Women's Christian Temperance Union in Ocean County



By: Victoria Ford

Editors Note: Important national issues such as prohibition or women's suffrage are often best illustrated through local stories. The following story is based on a scrap book rescued from an estate sale in Stafford Township kept by an ardent member of the Ocean County Women's Christian Temperance Union. The national role of the WTC is an important component of the 2011 PBS documentary series, Prohibition by Ken Burns. National women's history month is a great time to reflect on national women's issues seen through the lens of local experience.

By all accounts in historic local newspapers from the early 1930s, the Manahawkin chapter of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WTCU) was a lively bunch of passionate ladies who met regularly to discuss important social and political issues surrounding the Prohibition. They took action at the county and state level to advance the causes of the Temperance Movement, which had its roots in the early 19th century and took many forms throughout the decades, promoting moderation in, abstinence from, and legal prohibition of, alcoholic beverages.

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union remains in active existence today, with the same priorities – "agitate, educate, legislate" – and is "the oldest continuing non-sectarian woman's organization in the world," according to the organization's official website, wctu.org. Formed in 1874, the organization sought (in part) to curtail spousal abuse by alcoholic husbands, largely through education. It still stands against the consumption of alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs.

One old Ocean County newspaper clipping of the 1930's reported: "A temperance rally to organize a county branch of the new educational association, known as the Citizens Federation of New Jersey for Temperance and Law Observance, will be held in Toms River M.E. (Methodist Episcopal) Church on Thursday night next, April 16, beginning at 7:30." Among the speakers was to be the superintendent of the state's Anti-Saloon League. "The purpose of the organization is to educate the younger people who cannot remember the saloon and its crimes and its evils, and to urge enforcement of the prohibition law," which, by that time, was already weakening under the strain of the Great Depression and much-needed tax revenue from the legal sale of alcohol.

An article in 1932 reported on a Sunday evening church service held at the Manahawkin M.E. Church to celebrate the 12th anniversary of Prohibition, which included a hymn titled, "Enforcement - Not Repeal."

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That fall, the WCTU was "making its fight for two purposes: First, wherever possible to vote for dry candidates to Congressional and Legislative offices; second to retain in this fall's referendum, the Hobart act (New Jersey's prohibition enforcement law) on the statute books of the state."



Campaign Slide.
Photo credit: Stafford Historical Society

Prohibition began on January 17, 1920, with the passage of the 18th Amendment. It ended nearly 14 years later, on Dec. 5, 1933, with the ratification of the 21st Amendment, which repealed it. The 21st amendment is the only one that exists solely to counteract a previous amendment.

As history has shown, however, during the years when the sale, production, importation and transportation of alcohol was banned nationwide, organized crime and political corruption increased; so-called "bathtub gin" and "speakeasy" operations proliferated, or former drinkers switched to alternative narcotics; the tax revenue dropped and government spending increased; courts and prisons were overburdened.

In Ocean County, WCTU meetings were mostly held in the members' homes, or occasionally at a local Methodist Episcopal Church or Presbyterian Church. Well-established family names appear frequently in the lists of attendees: Cranmer, Cramer, Hazelton, Bishop, Pharo (of Manahawkin), Cox and Ridgway (in Barnegat). Ocean County WCTU had chapters in Manahawkin, Tuckerton, Barnegat, Point Pleasant, Lakewood and Toms River, and delegates attended county, regional and state conventions, held throughout the year.


ENJOY SOCIAL AT TUCKERTON

W. C. T. U. Chapter Sponsors Fine Program

W.C.T.U. MET MONDAY NIGHT IN M. E. CHURCH

ASSERTS PRESS OF NATION WET

Temperance Lecture Gives Outline of W. C. T. U.

W. C. T. U. HELD REGULAR MONTHLY MEETING

NEW HEADS OF W.C.T.U. NAMED AT TUCKERTON

TUCKERTON W. C. T. U. NAMES NEW HEADS

Scrapbook page.
Photo credit: Stafford Historical Society

The chapters also conducted community service, delivering baskets of fruit and flowers to "shut-ins" through their flower mission department.

Nationally, the heroine of the WCTU was Frances Willard, the influential feminist, educator, political activist and suffragist, and the organization's co-creator and longtime national president.

"Present plans of the Women's Christian Temperance Union call for a return to the oldtime methods of interesting young people and teaching them the evil effects of alcoholic drinks on the human body and mind," according to one report of an Ocean County WCTU covention.