

# THE "NEW WOMEN" OF SUBURBIA: A STUDY OF THE QUIET HOUR CLUB OF METUCHEN, NEW JERSEY FROM 1895-1899

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“THE first years of Quiet Hour club depict a way of life that has almost vanished—spirited, dashing, and gay, typifying the vision of the few who stepped out to form a woman’s club in Metuchen, New Jersey.”<sup>1</sup> In 1895, when eight young women met at the home of Mrs. Hester M. Poole to consider forming a club for “social and literary purposes,” they had a strong sense of themselves as members of a network of women who were claiming their places as productive citizens. The purpose of the club was to guarantee that they assumed this role as confident, informed, and knowledgeable women, with an awareness of their own abilities.

By 1895, Metuchen had been a commuting town for sixty years with many of its inhabitants employed in New York City. A popular observation was that after breakfast one could not find a man on the streets. It was also at this time that Metuchen earned its nickname the “Brainy Boro” because of the large number of intellectual and literary figures living there. The editors of *Harper’s Magazine* and Hearst publications were both residents, as well as a Presbyterian minister who ran for President on the Prohibition Party ticket. The novelist Mary Wilkins Freeman moved to Metuchen in 1902 and was not out of place among the accomplished female residents. A result of the commuting was that the women had the town to themselves during the day.

One of the notable female residents of Metuchen was Mrs. Hester M. Poole, the founder of the Quiet Hour Club. She was a writer, a specialist on parliamentary law, one of the originators of the International Council of Women in 1888, and a distinguished

<sup>1</sup> Reminiscences of Quiet Hour, Given by Florence Sortore and Harriet Molineux, October 22, 1970. All documents are held by Special Collections and Archives, Rutgers University Libraries.

member of Sorosis, the best known of the pioneer women's clubs of the nineteenth century. She had worked for women's rights with Susan B. Anthony, Frances Willard, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Mrs. Poole started the Quiet Hour Club "to bring together the women in Metuchen, N.J. for mental culture, social intercourse, and a sympathetic understanding of whatever women are doing along the best lines of progress."<sup>2</sup> Even though she was one of the leading feminists, it was her request that religion and politics not be discussed at the club. Those issues were debated in other places, whereas the opportunity for women to gather together to discuss literature was unique.

The reaction of the town to the founding of the club is not recorded in the minutes. In 1945, however, a play was written by one of the members of the Quiet Hour Club dramatizing the club's beginnings, and in the play there are references to the controversy created by the club.<sup>3</sup> If there was some opposition originally, the steadily increasing membership of the Quiet Hour Club, the large attendance at their open meetings, and their participation in town improvements indicate it was not long-lived. The references in the play seem to be mostly to teasing, curiosity, and some grumbling in the Barber Shop. There is also a reference made to an unfortunate printer's "error" in the announcement of the first meeting. Apparently the newspaper account read, "The first meeting of the Quiet Hour was hell [rather than 'held'] at Mrs. Hunt's home last Thursday." As one character in the play says, their meetings were considered "a turbulent change in the community" because of the independence of female thought they symbolized. Yet the Quiet Hour Club's commitment to town improvement won them supporters. A newspaper article written at the time of the Quiet Hour Club's fifty-fifth anniversary states, "During the day that Metuchen enjoyed its greatest social and literary glory, the Quiet Hour Club maintained that level of artistic reputation."<sup>4</sup>

The members' desire to keep an apolitical stance is reflected in their choice of the club name. Mrs. Wood, one of the original eight members, proposed the name "The Quiet Hour" at the first meeting and it was unanimously accepted. This name indicates that

<sup>2</sup> Quiet Hour Constitution, 1895.

<sup>3</sup> *Hail and Farewell*, written by Josephine Carman.

<sup>4</sup> *Metuchen Recorder*, May 5, 1950.

the club provided time for the women to pursue their own intellectual interests away from the concerns of domestic life. The issues of the male world, the religion and politics Hester Poole excluded, and the issues of the family world would not intrude, however, the "quietness" of the discussions on female issues is questionable. A letter written by Harriet Molineux recounts her first visit to the Quiet Hour at the age of five, ". . . all I remember about the meeting was that they made so much noise that I asked my father why it was called the 'Quiet Hour' when I was the only quiet one there. . . ."<sup>5</sup> As this is the only instance when a child's presence is mentioned, it must have been an open meeting or an exceptional case since it was only occasionally that even the children of the hostess were permitted to peek in. The quotation shows, nonetheless, that the members were quite serious about their discussions and felt women's concerns should not be kept silent. The club's motto "Upward," which suggests aspiration and elevation, further testifies to their belief that women should cultivate their talents.

The meetings were run quite formally with a slate of officers, a constitution, and by-laws adopted at the first meeting. As Mrs. Poole drew up the constitution and by-laws, it may have been her intent to instruct the women in practicable governmental organization. Since she had studied parliamentary law, and as a result of her political experience, Hester Poole must have believed it was important for women to understand the operations of government. The Executive Committee consisted of a president, two vice-presidents, a secretary, and a treasurer, with each officer serving a one-year term. The president would run the meetings, preserve order, and enforce rules. The members were to take part in the exercises in succession, according to the initials of their last names, unless excused by the presiding officer. Membership was by nomination, the only restriction being a minimum age of eighteen, but by 1899 it was necessary to restrict the number of active members to thirty-five. The order of business was to vary according to a vote by the club for any of the following considerations: current topics, readings, recitations, music, discussion upon designated topics, verbal descriptions, original papers, or "such other exercises as may seem best for the majority of members."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Harriet Molineux, speech toasting honorary members.

<sup>6</sup> Quiet Hour Constitution, 1895.

In 1896 the procedure was changed from the alphabetical succession, which was no longer effective with a membership of twenty-one, to a committee organization whereby one committee would be in charge of the day's program. The topics for the committees were literature, music and art, history and travel, natural science, social science, household economics, and current events. Several amendments were made in 1898 to ensure that the women were keeping abreast of progress in these areas. It was proposed that current subjects be chosen and that scholarly methods of researching be used. The office of Chronicler was also added at this time to provide an update on current events at each meeting. The emphasis in the curriculum was on providing the women with a contemporary world view.

The meetings were held in member's homes on alternate Thursdays at 2:15. This time must have been selected as an interval when no domestic chores needed to be attended to, possibly the maid's day off, because ten of the original thirteen members were married and managing households. As a consequence of an observation made at one of the first meetings about women lacking punctuality, a fine was instituted for members arriving after 2:45. It had also been proposed that the hostess not be required to greet a late-comer at the door, but this proposal was rejected as excessively censorious. It is clear, however, that the women wanted the meetings to be considered as important engagements that should not be broken regardless of domestic obligations. They organized their club so as to enforce businesslike behavior.

Every aspect of the club's structure, from the constitution to the fines for lateness, reveals an intent to train women to operate in the world outside the home. The Quiet Hour members recognized that women could, and in fact were beginning to, influence public actions. At their meetings they discussed women's achievements by proposing questions which required the members to reflect on influential women in various fields. To the question, "What American woman, now living, exerts the greatest influence over the women of this country?" the response was Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frances Willard.<sup>7</sup> Other notable women who came up in response to questions of influence or excellence were Jane Austen, Elizabeth Barrett

<sup>7</sup> Meeting on December 26, 1895.

Browning, Celia Thaxter, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. These questions point to an identification with female potential and achievement which was felt by the club. Their consciousness of female culture is also reflected in their attempt to encourage the talents of their own members by allowing for the display of special skills at meetings. Many meetings required members to compose an original poem for recitation or to prepare a musical performance. In addition, it was normal procedure for each committee member to present an original paper on a selected topic. These activities were encouraged so that members would see their talents as valuable to society, a message which was underscored in their study of Emerson's "Self-Reliance." This format also developed the women's political skills of analysis and public speaking.

Music became a special area of interest for the club because of a paper given by one of the members in January of 1897. Mrs. Tait had concluded in her paper that "as yet, women had not advanced as far in music as in most of the arts."<sup>8</sup> It is interesting that Bryce, the British historian whose book *The American Commonwealth* the women were reading at meetings, notes this phenomenon in his chapter "Position of Women."<sup>9</sup> By May the women had resolved to concentrate on the development of their musical talents. They purchased a lot of sheet music for women's voices, formed a Glee Club, and made a musical performance a part of every meeting. In 1899 they passed a resolution that the titles of the music they were using be recorded each week in the minutes. Their selections included secular, as well as religious music, and they ranged from popular songs to classical arrangements. Mrs. Poole is quoted, "I never thought there was so much music in this town."<sup>10</sup> The development of a strong program in music illustrates their commitment to the application of women's talent in new areas.

Yet their study of female achievement was not limited to the arts, they were also extremely interested in women's work in social projects. They spent several meetings discussing the settlement houses in New York City, including correspondence with a woman at Calvary House in 1898. A report was also given that year on charitable institutions run by women in Europe. There were two

<sup>8</sup> Meeting on January 14, 1897.

<sup>9</sup> James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, 1889.

<sup>10</sup> Susanna Molineux's letter on Fiftieth Anniversary of Quiet Hour.

newspaper clippings on women's contributions at a meeting in February 1899. One of the clippings was on the proposed establishment of regular corps of trained female nurses for the army, while the subject of the other was women in the business world. The Quiet Hour had several meetings dedicated to discussion of the women's suffrage movement. Since they were reading Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* at this time, it is likely that they read his chapter where he postulates that giving women the vote will have more of a social impact than a political impact.<sup>11</sup> At a meeting in November of 1898, a woman visited the Quiet Hour to report on the workings of the women's suffrage movement in Colorado. Additionally, it is recorded in the minutes that the club received an invitation to attend a meeting of the New Jersey Women's Suffrage Association. They were also familiar with the work of the Women's Christian Temperance Union as suggested by their admiration for Frances Willard's efforts. Despite this study of political women's groups, the club did not record a stand on either the suffrage movement or temperance so that they could remain apolitical.

The study of women's social impact did, however, prompt them to begin community work. In 1897, they donated a watering trough to the town, supervised the installation of a water container in front of the Post Office, and petitioned for clean streets. They passed a resolution in 1899 to establish an annual entertainment event with proceeds to go for philanthropic purposes. The Quiet Hour was also a sponsor of public lectures which were announced in the newspaper and included a lecture, musical entertainment, and refreshments. Their tradition of Officer's Day was another opportunity for guests and members of women's clubs in neighboring towns to attend a lecture.

The Quiet Hour Club became quite involved with other women's clubs around the country. It was at their fourth meeting that they voted to join the State Federation of Women's Clubs, an organization founded in 1894 to bring women's clubs of the state into communication for "acquaintance and mutual helpfulness." The association with the Federation meant that the Quiet Hour Club sent delegates to meetings and conventions, and received visitors from other clubs in the state. In 1898, the President of the State

<sup>11</sup> Bryce, Chapter XCII, Vol. 11.

Federation addressed the club. That same year they also heard an account from one of their own members about the National Convention of Women's Clubs which she attended in Denver. There was a great spirit of solidarity among the clubs, particularly between the Quiet Hour and clubs in New Brunswick and Perth Amboy. Beginning in 1897, the Quiet Hour subscribed to a journal called "The Club Woman." It was published in Boston and covered the activities of women's organizations in the United States. This journal was circulated among the members of the Quiet Hour Club to keep them informed of women's happenings on the national level.

It was a special concern of the club to make sure they were aware of national and international affairs. Current events were discussed at every meeting, many times the response to roll call was recounting an article, and a fine was exacted from any member who was unprepared. The office of Chronicler, mentioned earlier, was established specifically to guarantee that the women kept up on global issues. A knowledge of history and foreign countries was also tied in with this emphasis on news. Many of the women had travelled abroad, so experiences were shared at meetings. Mrs. Poole read a letter from a friend who had spent several years on the Nile. As the letter contained information on the Armenian question, a discussion followed on that topic. Another member gave an account of her trip to Nassau, answering questions on the manners, customs, and government of the people. When a paper was given on craters, the speaker added personal comments from a trip to Vesuvius. Susanna Molineux wrote, "Early meetings were devoted to reading and discussion of one person or trait. As the club developed, they gathered information about one country or part of the World. . . . As to London, I felt quite at home there, thanks to London with the Club."<sup>12</sup>

Because of their upper-class status, the Quiet Hour members travelled more than most women in the nineteenth century, but their desire for world knowledge was shared by other women. A list of books the New Brunswick women's club was reading between 1896-1900 contains a substantial amount of travel literature such as *The Scenery of Switzerland*, *The Edge of the Orient*, and *Greenland, Icefields and Life in the North Atlantic*. They were reading history

<sup>12</sup> Susanna Molineux's letter on Fiftieth Anniversary of Quiet Hour.

and political books, like Dr. S. W. Mitchell's *Hugh Wynne: Free Quaker*, as well. Women in the 1890s were eager to learn about the world, and their clubs allowed them to fill what had been a lack in women's education.

Many of the answers to the discussion questions of the first year led the Quiet Hour to follow up on certain areas, as with music and current events. At the tenth meeting of the club, in response to a question about what changes need to be made in women's education, it was agreed that women needed more instruction in practical and business affairs. It seems that the Quiet Hour's concentration on law reflects a desire to fill this lack. They decided to read Bryce's *The American Commonwealth* in 1896. In 1899, a study of parliamentary law was instituted with a fifteen-minute drill at each meeting, and a lecture was scheduled on "The Law As Affecting Women." In addition, the club received an invitation from the New Jersey Women's Legal Protection Association.

Another area explored in order to provide the women with practical knowledge was "Household Economy." This topic was discussed on every level from practical tips for budgeting to the social significance of women as household managers. One of the debates in 1896 was whether the industrial independence of women would have an unfortunate effect upon social and family life. At a meeting run by the Committee on Household Economics in 1899, a paper was presented questioning the effects of a college education on a woman's ability to manage a home. Afterwards each member presented her method of economizing, plus a discussion was held on the subject of a woman paying higher wages than her neighbor for domestic help. A representative from the Consumer League lectured to the Quiet Hour in April 1899. The title of Mrs. Poole's book, *Fruits and How to Use Them: A Practical Manual for Housekeepers*, published in 1890, shows that she regarded domestic chores quite seriously as skills to be sharpened through study. The women evidently took pride in running their homes efficiently and were interested in achieving the highest level of expertise in the enterprise.

Judging from the seriousness of the club's approach to household economics, it would seem likely for them to make a similar study of child-raising and family life, but these subjects were not brought up at all even though the majority of women were married. Aside



from a debate held on the merit of the Santa Claus story for children, the only time families are mentioned at meetings is when a family illness or accident prevented a member from attending. At such a time, a note would be sent by the secretary to the member expressing the club's sympathy; otherwise the families are not mentioned. The "Quiet Hour" meant that it was a time for the women to take care of themselves and their interests, with no intrusion of children or men. The members seem to have regarded this sanction as one they did not want to violate.

According to a letter written by one of the club members, it was Mrs. Poole's intention as the founder of the Quiet Hour that a sense of self-improvement dominate the meetings.<sup>13</sup> It was this ethos of female self-improvement that made the apparently ladylike meetings in 1895 threatening to the male residents of Metuchen because it was a transgression of social norms for women to have public aspirations. Yet through the years this desire to promote the fulfillment of women's potential has continued to inspire the projects of the Quiet Hour Club. The effect of Hester Poole's philosophy on the club members is evident in an outline of the club's activities during the first twenty-five years following its establishment. When the Borough Improvement League was started in 1901, several members of the Quiet Hour became officers. In 1911, the Quiet Hour joined the other women's clubs in Metuchen in sending a resolution to Senator Frelinghuysen requesting him to use his influence to pass a law placing women on school boards. It is not surprising that one of the Quiet Hour's members became the first female to serve on a school board in Middlesex County. The Quiet Hour's longstanding affiliation with Douglass College began in 1915 when Mrs. Charles Prickitt spoke to the club about the effort to raise money to build a college for women in New Jersey. The Quiet Hour Club gave a donation in 1915 to initiate the building of the college in New Brunswick and again in 1919 when money was needed for Cooper dormitory. Also in 1915 the Quiet Hour petitioned to have a policewoman added to the Borough's force. The women participated in a drive to have female prisoners housed in Clinton Reformatory rather than the state prison in 1917, and in 1918 they started a boycott of German articles. True to this

<sup>13</sup> Letter from Harriet Molineux to Josephine Carman, May 23, 1949.

heritage of women's achievement, the Quiet Hour Club is still in existence and will celebrate its ninetieth birthday next year.

In my analysis, I have emphasized the club's social awareness, rather than its literary activities, because the minutes indicate they placed special emphasis on world affairs. It should be noted, however, that the Quiet Hour maintained its literary interests through frequent readings, book exchanges, and discussions. The documents I examined in making my critical interpretation of the intent and purpose for the Quiet Hour Club were the minutes of the meetings from 1895-1899, the first five years of the club. Due to the factual nature of this source, I have had to interpolate the women's feelings about themselves and the club from their actions. An area for further research would be uncovering the women's private writings in order to discover their personal histories. I also read the newspaper clippings, yearbooks, and letters which had been saved by the club secretaries over the years. All the documents had been very carefully preserved, testifying to the need for women to keep their own records because if they did not, their deeds would never be known. The books and articles on Metuchen's history do not deal in any depth with the Quiet Hour Club, if it is mentioned at all. The most obvious example of this disregard was the reissuing of *Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen* for the bicentennial while nothing was published on the women's history. The documents of the Quiet Hour Club record women's efforts at a time when women were beginning to realize their potential for contribution to society. The country had witnessed the effect of the female abolitionists on the Civil War, and the women's suffrage movement was now gaining momentum. Women needed to be educated in literature, as the Quiet Hour Club's continued devotion to poetry and prose reflected, but there was so much more they needed to learn in order to participate as citizens. The Quiet Hour Club provided an opportunity for the women to gain a knowledge of the world beyond the household.