

The Sunshine Girls from the Universalist Church

Women were involved in the Universalist Church in Monroe from its earliest days. Many churches had only male members, but this church was more liberal than most. I find this religious group very interesting and wonder why the local congregation dissolved in the 1980s. As I read the old newspapers, I always notice and collect information about the Universalist Church. Today's column will be looking at the Sunshine Girls, who supported different groups within the church and the community.

The first reference to them was in 1914 when they announced a candy sale on Saturday evening, November 14 in the vestry of the church. Mr. H. W. Johnnott was there to make his "celebrated Green County Fair cream candy" and molasses candy. Proceeds were to be used to purchase chairs for the kindergarten Sunday school class taught by Mrs. Pearl Pengra. It was announced the following week that \$28 had been raised because the candy was in such great demand.

After a meeting of the girls on Saturday, December 12 of the same year, Evelyn Ludlow, president of the class, announced that the girls were planning a Christmas tree for needy families in the city. She said, "We will provide Christmas cheer for as many poor families as possible." At that time, they planned to give candy treats to each child as well as a substantial gift. It was their plan to personally visit each child in the home to invite them to the Christmas tree at the Universalist Church on the afternoon of Christmas Day. The plan was to hold a charity ball at the armory on Wednesday evening, December 23 to raise the needed funds. The price of tickets for the ball was only \$0.50; there would be no cost for the main event on Christmas Day.

It was announced that 100 tickets had already been sold by Monday morning of that week. The girls felt that more tickets would still be sold. Punch and wafers were to be served at the ball for a small fee. Those who did not care to dance were invited to watch the party from the gallery. The girls also planned to treat the needy children to an afternoon picture show, if enough funds were raised.

The Christmas Eve newspaper announced that the girls had earned \$50 to expend for the children the next day. Dancing to the Bast & Booth orchestra had started at 9:00 that evening and lasted until 1:00, early the next morning. Several spectators filled the gallery above. The hall was "nicely decorated in evergreens, pennants, and crepe paper." The Sunshine Girls met that afternoon to fill boxes with candy that would be placed on the Christmas tree for the children.

A total of 35 children was picked up at their homes by F. B. Luchsinger in a large sleigh and dropped off at the [first] Monroe Theater for a matinee performance. Of course, he had to make two trips to fit everyone in. After the matinee, they went three blocks north to the church where Santa Claus (enacted by Ray Young) met them at the door and escorted them to the Christmas tree. Each child received popcorn balls, a half pound box of candy, all the lemonade one could drink, and a toy gift. Those in need of shoes were given written orders to be left at a local shoe store; others were furnished with mittens or overshoes. Some money still remained and was to "be used at once in providing necessities for the poor of the city." The Girls were "grateful to all who assisted in many ways in making the first charitable Christmas tree entertainment a success and are greatly pleased with the success of the venture."

The following spring, 1915, they sponsored a May festival at 7:30 p.m. Friday, May 14 in the church. The vestry was transformed into a "fairyland" with large clusters of wild crabapple blossoms and pink and white crepe paper. No admission was charged, but cake and ice cream, strawberries, and candy (again made by Mr. Johnnott) were served on the cafeteria plan. Little tables were decorated with flowers. An informal musical program and readings by Misses Neva Gapen and Phyllis Hunt added to the enjoyment. The girls cleared \$19, which was then used for the piano; some was also added to the Sunday school fund.

That fall the girls planned a Halloween Social on Friday evening, October 29 in the vestry with corn stalks and other woodland decorations. Pumpkin pie, coffee, doughnuts, and home made candy were served "at jitney prices" following the program. The proceeds this time benefitted the flower fund.

The Sunshine Girls announced in December 1915 that there would be another charity ball to benefit the needy children on Christmas Day. This year the charity ball would also use the same Christmas tree that would be taken to the Church for the children. It was to be placed in the center of the floor at the armory directly below the "airship" and decorated with small, colored electric lights, tinsel, and more. Spectators were only charged ten cents. The coverage after the event this time was not as much as the previous year, so it is unknown how many attended either the charity ball or on Christmas.

The girls held a picnic supper in the vestry of the church in January 1916. Officers elected that evening were president Gertrude Babler, vice president, Phyllis Hunt, secretary Gertrude Hodges, treasurer Florence Miller, and reporter Neva Gapen. It was also decided to hold meetings once a month with the accumulating dues to be used later for the class and its work.

It is unknown for how many years the girls continued to meet, but it was stated there were eight members in April 1918 who met each week with their teacher, Mrs. Pearl Pengra. They had raised \$50 to purchase material to make items to donate to the local chapter of Red Cross.



This photo of a Sunday school class from the Universalist Church in Monroe was recently donated to the Green County Historical Society by Carol Koenig. Carol's mother, Daisy Kramer (later Koenig), is shown on the right of the middle row. In the back row are Margaret Penn (later Huddleston), teacher Mrs. Pengra, and Margaret Knoble. Mrs. Pengra gave each girl a sterling silver spoon for perfect attendance each year. If you recognize any of the other girls, please let Matt know.