accordance with this unwritten understanding the Games Chairman of the 1942 Fair had rented some devices commonly called "one-armed bandits." Almost immediately some never-revealed ill-wisher lodged a telephone complaint with the State Police that they couldn't very well ignore. So, willy-nilly, they descended on the offending gaming booth and carted off the poor male operator to the local lockup. The Games Chairman became paralyzed with consternation; and only the glib tongue of the offender and the sympathetic response of the local police saved him from a booking. This same problem reared its head some nine years later when Fairfield County District Attorney Lorin W. Willis of Bridgeport took it upon himself (with some needling from the clergy) to announce on June 30, 1949 that henceforth he would enforce rigorously the State ban on "*wheels of chance which gave money, merchandise or liquor as prizes.*" Thus Fairfield County suffered a charitable blackout due to the indefatigable dedication of one man, while elsewhere throughout the State, carnivals for charity were rife. Mrs. Bradley, the Fair Chairman, refused to be nonplussed. "We have already put \$7,000 in the fair," she stated, "and are depending on our friends and neighbors to support us as enthusiastically as they have in the past." So the Fair went ahead, and in the two weeks remaining before opening date, the games of chance were all converted to games of skill. At the final reckoning it was found that the amount realized was slightly more than \$16,000. This was \$2,000 less than the year before, possibly because of Mr. Willis' ruling. Such is the perversity of legislators that a bill, introduced in the 1950 session of the Legislature by Assemblyman Serena of Westport to legalize certain types of games at charity-sponsored carnivals, failed to pass.

Another incident of the July 1946 Fair was recounted by the *Norwalk Hour*: "Yankee Doodle is credited with riding to town on a pony, but it was the pony that reversed the tables yesterday by going to town at the Yankee Doodle Fair."

The pony at the Children's Carnival became frightened at the popping of a balloon in front of his nose and bolted. When Mrs. J.D. Lodge, former ballerina, attempted to stop the runaway, she was thrown beneath the wheels of the cart that

passed over her chest. The pony was finally corralled after snarling early evening traffic in the center of crowded Westport. Fortunately Mrs. Lodge was not badly hurt, and like the trouper she was, continued to handle the pony rides after a day of rest.

Not a little of the success of the Fairs in the late Forties was due to the pert and piquant columns created by Mrs. Bradley just before each Fair. Starting in 1947 and for four years thereafter, she wrote two weekly columns that appeared in the *Town Crier & Westporter-Herald*. In a regular weekly column that she later wrote for the *Westport Town Crier*, she frequently devoted space to Club activities.

The State Federation of Women's Clubs made awards for the high quality of the Club's publicity for the years ending 1945, 1947, 1948 and 1949. The third award conferred on the Club the right to permanent retention of the trophy cup. In September 1948, the Club's press book of that year topped all others by winning both the State and the General Federation of Women's Clubs awards, thus achieving "best in the nation."

Club expenses double after the war

The Club expenditures during the Forties showed the effects of wartime activity and inflation. The pre-war budget for the year 1940-1941 was slightly over \$11,000. The following year it jumped to \$15,700. Thereafter, it rose steadily to a peak of \$38,900 in 1948-1949, dropping to \$31,400 the next year. The receipts from the Yankee Doodle Fair followed a parallel course: \$4,961 in 1940 followed by \$6,476 the next year. Similarly, the Fair income peaked in 1948 at \$18,000, dropping to just over \$16,000 in 1949 (thanks to Mr. Tillis' war on games of chance).

The principal Club outlay was for salaries; and the defect between the income from the Fairs and Fashion Shows on the one hand and the total expenditures on the other hand, was supplied by receipts from the Bedford Fund, Club dues, visiting Nurses' fees and Drama Department ticket sales in descending order of magnitude. A stable fund-raising activity during the whole of the Forties was the *T.B. Seal Campaign* conducted each year in Westport by the Woman's Club. Eighty-five percent of the gross sales of these seals reverted to the public health activities of the Club.

In the early Forties, the Woman's Club responded promptly once the call had been issued for home services in support of the war effort. On June 11, 1941, the Club formed a *Home Defense Committee* that immediately set up a broad spectrum of activity within the scope of its available resources: a civilian motor corps, nutrition and "canteen" courses to insure balanced diets despite war shortages; a telephone squad of women to handle emergency calls; and a bicycle squadron of boys and girls for emergency messenger service. Some of these programs strained a bit: a women's marksmanship course under police tutelage, a women's ski corps and incredible enough, a women's cavalry. Of more immediate pertinence, was an aluminum scrap collection conducted in July 1942 with the help of local Girl Scouts

and Boy Scouts who garnered nearly a ton of this critical metal giving the Town the highest per capita collection rate of all in Fairfield County. In October 1942 the Club was awarded a "bronze certificate" by the Governor and the Connecticut Defense Council in recognition of the fact that more than 10 percent of the Club members had passed the first-aid examination and were accredited "first-aiders".

In May 1942, the Club sponsored a 2-year old British child - and then an American child - by contributing an amount sufficient to provide each with room and board. About the same time, fuel economy became an issue, and as a result Bedford House was closed on Mondays.

The working mothers employed at defense plants also received support when the Club conducted at Bedford Junior High School a series of 6-week *Play School* sessions for girls 6 to 14 years of age. About 50 girls were registered the first year; but, by 1943, the project was abandoned because of transportation difficulties. However, correlative athletic activities were continued in junior life-saving courses, a co-ed sports club for teenagers, and basketball and bowling tournaments for intermediates.

In the early 1940's, the Medical Corps headed by Dr. William R. Munson,



Shown from left to right are Dr. Munson, Mrs. Kathryn McCormick, public school nurse, Mrs. Hazel Rosenau and Mrs. John Guidera, visiting nurses of the Westport Woman's Club who supervised the operation of the hospital.

local health officer under the Westport Civilian Defense Council, established a 16-bed hospital in the basement of the Bedford Elementary school. The hospital included an operating table and other essential medical supplies for use in an emergency or disaster and could be expanded to include 40 beds. The hospital was created as a preparatory war measure and was supervised by the Westport Woman's Club.

A Special War Services Committee formed...Bundles for American servicemen and their families

In May 1942 the Club's Home Defense Committee was disbanded because the Red Cross, the Civil Defense Council and a host of other organizations had pre-empted the field. In its stead a *Special War Services Committee* was appointed in November 1942, whose principal effort was focused on the *Bundles for America* program. This was a national organization that was an outgrowth of the earlier *Bundles for Britain*. This program was dedicated "to winning the war by strengthening and vitalizing the home front...offering aid to servicemen and their families as well as to discharged veterans."

At the outset of its existence the Special War Services Committee opened a Westport branch of the Bundles for America on East State Street next to the First

National Store. Its first project, completed in less than a month, was to make 95 layettes for service wives, and to assemble 1,000 Christmas stockings for the "forgotten men of the Navy"---the gunners of the merchant fleet. This program operated largely in response to requests by the Army and Navy for specific items on a pre-set schedule. Twelve dozen pairs of special mittens were made for men on the mine-sweepers; and a *Clothing Bank* was established to provide warm clothing for Army storage in the event of a national disaster. To facilitate the collection and storage of clothing, a branch office of Bundles for America was opened at the Saugatuck Elementary School in February 1943. As reported by Mrs. Bradley in 1944, "In Westport and vicinity over 400 women have been giving their time to this project turning out 1,000 knitted garments for the Army, Navy and Merchant Marine, 1,050 layettes, more than 3,800 pieces of reconstructed clothing, and more than 200 miscellaneous articles."

In February 1945 the Westport office of Bundles for America was moved to Bedford House where it headed up branch offices in Saugatuck and Weston, and home operations in Westport, Darien and Norwalk. Toward the end of the war, emphasis was shifted to aiding discharged veterans. Finally, in September 1945, after V J-Day, the Bundles program closed its doors.

Life Magazine celebrates "A Rare Woman's Club" on its 40th anniversary
Unprecedented recognition from the national press



Apparently the Club, on its own merits, was considered very newsworthy by the press, as over 7,000 column-inches of space were devoted to Club activities in the local and national press during both 1947 and 1948. Life Magazine featured the Westport Woman's Club in its August 11, 1947 issue with a characterization of its members as "The ladies of Westport, Connecticut like sidewalks and street signs better than teas." In a three-page article including photographs of the club's officers, the Yankee Doodle Fair and club members' children playing on a sidewalk that had resulted from the WWC campaign, Life



summarized the club's many contributions to the community and

featured the fair's role in financing these programs. Apparently impressed with the Club's uniqueness among women's clubs in general, Life characterized it as "A Rare Woman's Club."

After being featured in this issue of Life Magazine, many direct appeals for help were received from all over Europe. These were investigated and accommodated in turn.