

ADMITTING WOMEN

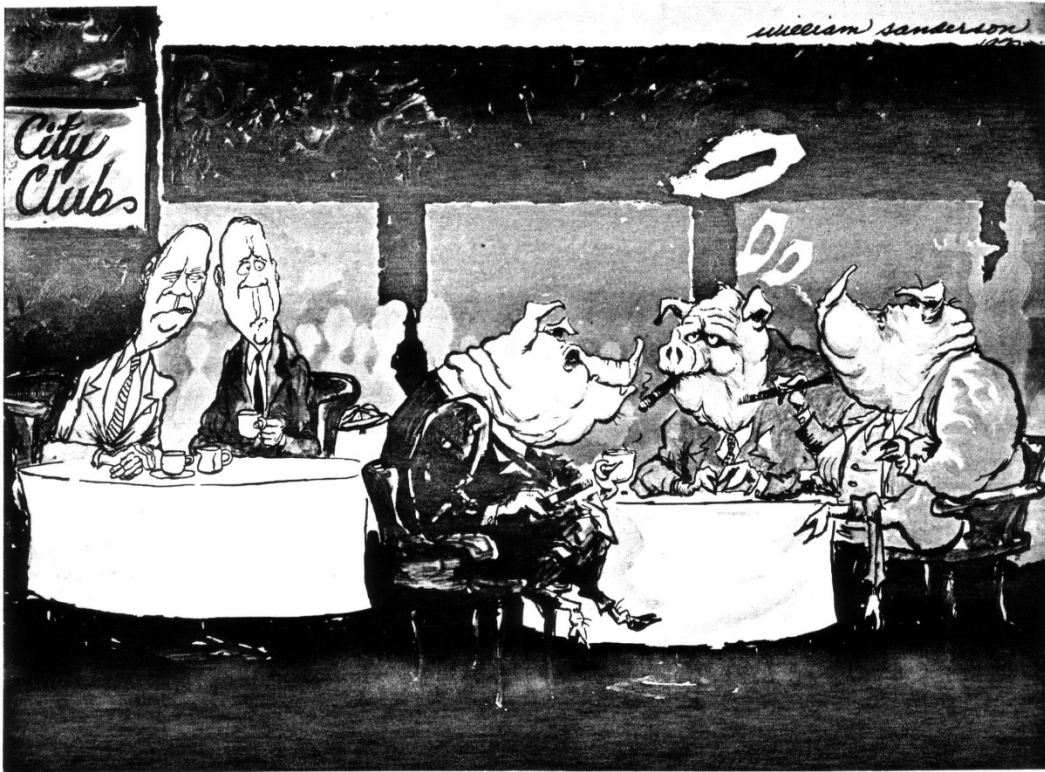
A brief account of the controversy over the admission of women to membership in the City Club of Portland

1969–1973

By Donald J. Sterling, Jr.

1988

This is a slightly revised version of a talk delivered to a regular weekly luncheon meeting of the City Club of Portland in the Mayfair Room of the Westin Benson Hotel, Portland, on October 21, 1988, in observance of the 15th anniversary of the admission of women to membership in the club. Donald J. Sterling, Jr., was president of the club and editor of the Oregon Journal in 1973 when the vote to admit women was taken. In 1988 he was assistant to the publisher of The Oregonian. Gretchen Kafoury, who had been a member of the organization Politically Oriented Women and in 1988 was a Multnomah County commissioner, also spoke.



"OLDER MEMBERS OF THE CLUB. VOTED SOLID AGAINST ADMITTING WOMEN."

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Ah, the good old days. As you arrived for lunch today some of you saw the commemorative picket line set up outside the hotel. Fifteen years ago those pickets were there in earnest. One of their signs even had my name on it, which suggests a corollary to Andy Warhol's dictum: Today everyone can expect to be famous for 15 minutes . . . and to be picketed once.

Members who attended the City Club meeting in this room on October 26, 1973, voted to admit women to membership in the club by a margin of seven votes. It was the fourth time in three and a half years the proposal had been before the club. The decision ended a controversy that had gone on through the terms of five presidents of the City Club and the overlapping service of four boards of governors. It was the longest and most divisive internal issue in the history of the club.

The debate over what club members then often called "the women issue" was sometimes bitter and sometimes had humorous overtones, but it was a matter the club took seriously. At all times in those three and a half years a majority of the board was in favor of admitting women. So far as can be determined from the record, so did a majority of the members of the club. For reasons I shall explain, however, a simple majority was not enough.

The proposal to allow women to join the City Club originated not with women but with men, and it originated not in Portland but in Gresham. In 1969 three City Club members—Douglas C. Myers, who then was manager of the Gresham branch of the United States National Bank; Laird Kirkpatrick, a lawyer, and Dr. George Casterline, a physician who practiced at Twelve-Mile Corner—agreed that it was high time to open the club's membership to women. To add weight to their suggestion they recruited three other City Club members—Dr. Earl Klapstein, then president of Mount Hood Community College; Sidney I. Lezak, then United States attorney for Oregon; and Dr. Paul S. Wright, then minister of the First Presbyterian Church in Portland and a former president of the City Club. The six of them signed a letter that they delivered to the board of governors May 16, 1970. I have not seen it but I understand it asked the board to take steps to admit women to the club.

The composition of the board changed at the end of May, as it does every year. The new 1970–71 board, with Dr. Herbert Goodman as president, made the question an early order of business. It determined that in formal terms the problem was one little three-letter word, m-e-n, in the club's constitution. The constitution said, "The purposes of this organization shall be: To provide a common meeting ground for congenial, forward-looking men [emphasis supplied] of divergent beliefs, politics, and occupations . . ."

Ogden Beeman, a board member who later was to become a president of the club, suggested that the way to deal with that constitutional provision was for the board to interpret "men" to mean "mankind," and to admit women on that basis. Standing in the way of that Gordian-knot proposal, however, was a fact that anyone who knows the City Club will recognize as powerful: tradition. In all of the club's then 54 years of existence, no woman had been a member.

In fact at that time, with an important exception that I shall get to later, women were not even allowed to attend the meetings of the City Club except on special occasions or when they were on the platform as speakers. In those days the club often met for lunch in the Crystal Room on the first floor of the Benson Hotel. The Crystal Room has a little balcony on its south end, and my friend Barbara Farrow Walker discovered there was a way to reach it by crawling through a door in the back of a manager's office on the mezzanine floor of the hotel. She often used to hide there like a crouching Juliet to take in the proceedings of the City Club below.

The board quickly voted, *in* November 1970, to allow women to attend meetings other than members-only meetings as guests, and thereafter they did.

Having concluded, however, that to let women become members required an amendment of the club constitution, the board then was confronted with a provision which still is in effect that says, "This constitution may be amended by a two-thirds vote of the members present at any regular meeting . . ." That requirement and state corporation law meant, the board concluded, that the vote could not be taken by proxy or by mail. The only way the constitution could be changed was by a two-thirds vote of the members attending a meeting.

The board and club had other matters to occupy them in the fall of 1970. It was an election year and there were ballot measures to study and debate. The board consulted Dr. Casterline, who said his group was in no particular hurry. Eventually, on January 8, 1971, the board brought the issue before a regular Friday noon meeting of the club for the first time. The question presented was to substitute "individuals" for "men" in the membership description in the club constitution. In every subsequent vote the issue was essentially the same, although in the amendment the club finally adopted the new word was "persons."

In the first election the amendment received a 143-to-142 favorable vote, but that outcome was 47 votes short of the required two-thirds majority of those present. The arguments that day were similar to those that members offered at every subsequent debate.

One who favored admission of women said, "It ill behoves this club to keep this type of segregation which affects not a minority, but the majority of this country's population."

Others in favor said:

"If this club is to be meaningful it must include all members of the community."

"Male chauvinism might be harmless if it didn't carry over into important things, and City Club membership is regarded as prestigious."

"If the question were to admit Jews or blacks there's no doubt which way it would go."

But in opposition a black member of the City Club said, "Ordinarily I would be for total integration, but I think we should have a private domain here where men can be men."

The argument most frequently advanced against the amendment in all the debates was a variation of this that was offered at the first one: "If you have a formula that succeeds, don't change it."

Another opponent said, "I dread the thought of fighting for luncheon seating with housewives who can get here at 11:15."

As the controversy wore on some members—mostly ones who favored women's membership—pointed out in later debates that it was harming and dividing the club and needed

to be settled. Other than that one of the few notable new arguments later came from the member who chose to say that he feared the admission of women would introduce additional cleavage into the club.

To shorten a long story, the club voted again on the issue October 29, 1971, and it failed by 55 votes. In a third election July 14, 1972, it fell short by six votes. Finally the amendment was adopted and women were admitted on October 26, 1973.

The first rejection in January 1971 caught the attention and aroused the indignation of a group of women friends who were active as volunteers in Portland politics. Thereupon they formed themselves into an ad hoc organization they called Politically Oriented Women, or POW, to campaign to gain the admission of women to the club. They wrote nationwide to figures who might be invited to speak before the club, asking them not to come until the vote was reversed. They urged men members of the club to resign or withhold their dues in protest. They lobbied the board repeatedly to do more to pass the amendment.

In June 1971 the members of POW and a few male sympathizers began picketing outside the Benson Hotel on Friday noons when the regular weekly club meetings were held, and they kept it up week after week. Some of their signs bore all-purpose messages such as “Shame” and “Oink,” but they also tried to carry a special message appropriate to the subject of the day. For example, when the speaker was Dr. Mary Calderone, executive director of the Sex Information and Education Council of the United States, one of the picket signs read, “The City Club Needs Sex Education.”

The City Club was by no means the only all-male civic or social organization in Portland. Some of them still exist. When asked why they were picking on the City Club, a member of POW replied it was because that was where the action was.

The campaign both inside and outside the club took place against a background of national turmoil and ferment in the years 1970 to 1973, and the campaigners borrowed some tactics from other causes. The Vietnam War was dragging on, and was being resisted with protests that included picketing, street marches, student strikes, even shootings and bombings. The Watergate scandal was unfolding. In the same week that the club finally admitted women the United States House of Representatives voted to proceed with the hearings on the impeachment of President Richard Nixon. Those years also were a time of political activism. A young lawyer named Neil Goldschmidt, now Oregon’s governor, first was elected to the Portland City Council. The Oregon Legislature adopted milestone environmental laws such as the bottle bill and the beach bill.

Perhaps most to the point, the beginning of the 1970s saw the flowering of the movement for women’s rights. Congress referred the Equal Rights Amendment to the states and the Oregon Legislature ratified it. Formerly all-male universities such as Princeton and Yale took in their first woman undergraduates. The Federal Bureau of Investigation hired its first woman agents. Women were admitted to the Harvard Club of New York and the National Press Club in Washington. On the West Coast the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco and Town Hall in Los Angeles, which are counterparts of the City Club, opened their doors to women shortly before the Portland club did.

It is hard to say how this turbulent atmosphere affected the debate over the women issue at the City Club, but it is safe to say that it did.

The City Club continued to function. It conducted research, held its weekly meetings and took in a steady flow of new members. Nevertheless the controversy and pressure unquestionably crippled it. Some invited speakers declined to appear. Some members refused committee appointments. The bickering preoccupied the Board of Governors and at different times three members resigned from the board—E. Kimbark MacColl, Dr. Gerald Cogan, and Dr. Walter Reynolds. Some members stayed in the club but withheld their dues. Others resigned, most of them to protest the continued exclusion of women but a few because they objected to the proposed change and were tired of the argument. The membership dropped from 1,623 on June 1, 1971, to 1,282 on September 30, 1973, shortly before the fourth vote. The resignations and dues strike cut into the club's budget.

Each resignation of a supporter of women made passage of the amendment harder, because under the two-thirds rule one member voting no or attending and not voting at all offset two who were in favor. The board also had to wrestle with the question of when it should accept as final the membership's rejection of the change and how often it legitimately could propose reconsideration.

In the summer of 1972 campaigners for the amendment filed a lawsuit in federal court in Washington, D.C., against the United States Treasury Department. It challenged the tax-exempt status of the City Club Foundation on grounds that it discriminated against women, since the memberships of the club and foundation were identical. The plaintiffs were Gladys McCoy, now chairman of the Multnomah County commission, and the American Civil Liberties Union. The defendants included George Shultz, then secretary of the Treasury and now the U.S. secretary of State. The boards of the City Club and the foundation decided not to intervene, in part because they were not named defendants to the suit but also because they could not find a lawyer who would take the case for no fee. The foundation's board did explore amending its bylaws to permit anyone who contributed \$1 to become a member. The case had not been resolved when the club voted to admit women.

The long controversy particularly affected two persons, one of them Sidney Lezak. Early in 1972, when he was president-elect, he announced publicly that he would not continue to serve as president if he became convinced that there was no realistic hope of women's admission. In December 1972, shortly after the third vote, he did resign as president but not from the club. The *City Club Bulletin* carried his statement, filling more than a page, in which he said, "[M]y resignation may serve the purpose of emphasizing the importance of this issue to those who are still blind to the desire of many women to be given more opportunity to choose their roles."

The other person to feel a special impact from the debate was Ellamae W. Naylor. In all the history of the City Club no one has had more to do with its success or been more protective of its traditions and standards than Woodie Naylor. She became executive secretary of the club in 1950 and served for 23 years, longer than any other club executive. She attended the meetings from which other women were excluded. Working for the City Club was hectic and demanding in the best of times, and these times were not the best. In addition, Woodie never made any secret of her opposition to having women as members. Some of the supporters of admitting women saw Woodie as part of the problem, and some of their attacks were personal. In July 1973 Woodie Naylor informed the board that she intended to resign, and three months later she did. The club held a farewell ceremony for her on this platform October 19, 1973, one week before the fourth and final vote. She received a special City Club Award, a check for \$2,676

contributed voluntarily by 328 members, and an honorary life membership, and she deserved them.

The next Friday the amendment to admit women passed, 240 to 109, and the controversy quickly died away like a summer storm. The first woman to apply for membership was Portland City Commissioner Mildred Schwab, who 45 minutes after the voting was in the City Club office to turn in her application and have her picture taken for the newspapers doing it. One other woman, Cornelia B. Frank, also applied in the first week.

Since then women have served in every position in the club. Two of them so far, Pauline Anderson and Orcilia Forbes, have been president. The membership began to grow immediately and the City Club today is larger and more active than it ever was before women could join. For the past two years membership has stood at about 2,800, with steadily rising proportion of women members which as of end of last August had reached 41 percent.

That means that the 1,150 women members account for virtually all the net gain in the club's size. The number of men today, about 1,650, is about the same as the membership in 1971 when the debate over women first began to be warm. Whether there is any significance to that fact is a subject for another day.

APPENDIX

These are the dates and outcomes of the four votes of City Club members on the admission of women to the club, as reported in the *City Club Bulletin*:

January 8, 1971— In favor, 143; opposed, 142. Failed by 47 votes to achieve a two-thirds majority of those present.

October 29, 1971— In favor, 267 out of 483 in the room. Failed by 55 votes.

July 14, 1972— In favor, 275 out of 421 present. Failed by 6 votes.

October 26, 1973— In favor, 240; opposed, 109. Passed by 7 votes.