

LADIES' CHARITABLE READING SOCIETY, 1815-2001
The Oldest Continuing Charitable Society in the United States
By Marie Coady

In 1915, when Mrs. Sophia Osgood Hovey wrote her speech entitled “Personal Reminiscences of Fifty Years”, which she planned to read before the Ladies' Charitable and Reading Society at the First Congregational Church in Woburn, the Society was already 100 years old.

It was, in fact, the Society's Centennial Celebration which prompted Mrs. Hovey to put together recollections that reached back 50 years, calling to mind memories of a time long since forgotten. Although, a century before Mrs. Hovey enchanted her audience with her warm recollections, the Ladies' Charitable Reading Society was reaching out to the less fortunate both “domestic and foreign” just as it does today.

Ladies' Charitable Reading Society seems an ungainly mouthful of a name for a Society whose main focus is simply “to do good works”, but the name has indeed undergone some changes over its nearly 200 years of existence. As Mrs. Hovey explains in her speech, “with advancing civilization”, the name metamorphosed from the Female Reading Society to the Ladies' Charitable and Reading Society, which in 1915, as the Women Suffrage Movement came closer to winning the vote, seemed more appropriate.

The seeds of the Society were planted by an unnamed young woman in the winter of 1814-1815 after she had observed the workings of a similar society in Boston. It is reported in Sewall's History of Woburn that the young lady, not named in any official record, was so infused with the spirit of her experience, she aligned herself with another young lady of like mind, and the two approached Pastor Chickering of the First Congregational Church of Woburn with the seeds of an idea to institute a similar Society to “do good works”, believing that “Faith without good works is dead”. From that meeting, they constructed a Constitution which set forth eight principles by which the Society would conduct its “good works”, principles which still guide the Society today.

One Article of the Constitution that still intrigues Society members is the 6 cents dues each member was mandated to pay in 1815 at each meeting, whether she attended or not. Of course, that soon escalated to 50 cents by the Civil War era, then to a \$1 by 1915, but none can deny the dues made the Society affordable to everyone. Another Article still adhered to is one which states that “time at meetings shall be spent in reading and devotions, or useful conversation” which I recently honored as guest speaker at the Society's May meeting, now held on the second Wednesday of every month.

My presentation was based on the theory espoused by author Leo Tolstoy in his work "What Then Must We Do?", in which Tolstoy concluded it is not always possible to help all those in need; therefore we must help those who come into our path. And that is what the Society has been doing for nearly 200 years.

I'm sure that on June 21, 1815 when Mrs. Elizabeth Chickering, not coincidentally the Pastor's wife, took the oath of office as first president of the Society, she never expected the then named Female Reading Society, would endure to become what is believed to be the oldest continuing charitable society in the United States. But I'm certain she would be very pleased. Unfortunately, Mrs. Chickering, called "Betsey" by her friends, lived to serve only 5 months, passing on unexpectedly in November of 1815.

"Betsey" Chickering was succeeded as president by Mrs. Mary B. Wyman, Miss Susan Clapp, and ultimately by Pastor Chickering's second wife, Mrs. Sarah H. Chickering in 1820. But the longest serving president in that first century was Mrs. Mary L. Bennett who served admirably for 24 years. But to this day, the Ladies' Charitable Reading Society is most proud of one lofty achievement, that of the institution of the Sabbath or Sunday School in 1818, which still functions today.

Throughout the years between 1815 and 2001, the Society has searched out the needy, sick and infirm, providing them with comfort, funds and supplies. It has sent barrels of clothing to missionary societies both foreign and domestic, provided comfort to Civil War soldiers by knitting warm socks, and helped widows pay their rent. They have rolled bandages for lepers colonies far away, furnished a room at the Sailor's Home in Boston, sent aid to victims of the San Francisco earthquake, and provided tuition help for college students, all financed by member dues and legacies bequeathed to the Society, like their first legacy of \$40 bequeathed by Sally Wyman.

In keeping with the "Reading" in the Society's title, members would read aloud excerpts from lofty tomes that reinforced their mission to "raise the standard of piety and benevolence". Selections were often taken from popular books of the day such as Blair's Sermons, Cooke on Benevolence, and Mason on Self Knowledge, books considered collector's times today and available at auction on the Internet.

But their most enduring legacy is the warm fraternal feeling among its members who "through change and conflict have never swerved from their high and brave purpose", and no one summarized that fraternal feeling better than Sophia Hovey. Unfortunately, Mrs. Hovey was too ill to attend the Centennial Celebration on June 22, 1915, and invited Mrs. Stephen Norton to read her speech to the crowd of 250 gathered at the First Congregational Church for the celebration.

In her address, Sophia harkened back to her arrival in Woburn in August of 1865. It seems she and her husband became tired of “boarding house life in Boston” and “came looking for a home in the country”. As a result of their search in the Boston Transcript, they found a 10 acre farm on Church Avenue in Woburn Center, with a 10 room house, an “orchard and good pastures, a fine well, and a pump in the kitchen sink”.

Once settled, Sophia set out to look for what she describes as a “church-home” and found it in the First Congregational Church just down the street in Woburn Center, and became a member in spite of the fact she was often introduced to other church members as “a cut and dried Episcopal at heart”. She also recognized that her husband had little interest in church going and “never could find his place in the prayer book”.

A few days after attending her first service, “a handsome pair of horses and a carriage stopped at her (our) gate, and a dainty lady alighted”. That lady was Mrs. Celenda Dow, president of the Society from 1864-1867, come to invite Sophia to join. Sophia then described her first meeting in the kitchen of the church where it was warm and cozy and “we had supper, no beans or coffee, but bread, butter, tea and plain cake”. The ladies of the Society liked her right away, she claimed, because she could “knit socks, “ribbing, heel, gores and all, thanks to my grandmother”.

Sophia ended her speech by saying, “Thanks for leading me to Woburn and to this Church and this Society.” A sentiment I'm sure that can be attested to by present members of the Ladies' Charitable Reading Society.

The Ladies' Charitable Reading Society is now, as it has always been, an Ecumenical organization, and, as it states in Article 1 of its Constitution, is open to “any females of good character”. The Society's first vice-president in 1815 was a Baptist, and its most recent past president, Margaret Giles, was a Christian Scientist. Today, Marge Leseur serves as President, Hazel Van Putten as Vice-President, and Veronica Booker has served as Treasurer for 27 years.

The biggest change in Society bylaws is that members no longer pay a mere 6 cents at every meeting. Today there is no fee. So come meet with the ladies of the Ladies' Charitable Reading Society at the First Congregational Church any second Wednesday of the month. They will be there, as they have always been for the last 186 years.