



GREATER GRAND RAPIDS WOMEN'S HISTORY COUNCIL

FALL 2017

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*Dedicated to educating
the community and cel-
ebrating the legacies of
local women, preserving
knowledge of their past,
and inspiring visions for
their future.*

THE SECOND LINE OF DEFENSE: GRAND RAPIDS WOMEN AND THE GREAT WAR

November 9, 7pm, Grand Rapids Public Library Auditorium

Shortly after the United States entered World War I in April of 1917, the Council of National Defense - taking the lead from women's clubs that were already beginning to address the food, social welfare, and employment issues the country faced - formed the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense. Local and academic historians are only beginning to tell the stories of American women as citizens during the largest wartime mobilization of a young country, dispelling myths that women led lives only in their homes. When invited in because of military needs, diverse groups of women made contributions to the nation that ranged far beyond the war and their traditional gender roles.

Though it was a national effort, the power and success of the Woman's Committee was demonstrated by the state and city units across the country. Promoting and supporting backyard gardens, food preservation, the health and wellness of women and children, improving conditions for women in the workforce, and finally encouraging more than 22,000 women in the city to register for the war effort, the Grand Rapids unit and the larger Michigan division served as an example for the rest of the country.

For more than 10 years the Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council has been dedicated to researching and supporting work on women during World War I. Readers will remember Diana Barrett's work on the registration cards, and more recently conference panels on food programs that GGRWHC has sponsored at the Midwestern History Association. On November 9th Melissa Fox, the new president of the Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council, will provide an overview of this recent work bringing this period to life. Highlighting examples of Grand Rapids women serving on state- and city-level woman's committees, Fox will share some familiar names of women activists in new positions. Join us on November 9th for a look at history-making in process and see how the efforts of 19th-century women were newly energized and reframed by women in the early 20th century after an invitation from the federal government. And see where it led—for starters, to universal suffrage, the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920.



LEADERSHIP AS GGRWHC TURNS 30!

Jo Ellyn Clarey

During 2018 the Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council will celebrate 30 years of existence and once again register how our past relates both to our present ways of doing business and to future goals. Five years ago at a quarter century, we took stock and published a summary history, which you can find on our website: <http://www.ggrwhc.org/>

We are grateful to everyone who helps further our mission, but on the brink of our 30th anniversary we pause to acknowledge a distinct generational shift in leadership as well as to honor board members continuing in office to ensure a smooth transition. Healthy organizations have both invested institutional memory and fresh eyes. We are proud to have both as we continue to rewrite local history, to unearth and distribute information about the little-known but significant roles played by women in the development of our community.

As today's Council continues to move into new territory, we are delighted to introduce a new president and vice president, Melissa Fox and Kate van Liere.

While Melissa currently works as a freelance writer, researcher and homemaker, from 2008 to 2014 she was employed as a librarian with the Grand Rapids Public Library, where she spent her final two years in the Local History and Special Collections Department and served as coordinator of History Detectives programming. Now as a volunteer she continues to help process archival collections and is an important liaison between GGRWHC and the GRPL. We knew her when, and appreciate her decision to work with us to inspire others to think more deeply about the roles women have played in our community.

Kate is a professor of History at Calvin College and specializes in Renaissance and Reformation-era courses in European and world history. It's convenient for GGRWHC that she also directs the history internship program at Calvin and places students in museums, historical societies, and other local non-profit organizations. We're grateful that she helps to bring together academics, public historians, students, and amateur history lovers in creative collaboration.

Balancing our new leadership are continuing secretary and treasurer, Ruth Van Stee and Connie Ingham, whose service with the nitty-gritty we applaud!

Besides handling our business as secretary, Ruth presents programs and edits newsletters, reinvesting talents she developed when she worked in the local history department of the Grand Rapids Public Library and for some years as administrative assistant and newsletter editor for the Grand Rapids Historical Society. The GRHS awarded her its prestigious Baxter Award in 2016.

Connie manages all things financial—and we are lucky to have her! Supposedly she is retired from Grand Valley State University where she served as the academic coordinator for the GVSU Department of Biology, but she still seems to be necessary there during budget crunch time. While at GVSU Connie served as a core member of the Women's Commission and a subcommittee, Fire-side Chats, dedicated to developing a greater understanding of issues based on race and culture. She was recognized for her work with the Maxine Swanson Award.

UPCOMING PROGRAMS AND EVENTS

Mark your calendars, then check for updates on our website and in our newsletters (sign up at www.ggrwhc.org), on Facebook and Instagram, or call (616) 574-7307. **In the works**: On February 18th we will partner with the Grand Rapids Study Club to offer a program on African American women's sport history for GRPL's Taste of Soul. Stay tuned! All events are free and open to the public.

Thursday, November 9th, 7:00 pm: *The Second Line of Defense: Grand Rapids Women and the Great War* by GGRWHC's new president, Melissa Fox, GRHS series. Upon U.S. entry into WWI, national women's groups transformed their organizational structures for war work. The efforts of pioneering midwestern leaders have been too long neglected. Get ahead of history--credit them! Ryerson Auditorium, Grand Rapids Public Library. (And get a peek at the 4th Floor archival exhibit, ***Women Go to War***, more on that on page 9 of this newsletter.

Saturday, January 20th, 10:30am: *Elective Detectives & Crowdsourcing Grand Rapids Women's History*. At History Detectives, the Grand Rapids Public Library's day-long offering of local history programming, Julia Bouwkamp and Jo Ellyn Clarey will report on how the charting of 19th-century local women's candidacy for public office is upending conventional wisdom and offering surprises about dates, the numbers of races, and the identities of losers. This unique historical accounting hopes to inspire cities across the nation to create their own comprehensive elective histories. And now a national crowdsourcing project, *Her Hat Was in the Ring*, has invited local researchers to share their data with the world, to help others complete and complicate American women's history by seeking out every woman who ran before 1920.

Also January 20th, 1:00 pm: GGRWHC's Ruth Van Stee will present ***African Americans in Early Grand Rapids***—including, of course, more women's history. From 1850 to 1920 African Americans here were a steady one percent of the city's rapidly growing population. After an overview of this vibrant community as a whole, Van Stee will provide snapshots of individual business, political, and cultural leaders illustrating their life during an era that sometimes encouraged but often repressed their full involvement in this city.

Late March: *Celebrating the Resource of the Century and the Centennial of WWI Registrations of Grand Rapids Women!* The GGRWHC's annual reception will wrap up Women's History Month by honoring the 20th-century effort in 1918 to register half Grand Rapids' female adult population for war work and the 21st-century creation of a massive, searchable database, including well over 100 fields of data for 23,000 Kent County women. We'll lift a glass to those who created, saved, and entered the records—a model effort deserving of imitation wherever cards can be found! We'll talk about that, too. Precious few have been located among the 4,000,000 American women registered nationally, with 900,000 in Michigan alone. These rediscovered records and resultant database model the possibilities for crowdsourcing, and other modes of sharing nationally may help to locate more records!



VOTES FOR WOMEN: GGRWHC ON THE STREETS

We had a busy suffragist summer! Before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granting full suffrage to women in 1920, public demonstrations demanding the vote included parading. On July 4, with kids, dogs and husbands in tow, the GGRWHC honored the 72-year women's rights movement beginning in 1848 by marching in the annual Hollyhock Lane Parade.

Women's Equality Day is celebrated each year on August 26 to commemorate the passage of the 19th Amendment and to call attention to women's continuing efforts toward full equality. GGRWHC celebrated Equality Day 2017, the 97th anniversary of the American women suffrage movement's great victory, by distributing information outside of the Grand Rapids Art Museum, along with the local chapter of the League of Women Voters.

Many thanks to all who marched with us! Mark your calendars for these fun events next year!





MICHIGAN WOMEN'S HALL OF FAME INDUCTEE: ELLA MAE BACKUS

Grand Rapids Attorney Ella Mae Backus (1863-1938) was celebrated on October 18 as a member of this year's class of inductees into the Michigan Women's Hall of Fame. Backus made her mark on West Michigan during her 35-year career in the Grand Rapids office of the U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Michigan.

In 1923, she was appointed the first female Assistant U.S. Attorney in the Western District, one of only six women in the United States who held that position. As the first female member in 1928 of the Grand Rapids Bar Association, Backus blazed the trail for generations of women who followed her into the legal profession in West Michigan.

Backus grew up on a farm in central Michigan. After graduating from high school, she began to work as a stenographer in a small law office in Traverse City. This choice set her on the path to becoming an attorney, and in 1895 she was admitted to the bar in Traverse City – most likely the first woman to achieve this distinction.

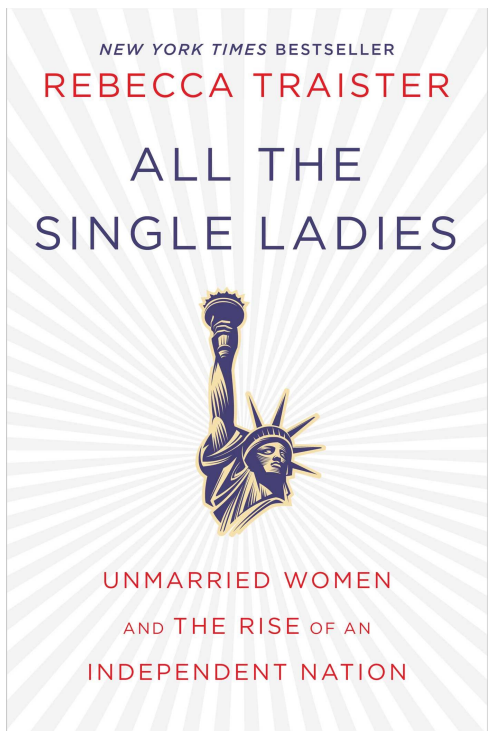
Backus' tenure in the U.S. Attorney's office was especially remarkable because she worked for six different U.S. Attorneys. She played an important

role in federal law enforcement in Western Michigan during turbulent times that included World War I, Prohibition, the Great Depression, and, at the end of her career, the New Deal.

Both Democrats and Republicans chose to retain Backus because of her immense knowledge of federal law and procedure. She was appreciated not just for her legal knowledge, but also for her strength of character and dedication to her work. After her death, colleagues remarked that "she served her country with as much loyalty, fidelity, and unselfish devotion as any patriot whoever marched in battle in defense of his country's flag."



To learn more about Backus and the October 18 induction ceremony, see http://www.michiganwomen.org/awards_dinner.aspx and GGRWHC Board member Ruth Stevens's article about Backus for the Fall 2016 Michigan Historical Review, titled "Assistant US Attorney Ella Mae Backus: 'A most important figure in the legal profession in the Western District of Michigan,'" available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/scjpeerpubs/15/>.



GVSU COMMUNITY READ: *ALL THE SINGLE LADIES*

Rebecca Traister, author of the best-selling 2016 book *All the Single Ladies* will visit Grand Valley State University on March 13, 2018, as part of Grand Valley's annual Community Read program. Her visit will cap a year of programming relating to the book. In *All the Single Ladies*, "Traister explores the role of single women throughout modern history, discussing the unmarried women who worked as abolitionists, fought for voting rights, wrote literary classics, kept the country running during times of war and even, like Queen Elizabeth I, ran countries themselves" (*New York Times*, March 1, 2016). She successfully weaves historical information and contemporary interviews into a narrative that raises thought-provoking questions regarding attitudes toward and treatment of single women. All community members are invited to read the book and participate in Community Read events. For more information, see, <http://www.gvsu.edu/rea>

NEW BOARD MEMBER

A graduate of Calvin College with a B.A. in History, Julia Bouwkamp has served as an AmeriCorps VISTA Member at Wayland Main Street, a development and historic preservation agency in Wayland Michigan. She has also worked as a historical interpreter at Colonial Michilimackinac, the reproduction of an eighteenth-century fort in Mackinaw City, Michigan. Julia appreciates the work of the GGRWHC as it finds and preserves valuable resources uncovering the dynamic history of women in Grand Rapids. She plans to assist in that effort to ensure that the women who have left their mark on Grand Rapids are remembered. She has a particular interest in the elective history project, *Her Hat Was in the Ring*, a national effort to record the biographical histories of women who ran for office in the United States until 1920.





Deming was hired as the first resident director at the Welcome Home for the Blind, where one of her main duties was fundraising, including starting the annual Strawberry Festival, now run by the local chapter of the Lions Club.

EMILY CLAGETT DEMING: HOUSEKEEPING PIONEER

1906 - 1998, Interviewed in 1990

In this issue Ruth VanStee highlights one of our oral histories recorded over the years by members of the GGR-WHC. These recordings and transcripts are stored in Collection 167 of the Grand Rapids Public Library archives. Transcripts and audio are both accessible to the public upon request. You can view a list of the subjects on our website at [http://www.ggrwhc.org/our-projects Summaries](http://www.ggrwhc.org/our-projects-Summaries) like this one (edited for space) are added to the website as they become available.

In 1971, at the age of 65, Emily Deming was told by her doctor that if she was "cooperative and lived in supportive care," she could live "a year and possibly 18 months." Her Aunt Cora had always said she was "the stubbornest brat that ever lived...I think maybe stubborn has had something to do with staying around when I wasn't really supposed to," concluded Deming.

Emily was born to Charles Eugene Deming and Emily Maud Claggett Deming in 1906. Her early education was spotty, as she attended many different grade schools, but her mother who

read books with her and played the violin, cultivated Deming's life-long love of learning and music. "We read the classics, the myths, the fairy tales. . . and a great deal of history and biography." Her father died when she was seven, so Emily and her mother moved to Chicago to live with Arthur Claggett, her mother's brother, and his wife, Cora.

Being a medical doctor, Uncle Arthur performed procedures on her, such as "suturing her uterus where it didn't belong." He went on to other "dreadful things"—conducting experiments with radium inserts, for example. As a result, Deming had health problems the rest of her life requiring many surgeries. "This, that, and the other thing I've had tried on me, and I guess I'm pretty lucky because this June, I'll be 84." "I think probably he was one of those people who was a true Jekyll and Hyde.

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DEMING, continued

His greatest joy was to send each one of us from the dining room table in tears and finish dinner alone. Yet when he had guests....he was the most charming, gracious, the most delightful host and everybody thought he was marvelous."

After four years in Wilmette Illinois, where Emily earned a high school education, they moved to the West Michigan area in 1923. Her first job was with the Powers Theater assisting actress Selena Royal, in the same troupe as Spencer Tracy. Emily's duties included dressing Miss Royal, making scripted sounds offstage, and occasionally performing walk-on parts.

In 1926 when she started at Butterworth Hospital, Deming worked first as a night switchboard operator six nights a week, then the patient information phone line, still on the night shift, then the admissions office, and after a six-week internship in a Chicago hospital, she was appointed housekeeping director.

In addition to her daily responsibilities, Deming was involved in professional organizations, planning and presenting at the Tri-State Hospital Association conference in Chicago and had over 80 published articles in professional journals. Deming "invented the first classes for housekeeping employees" and in 1954 put all her training ideas into a book, *Lessons in Good Housekeeping*.

During those years she was "having my normal quota of surgery and medical problems and pneumonia and stuff, and it was decided that I should probably do something a little less strenuous. . . ."

After a stint at the Morton House, she began her work as a resident director at Welcome Home for the Blind. She teamed up with Dr. Stanley Larsen, board president, planning for what was needed in a new building, raising

funds for it, and continued as resident director of that building on north Monroe.

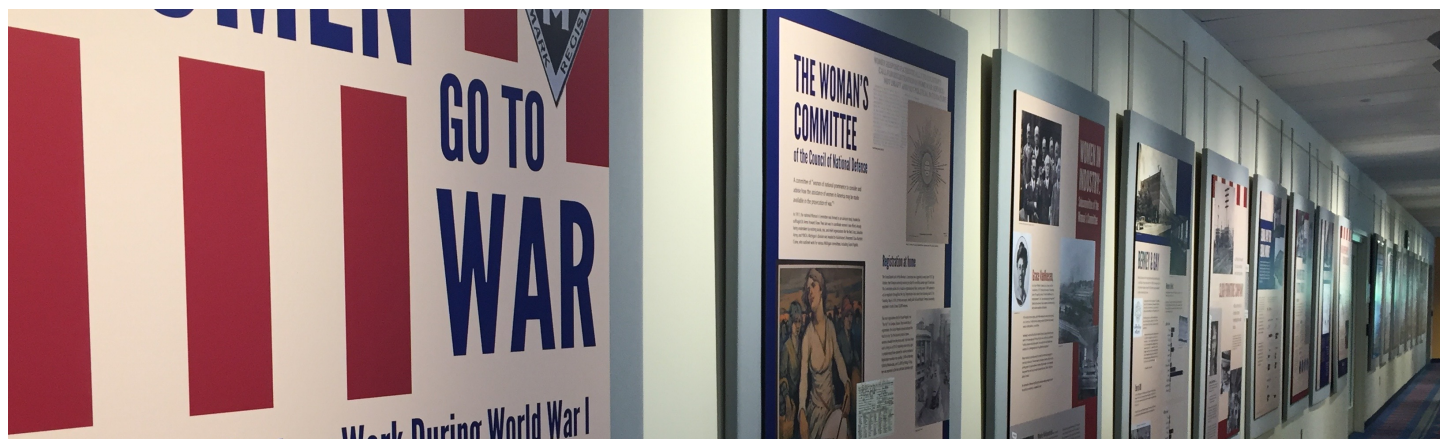
After retiring in 1971, Emily remained active: working to prevent the eviction of the residents from the bankrupt Olds Manor; working with the Grand Rapids Public Library to start a large-print book exchange among all the area homes for the aging; attending OLLI classes at Aquinas College, a "godsend that has given me such joy."

Deming lived out the rest her years in Porter Hills Retirement Village where in 1990 she was taking classes, volunteering in the reception office, and filling in as she was needed. She concluded, "I have the best of all worlds."

Deming died on January 22, 1998, at the age of 91. She lived a long, full life far beyond expectations and despite all her medical prob-



Images for this article are courtesy of Grand Rapids Public Library, History and Special Collections department



WOMEN GO TO WAR: Furniture Factory Work During World War I

The Grand Rapids History & Special Collections Department has a new exhibit as of September. "Women Go To War" highlights the wartime furniture factory life of Grand Rapids women during the Great War. The multi-panel exhibit is replete with historical photographs, newspaper articles, labor statistics, and profiles of individual women. Go to the 4th floor of the Grand Rapids Public Library Main Branch (111 Library St. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49503) to see how the Woman's Committee of the Council of National Defense harnessed the working power, as well as the social and

civic relief aims, of more than 20,000 Grand Rapids women through voluntary registration. Learn what working life was like for the women who worked at the Sligh Furniture Company and Berkey & Gay--two of the most prominent furniture makers employing women during the war - as they moved into roles traditionally held by their male counterparts. This exhibit speaks to the contributions of women--including the city's immigrant populations--and the power of community during a tumultuous time.

This exhibit was made possible by the Grand Rapids Public Library Foundation through a grant from the Furniture Manufacturers' Heritage Fund, a Donor Advised Fund of the Grand Rapids Community Foundation.

Join and become a member! Membership / Sponsorship Form

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Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council
P. O. Box 68874
Grand Rapids, MI 49516-8874



The Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council was started in 1987 when founder Twink Frey was doing research for a paper on the role of women in the history of Grand Rapids. She found little or nothing either at the local or state levels about the many women who had helped found and shape the city and its surrounding area. Knowing that women had played an enormous role in the development of the region, Frey began to contact others who had a similar interest in systematic research, documentation, and preservation of the lives and contributions of former Grand Rapids and West Michigan women. In the ensuing 28 years many others joined Frey in this work. A great deal has been accomplished and many women who played important roles in Grand Rapids history continue to be discovered.

Visit our website at ggrwhc.org

The Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council is dedicated to educating the community and celebrating the legacies of local women, preserving knowledge of their past and inspiring visions for their future.