

My Brief Professional Career: The League of Women Voters
1949-1951, age 23-25

In June 1949 I was 23 years old and finally leaving school and education behind to enter the working world – well, full-time working world. I spent most of that summer at home in Bay City because my new job with the League of Women Voters of Ohio did not begin until August. Meanwhile I caught up on paper work left over from graduate school and took driving lessons from AAA because my new employers expected me to be able to drive a car. Learning to drive was easy but I didn't have much chance to practice, my Dad not being keen on my driving his car. This proved to have negative consequences later on. An unexpected opportunity came up during the summer that took me to Washington, D.C. for a training session for new staff persons offered by the League of Women Voters of the United States. The Ohio League paid my expenses but no salary and arranged for me to live with a friend of theirs in Fairfax, VA with transportation to the National League offices each day. This was an excellent way to get acquainted with the history, policies and operation of the League early on and was a great experience, besides. The League of Women Voters was organized in 1920 and grew out of the women's suffrage movement. Originally intended to help women learn what they needed to know to become intelligent and informed voters, now that they had the right to vote, it continued as a women's organization that studied and took positions on various issues of public interest. Local Leagues were organized throughout the United States and there were several state Leagues as well as the National League with headquarters in Washington, D.C. Although daytimes were devoted to workshops, the national staff planned some entertainment for those of us who had come from distant places so we could see the sights of the Capitol. One evening we had a lovely picnic in Rock Creek Park along the Potomac River. Mostly I remember how very hot it was there and with the need to be "dressed up" and no air-conditioning it was very uncomfortable.

I moved to Dayton, Ohio – a prosperous city and the largest I had ever lived in up to that time -- in August and began work in the new state office. In Ohio it was customary for the League headquarters to move to the city where the president lived. In this case, Mrs. Werner J. Blanchard, the new Ohio president, chose a one-room office in a remodeled building near downtown Dayton. Although small it was adequate for our needs with desks for Mrs. Blanchard, myself and our part-time secretary, Phyllis Kielawa, who herself was a graduate in political science and had been secretary of the Dayton League of Women Voters. A *Dayton Daily News* article dated August 3, 1949 states: "In charge of the office will be Miss Betty Lou Bidwell, Bay City, MI, who is newly employed as Executive Secretary." It goes on to list my credentials in glowing terms. My job covered a variety of duties and it occupied far more than forty hours per week of my time. I worked, as needed, evenings and on weekends, with no complaints. The state League supervised and aided the work of the many local Leagues in Ohio and this involved a great deal of report writing, correspondence, and travel to visit them. We conducted workshops on topics of current governmental interest as well as how-to sessions on raising money, writing voters guides, and public relations. I was involved in all of this, of course, and did a lot of public speaking both in Dayton and when visiting the local Leagues around the state. I made appearances on radio, debating current issues such as

support of the United Nations, need for constitutional revision, urban redevelopment, and many others. I was even on live television once! My picture appeared in the newspapers often. This was all hard work, quite demanding and often a challenge to my abilities. But it was exciting and great experience. In April 1950 I traveled with Mrs. B and others to Atlantic City for the national League convention, learned new things and ate lobster for the first time. Afterward I went on my own to North Carolina for a weekend visit to Harding Hughes, a graduate school friend who was in city management there. In May the Ohio League's state convention was in Cleveland and I was responsible for much of the organization of the facilities, the program and keeping the various sessions operating properly. The following year I had similar responsibilities for the convention in Columbus. In July 1950 there was a seminar for League staff persons in Chicago and I attended it. I don't remember how I got there but I recall that I stayed at the YWCA and used the city buses and the El to get around town. One evening a group took a train to Ravinia and heard George Ormandy conduct the Chicago Symphony out of doors.

I cannot say enough of what I learned from Juliet Blanchard. She was a woman of education, experience and great energy. A recent widow, she had time and resources to devote to being president of the Ohio League and she was superb. She had high standards of conduct, appearance and doing things "right". Which we did! Considering her nature, I am pleased to recall that she let me do things my way as often as not so I developed and never felt smothered by her direction. When she went out of town, she often had me stay at her home, a lovely large one in residential Dayton, to be a companion for her teen-age son. Her regular maid cooked and served for us just as she would have for Mrs. Blanchard. Heady stuff! I used her car then, too, and had no trouble driving into Dayton and back. But one day I visited a local League some distance into the country and on the way home, on a county road, missed a curve in the road and ran into a fence post. Having the car repaired emptied my savings account – Mrs. B didn't carry collision insurance -- and I ate peanut butter sandwiches until the next payday. I also became firm friends with Phyllis Kielawa, our office secretary, and Helen Spurlino, treasurer for the Ohio League, another fine lady who guided me when I needed it.

Looking for a place to rent when I first arrived in Dayton, I noticed an ad in the paper from three girls looking for a fourth to share a two-bedroom furnished apartment on Superior Avenue. This was walking distance from the office but could be reached by city bus as well. I responded and joined these three other young women in a rather unique living arrangement –and inexpensive, too! There were four apartments in the building, on a nice street, and each was composed of a living room, two bedrooms and a bath, a dining room and a kitchen. The partnership in this unit (top floor, right) had been going on for some time -- long before any of the three living there when I joined them. Records were kept in the top left-hand drawer of the buffet. Each of us put a certain amount of money in the kitty each week. This was planned to cover the rent, cost of daily newspaper, telephone, laundry of bed and kitchen linens, and food for dinner each day. We took turns cleaning the common rooms, in rotation. We also rotated the chore of grocery shopping each week. As it worked out, the same two girls usually did the cooking because they got home from work first. The other two did the cleaning up. I was always on the cleanup crew, which was fine with me. We had wonderful meals

because the first one home was an excellent cook. I don't remember what kind of work each of them did, but she demonstrated new products in grocery stores and often wore a costume to fit the product. This was such an inexpensive arrangement that I discovered, when I tried to make out a budget for myself, that I had far more income than I knew how to spend! (I was earning \$3000 per year, as I recall, the equivalent of the salary of beginning teachers in those days.) This feeling didn't last too long, of course, because I had to buy new clothes to match my new activities. I opened my first checking account as well as a charge account at Rike's, the big Dayton department store. I always paid the rent because I was the only one in our apartment who had a checking account and the only one who worked downtown and so could pay it in person without spending money for a stamp! One of the first things I bought was a Brownie camera and thus I began to have snapshots for my scrapbooks.

Life in Dayton wasn't all work. I became acquainted and socialized with other women -- in the YWCA and the AAUW and made friends with members of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, a very small church near where I lived. In November 1950 my parents and brother came to Dayton to visit me for Thanksgiving. That weekend there was a huge snowstorm and it was a couple of days before they could drive out of town because, as my Dad complained, Ohio didn't know how to clear the roads the way we did in Michigan. In December, riding north for Christmas to Michigan with old friends from high school, we had an accident and I ended up in a hospital in Kenton, Ohio for several days.

This was a crucial juncture because I had planned to move after Christmas to Columbus for the coming six months or so to finish my work with the Ohio League by serving as its lobbyist with the Ohio legislature. With my father's help I got moved and in January began my work with the legislature -- one that met only every other year and for only six months, as a rule, at that. I attended sessions of the legislature, committee meetings and talked with the legislators. I was keeping track of the progress of bills of interest to the League's program and wrote a weekly report that was sent to each League. I did not lobby the legislators in the usual sense, because I was a paid staff person and only volunteers were allowed to do that. My job was to let them know when a legislator needed to be contacted and what the status of the bills of interest might be. I used the typewriter and mimeograph machine in the Columbus League's office. Being downtown a good deal of the time, I got to know the better restaurants and fine stores of Columbus quite well. I was beginning to feel very much like a sophisticated career woman and enjoyed the feeling.

I lived a distance from town, in the Ohio State University area and rented a room in a large house where several other women resided. We shared a bathroom and a refrigerator but each had a large room with a closet outfitted with a hot plate and shelves for cooking. It was very comfortable and worked well for me to entertain on occasion. My most frequent visitor was Jerry Morris whom I had met in September in Dayton before he started medical school at OSU. He lived not far away and after studying in the evening, would stop by for a short time to visit. His fraternity did not serve an evening meal on

Sundays, so he used to come to my place for “haute cuisine” like meatballs and canned Franco-American spaghetti -- or whatever else was easy to heat on my hot plate.

Because my work with the League would be ending in June, I began to think about the next step in my career. Unlike my high school and college friends who had married and were beginning to raise young children, I saw nothing of this nature on my horizon. I had had an appointment in December with the president of the LWV of Michigan regarding possibly becoming Executive Secretary there but the auto accident cancelled this. I was also applying for entry-level internships with the federal government, although my first choice of employment would have been in the field of city management. This speculation all ended abruptly and with surprise (to me, at least) in February when Jerry proposed and I began to focus instead on marriage and staying in Columbus for his next three years of medical school. I talked with my legislator friends about how long they thought the 1951 session would last because this would determine my wedding date. They got a kick out of speculating on this question and were helpful. We set the date for our wedding at St Andrew’s Church in Dayton for June 23. My League friends were very kind; they had showers for me, sent lovely gifts, and attended the wedding. My League experience and all that I learned while working there was a wonderful addition to my education and has enhanced my activities in civic affairs ever since. The next phase of my life, however, was a very different one.

Betty Lou Morris
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