

How *The Feminine Mystique* Played in Peoria¹: Who is Betty Friedan?

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Betty Friedan's groundbreaking work, The Feminine Mystique, published in 1963, was not celebrated in her hometown of Peoria, Illinois, until its fiftieth anniversary. This article explores why many of Friedan's Peoria contemporaries – white, educated, married, middle- and upper-middle-class women, like the women featured in her book – rejected her thesis that their lives as women without careers in the paid labor force were dissatisfying and unfulfilling. It uses evidence from interviews with Peoria women from this cohort to discern how they found fulfillment and satisfaction as professional volunteers. It is part of the revisionist effort of women's post-World War II history to demonstrate the broad diversity of women and widen awareness of the breadth of their activities. It draws on civil society scholarship to interpret the import of their civic service. It argues that these professional volunteers are among the women that The Feminine Mystique mischaracterizes and that their contributions to producing a civil society have been undervalued.

Keywords: Betty Friedan, professional volunteer, women's history, civil society, volunteerism

In 2013, in Peoria, Illinois, the Betty Friedan Hometown Tribute Committee (hereafter known as the committee) staged a celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and its author, who they called “a Sister Peorian.” The leaders explained, “We thought it the perfect opportunity to promote better understanding of the most influential person Peoria has ever produced as well as to explore how Peoria shaped a young Bettye Goldstein.”² They determined to “use the event to talk about how *The Feminine Mystique* and the women's movement that followed changed the lives of Peoria women.”³ The committee members argued that both the book and the movement profoundly affected them and, thus, named the celebration, “It Changed Us!”⁴ They held the event on a cold, snowy

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¹ Ben Wattenberg, “The First Measured Century: Betty Friedan Interview,” <http://www.pbs.org/fmc/interviews/friedan.htm> (accessed 18 June 2015); Greg Wahl and Charles Bobbitt, *It Didn't Play in Peoria: Missed Chances of a Middle American Town* (Charlestown, South Carolina: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), viii.

² Betty Friedan Tribute website, <http://www.bradley.edu/sites/bettyfriedantribute/>, (accessed 26 April 2014).

³ Betty Friedan Tribute website. The original spelling of Betty Friedan's first name was “Bettye.” Joyce Antler, “The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America,” reprinted in *A Norton Critical Edition: Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique*, eds. Kristin Fermaglich and Lisa M. Fine (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 447. Friedan changed the spelling of her first name to “Betty” after she graduated from Smith College. Daniel Horowitz, “Rethinking Betty Friedan and the Feminine Mystique: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America,” reprinted in *A Norton Critical Edition*, 456.

⁴ Betty Friedan Tribute website.

evening in February when, they described, “more than 220 people showed up ... to learn about and celebrate Betty Friedan’s life and work.”⁵

The committee’s emphasis on teaching and promoting an understanding of Friedan’s life, work and *The Feminine Mystique* to members of her hometown was purposeful. Peoria had to that date failed to claim, boast or celebrate its most universally famous daughter.⁶ Seven years earlier, when Friedan died in 2006, the House of Representatives of the State of Illinois did issue a Resolution honoring her life. Hidden among its praises is, perhaps, part of the reason that Friedan and her book, *The Feminine Mystique*, had not resonated or “played in Peoria.”⁷ The resolution wrongly claimed that *The Feminine Mystique* was a book that “spoke to *all* women from all walks of life and addressed what she called the problem with no name, one in which women were leading the lives society expected from them but finding themselves unfulfilled.”⁸ Many of the women in Peoria, however, had not even read the book and only a few claimed that they experienced “the problem with no name.”⁹ This article investigates why so many white, married, educated, middle- and upper-middle-class women from Betty Friedan’s hometown rejected her feminine mystique thesis.

Peoria, Illinois has long been considered the heart of Middle America. The phrase “Will it play in Peoria?” originated during Friedan’s youth when the town was considered a test market for how a

⁵ Ibid. The Illinois State Historical Society named the tribute among the top historical events in Illinois in 2013. “Betty Friedan tribute named one of 2013’s top state events,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 15 February 2014.

⁶ “Editorial: Time to Recognize Betty Friedan in her Hometown,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 18 January 2010 available at: http://www.bradley.edu/sites/bettyfriedantribute/documents/rotated_PJStar_OurView_Time_to_Recognize_Betty_Friedan_1-18-2010.pdf. The first tribute to Betty Friedan in Peoria was created in September 2010 when the Betty Friedan Tribute Committee raised \$100,000 and renamed the YWCA childcare center the Betty Friedan Family Child Care Learning Center. Clare Howard, “Betty Friedan Committee reaches goal,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 1 September 2010 available at: http://www.bradley.edu/sites/bettyfriedantribute/documents/Betty_Friedan_Committee_reaches_goal.pdf (accessed 26 April 2014).

⁷ See note twelve.

⁸ Emphasis added. State of Illinois Ninety-Fourth General Assembly House of Representatives, Resolution 922 available at <http://www.bradley.edu/dotAsset/cfe97666-e09f-4832-89db-a5d6311bf624.pdf> (accessed 30 May 2015).

⁹ Interviews by author with Sally Snyder, Esther Cohen, Zan Ransburg, Joan Krupa, Patty Bash, Carole Ackerman, and Barb Leiter, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013, and Judy Hoerr Chicago, Illinois, December 2013. I interviewed thirteen women for this project. All of them lived in Peoria, Illinois, at some point during the last half of the twentieth century. All but one of them (Judy Hoerr) lived in Peoria in 2013 when I conducted the interviews. I categorize the interviewees into three groups: those who primarily and consistently throughout their adult lives were working, career women (Barb Drake, Joyce Harant, and Elaine Hopkins); those who were consistently both working, career women and professional volunteers (Joan Krupa and Patty Bash); and those who began their adult lives as primarily professional volunteers (Carole Ackerman, Sally Snyder, Esther Cohen, Zan Ransburg, Barb Leiter, Pat Kenny and Judy Hoerr). Most of the women in the last group did have careers in the paid labor force after their tenure as professional volunteers. All but one of the interviews was conducted in Peoria, Illinois, in October 2013. The other interview, with Judy Hoerr (my mother), was conducted in Chicago in December 2013. Judy Hoerr was the only interviewee who had moved away from the Peoria area.

vaudeville act would be received across the country.¹⁰ Friedan left Peoria after she graduated high school, but she did return many times over her life to visit her friends and family. Despite her local connections and her international fame, Peoria failed to embrace her.¹¹ Part of the reason was a strong strain of anti-Semitism that permeated the upper-middle class through much of the twentieth century.¹² But, it was also that few of its middle- and upper-class women identified with the problem Friedan branded during the 1950s, 60s and 70s. Many of Peoria's white, middle- and upper-class volunteer women did recognize that their life choices were limited by their gender, but most denied that they felt the malaise of the housewife that Friedan described.¹³

I grew up in Peoria, Illinois in the 1960s and 1970s with a mother who fit the demographics of the women Friedan wrote about; she was white, educated, middle class, married with children and she did not work in the paid labor force until after I went to college. My mother, who did read the book, reports that she did not experience the dissatisfaction that *The Feminine Mystique* described.¹⁴ I, too, read the book. I was a feminist and recognized that I was the beneficiary of the Women's Liberation Movement that Friedan helped to spearhead.¹⁵ But I also felt there was a dissonance between Friedan's descriptions in the book of women similarly situated to my mother and my observations of my mother's actual life. My memories are filled with her discussions at the dinner table of how to raise more money so the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) could build a second facility to expand its work and offer additional supportive services such as a day care center to working women in the community, how to establish support groups for women who were victims of domestic violence, and other such endeavors. My mother and her colleagues spent the 1960s and 70s engaged in meaningful civic service.

Civil Society scholars agree that during the decades after World War II, there was a strong ethos of American voluntarism that helped to promote the notion of society as a collective, comprised of "networks through which civility is produced and reproduced."¹⁶ White, educated, middle- and upper-

¹⁰ Amy Groh, "The Phrase that Put Peoria on the Map," PeoriaMagazines.com, June 2009. Available at <http://www.peoriamagazines.com/ibi/2009/jun/phrase-put-peoria-map> (accessed 26 April 2014).

¹¹ Enid Nemy, "Back Home to Peoria – and a Sequel to 'Feminine Mystique,'" *New York Times*, 21 May 1976, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/books/99/05/09/specials/friedan-sequel.html> (accessed 26 May 2015).

¹² Joyce Antler, *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 261-4. See also Sarah Okeson, "Peoria Friends recall Friedan," *Quad-Cities Online Dispatch-Argus*, 5 February 2006, available at http://www.mywebtimes.com/news/illinois_ap/peoria-friends-recall-friedan/article_4a9857c9-8fb5-5318-99fc-8e8877efb9b0.html (accessed 30 May 2015); Nemy, "Back to Peoria."

¹³ Interviews by author with Sally Snyder, Esther Cohen, Zan Ransburg, Joan Krupa, Patty Bash, Carole Ackerman, and Barb Leiter, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013, and Judy Hoerr Chicago, Illinois, December 2013. See also: Carole S. Ackerman, "Did it change my life?" in the *It Changed My Life Testimonials* section of the Betty Friedan Tribute website.

¹⁴ Interview by author with Judy Hoerr, Chicago, Illinois, December 2013.

¹⁵ Anna Quindlen, "Introduction," in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 12-13.

¹⁶ Quoting Michael Walzer in E. J. Dionne Jr., "Introduction: Why Civil Society? Why Now?" in *Community Works: The Renewal of Civil Society in America*, ed. E.J. Dionne, Jr. (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 3;

middle-class women were the driving force behind many of these volunteer institutions that produced civility.¹⁷ Upper-middle-class women in Peoria, like women throughout the United States and beyond, did more than merely serve as caretakers. As historian Joanne Meyerowitz explains, “To state the obvious, in the years following World War II...many white middle-class, married, suburban women were neither wholly domestic nor quiescent.”¹⁸

A few of Peoria’s affluent married women fought their way into the paid, white collar, male workforce, but many more of them engaged as volunteers in “civic activism.”¹⁹ They were able to pursue these activities because of their class and their race – they did not have to work for a wage and they had connections through birth and marriage to many resources within their communities. They became what I am calling professional volunteers, serving their communities through established organizations such as the Junior League of Peoria (JLP) and the YWCA and by founding new institutions including health centers, art and education centers, and women’s shelters. These volunteers in the 1950s, 60s and 70s continued the social reform agenda of their predecessors which included providing social services, housing, and education to working women and girls and advancing their own status and opportunities.²⁰ This article argues that these professional volunteers were among the women that *The Feminine Mystique* mischaracterizes and that their contributions to producing a civil society have been undervalued.

This article is part of the revisionist effort of women’s post-World War II history, which began in earnest in the 1990s, to demonstrate the diversity of women and the breadth of activities in which they engaged.²¹ Many of these works focus on women’s racial and class diversity.²² This article, alternatively, attempts to further undermine the stereotype of “the quintessential white, middle and upper-middle class housewives who stayed at home to rear children, clean house, and bake cookies,” by exploring the civic activities of precisely the group on which the stereotype is founded: white, upper-middle-class,

Theda Skocpol, “Don’t Blame Big Government: America’s Voluntary Groups Thrive in a National Network,” in *Community Works*, 40-43.

¹⁷ For a study of post-World War II women’s activism in Great Britain see Cairíona Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1928-64* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ Joanne Meyerowitz, “Introduction,” in *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945-1960*, ed. Joanne Meyerowitz (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), 2.

¹⁹ Susan Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace, and Feminism, 1945-1960s* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 11. For a discussion of women’s employment in this period, see the Kleinberg and Ritchie article in this special issue. For further anecdotal evidence of affluent, Peoria women working during this period see the *It Changed My Life Testimonials* of Suzanne Smith, Martha Willi, Judith Koren Shanahan, and Barb Drake on the Betty Friedan Tribute website.

²⁰ Arlene Kaplan Daniels, *Invisible Careers: Women Civic Leaders from the Volunteer World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²¹ Meyerowitz, “Introduction,” 2.

²² Meyerowitz ed., *Not June Cleaver*; Lynn, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times*. See also: Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

suburban mothers.²³ It is based on interviews conducted with thirteen women from Peoria and the records of the organizations for which they volunteered, most prominently the JLP and the Peoria YWCA.²⁴ It first discusses the concept of the professional volunteer and then assesses how these women developed organizational and leadership skills that they subsequently used to improve the quality of life in their communities. It next examines how these volunteers operated in the JLP and the Peoria YWCA, arguing that they engaged in civic activism that especially enriched the lives of working women and children. It concludes with a discussion of the decline of the female professional volunteer, assessing that although this decline was accompanied by increased rights and opportunities that benefitted individual women as well as their families, their communities, and their country, it did result in some negative consequences for the civic virtue of their communities.²⁵

The Female Professional Volunteer

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan criticized the woman volunteer. She noted that women had done meaningful volunteer work in the past, but she argued that the feminine mystique of the postwar era kept them from taking leadership roles in community organizations:

Women...of the post-1950 college generation, refuse to take policy-making positions in community organizations; they will only collect for Red Cross or March of Dimes or Scouts or be den mothers or take the lesser PTA [Parent Teacher Association] jobs. Their resistance to serious community responsibility is usually explained by 'I can't take the time from my family.' But much of their time is spent in meaningless busywork. The kind of community work they choose does not challenge their intelligence – or even, sometime, fill a real function. Nor do they derive much personal satisfaction from it – but it does fill time.²⁶

Friedan was not alone in her dismissal of women's volunteer work. In 2009, Gail Collins acknowledged the pervasiveness of women's volunteerism during the 1950s and 60s, but dismissed the work as a mere "break from domestic routine."²⁷ Collins offered the example of a 1960s well-to-do woman from New York who had explained the tradition in the Guggenheimer family was that, "all the men become lawyers and all the women work on committees." Collins dismissed that committee work as working for

²³ Ibid., 1.

²⁴ Details about the interviews are included in footnote nine.

²⁵ For a discussion of the debate among civil society scholars about the declension thesis see: Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); Dionne Jr., ed., *Community Works*; Theda Skocpol and Morris Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999).

²⁶ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 347-48.

²⁷ Gail Collins, *When Everything Changed: The Amazing Journey of American Women From 1960 to the Present* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2009), 16-17.

the PTA or “charity fashion shows” without investigating the true essence of that engagement.²⁸ What Elinor Guggenheimer was really doing was working from 8:30 am to 6:30 pm for “more than half a dozen civic and welfare organizations.” This work, as lauded by the *New York Times*, included her service as chair of the \$2 million fundraising campaign for the Community Service Society. The campaign was to support the organization’s work to influence urban development so that it included health services, housing, and education for working families in New York.²⁹

The women who engaged in volunteer work in the 1950s through the 1970s, like Elinor Guggenheimer, were part of a national trend of community based volunteering in the U.S. Civic volunteering increased after World War II, peaked in the early 1960s, but continued into the 1970s.³⁰ Although some, including Friedan, characterized most of women’s volunteering during this time as trivial, sociologist Robert Putnam found that organizations like the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) were important to their communities: “It is easy in our cynical era to sneer at cookies, cider, and small talk, but membership in the PTA betokened a commitment to participate in a practical, child-focused form of community life.”³¹ These women were part of what Putnam called the “long civic generation.” They were the ones who responded in 1961, when President John F. Kennedy instructed, “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.”³²

The professional women volunteers were also part of the women’s movement, although many of them were not part of the feminist movement. Caitríona Beaumont articulates this important distinction in her study of the YWCA in England. These women, like their YWCA sisters in the U.S., engaged in an “active citizenship [that] allowed conservative women’s groups to voice their concerns regarding the welfare and rights of women whilst at the same time successfully avoiding any ‘taint’ of feminism.”³³ Edith Lerrigo, the executive secretary of the YWCA in the U.S., explained in 1960, “We are a women’s movement...this means that the YWCA must help women to see themselves as persons with dignity, integrity, and wholeness: we must show women the great contributions they can make by assuming responsibility and leadership as citizens.”³⁴ However, despite what some would call its feminist positions such as equal pay and the fight for childcare for working women, the YWCA did not challenge the broader concept of women’s domestic role as wife and mother nor embrace the Equal Rights Amendment.³⁵ Rather, the YWCA maintained as its aim “equal opportunity in the realm of education,

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Rhoda Aderer, “A Tradition is Continued by Mrs. Guggenheimer,” *New York Times*, 6 January 1960, 94.

³⁰ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 53-55.

³¹ Ibid., 56.

³² Ibid., 242.

³³ Caitríona Beaumont, “‘Fighting for the ‘Privileges of Citizenship’: the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), Feminism and the Women’s Movement 1928-1945,” *Women’s History Review* (2014): 3.

³⁴ Lynn, *Progressive Women*, 113-114, quoting Edith Lerrigo, “The Edge of a New Chapter,” *YWCA Magazine*, October 1961, 7.

³⁵ Lynn, *Progressive Women*, 117.

work and organizational leadership.”³⁶ Susan Lynn asserts that these middle-class volunteers used the YWCA to pursue “an alternate path to fulfillment...[in their] quest for social justice.”³⁷ It was women’s voluntary organizations, such as the YWCA, that “played a crucial role as a bridge that linked the prewar progressive work of women reformers with women’s activism in the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist movements of the 1960s.”³⁸

The women volunteers in Friedan’s hometown followed this tradition. They strategically taught themselves how to become skilled organizers and leaders and then used those skills to break into leadership positions and engage in meaningful civic work that brought them a tremendous sense of purpose. They operated during what Esther Cohen, a Peoria woman professional volunteer, described as “the golden years of volunteering.”³⁹ Their work in the three decades after World War II enriched not only their own lives and the lives of white and black working women and children, but also the broader community. Two of their most prominent associations were the YWCA and the Junior League.

The Junior League of Peoria

The first Junior League originated in New York in 1901. Two debutantes, Mary Harriman and Nathalie Henderson, organized the League for the “Promotion of Settlement Movements.” They focused on the settlement movement because they asserted it was “one of the most efficient movements of the times to aid in the solution of the social and industrial problems of a great city.” The founders also believed it was a cause to which all of its eighty members could “lend their sympathies irrespective of church or creed.”⁴⁰ Despite its substantive mission, the Junior League has long been mischaracterized as nothing more than a social organization for debutantes.⁴¹ Even those who have challenged the way it has been depicted have often perpetuated the historical stereotype in order to boost its reputation in their new era. In 1980, the authors of the League’s history asserted that its then eighty-year history was a story of the “evolution of the Junior League from a group of very young and very sheltered debutantes into a volunteer powerhouse.”⁴²

One of the primary reasons for this perception is that its membership has, from its inception until the 1980s, been primarily wealthy, white, young women from the most prominent families in their

³⁶ Ibid., 119-120.

³⁷ Ibid., 11.

³⁸ Ibid., 3. See also: Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA 1906-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 17-78.

³⁹ Interview by author with Esther Cohen, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013.

⁴⁰ Janet Gordon and Diana Reische, *The Volunteer Powerhouse* (New York: The Rutledge Press, 1982), 33.

⁴¹ Virginia Lee Warren, “The Junior Leagues Have Grown Up,” *New York Times*, 27 October 1968, 84; Gordon and Reische, *The Volunteer Powerhouse*, 9.

⁴² Ibid., 17.

communities. As the *New York Times* reported in 1976, “for years, Junior Leagues were the elite and the rich, the debutantes and the dilettantes, the elegantly coifed and dressed, the wives and daughters of the ruling class.”⁴³ Because of the upper-class status of its members, newspapers put stories of the Junior League on the society page and downplayed the substance of their activism.⁴⁴ Another reason for its white glove reputation is that the League consistently refrained from joining the feminist strain of the twentieth-century women’s rights movement, even refusing to take a position on women’s suffrage and the Nineteenth Amendment.⁴⁵ The wealth, privilege, and conservative bent of its members, however, never accurately represented the substance of its work.

By the end of its first decade, the Junior League of New York had over 500 members and three other Junior Leagues had formed across the country. In 1921, the growing number of Leagues joined together and founded the Association of Junior Leagues of America (AJLA) with a mission

to unite in one body all the Junior Leagues and to promote their individual purposes, i.e., to foster interest among their members in the social, economic, educational and civic conditions of their own communities, and to make efficient their volunteer service.⁴⁶

Throughout the 1920s and 30s, the organization focused its volunteer efforts on health, welfare, education and improving the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities. “Virtually every project reported by the prewar Junior Leagues addressed the social needs of children, families, or working women.”⁴⁷ During World War I and World War II, Junior Leagues worked with the Red Cross, the YWCA and the Salvation Army and on Liberty Bond campaigns.⁴⁸

The Junior League of Peoria started in 1931 as a Service League “formed to take responsible positions in the activities in the Community.” It became the Junior League of Peoria (JLP) and a member of the AJLA in 1935. Its first projects included providing volunteers for the Dental Dispensary for working families, establishing a Women’s Crusade to “interest all women of the City of Peoria in their civic responsibilities” as well as creating a children’s theater and an art exhibit.⁴⁹ After World War II, the JLP again focused its efforts on attending to the needs of the community. By its twenty-fifth anniversary, the JLP’s fundraising efforts included a rummage sale and an evening gala in order to sustain their civic work providing scholarships for children with special educational needs and paying the salary of a full-time speech therapist in the public schools. The League financially supported and staffed the local Arts and Science Center. With Bradley University and a local television station, it co-sponsored Peoria’s first

⁴³ Mary C. Churchill, “The Changing Junior League,” *New York Times*, 13 June 1976, 346.

⁴⁴ Gordon and Reische, *The Volunteer Powerhouse*, 57.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 10, 56.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁹ Junior League of Peoria, Illinois, *Twenty-seventh Annual Report (1961-1962)*, 6.

public education television program, “Bonjour Amis,” to teach children French. It also held a banquet for Sterling Merit winners, honoring high-achieving high school students.⁵⁰

Harriet Vance Parkhurst was the JLP Volunteer of the Year in 1959, its president in 1960-61, and the epitome of the professional volunteer. During her career, she served as president of the League of Women Voters, the Child and Family Services, and the Tri-County Child Abuse Prevention Council. She was a Board member of the Crittenton Care and Counseling Center, the YWCA, the United Way, and the League of Women Voters. Additionally, she was a member of the American Cancer Society’s Quest Committee, the YWCA Adopt-A-Day Committee, the Executive Board and the Board of Deacons for the First Federated Church, and the United Church of Christ Board for World Ministries, among other positions.⁵¹ She was also Friedan’s best hometown friend.⁵²

Parkhurst and Friedan were friends their entire lives. The two grew up together in Peoria, attended Smith College together, and were roommates in New York City when Friedan began her work as a reporter.⁵³ Harriet Vance moved back to Peoria when she married John Parkhurst in 1946. There she started the Smith Club for all the Smith graduates who lived in Peoria. They considered it a “good old girls’ club.”⁵⁴ They met monthly for lunch and discussed a topic of the day, chosen by Parkhurst. When Friedan came to Peoria to visit her family or when she was writing a new book, she would attend the Smith Club and elicit feedback on her projects, including *The Feminine Mystique*.⁵⁵

Despite this, Friedan ignored the volunteer work of Parkhurst, the other women of the Peoria Smith Club and their colleagues when she wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, although later in life, Friedan publically acknowledged Harriet Parkhurst’s important contributions. In her preface to a new edition of *The Feminine Mystique* in 1997, Friedan wrote that Parkhurst, who had died the year before, had, while raising five children, “championed every community campaign and new cause from a museum and a symphony to Head Start and women’s rights.” She noted that Parkhurst “wasn’t rich and famous [and] had no male signs of power,” but described her as “a woman who *led the community* in nourishing those bonds once silently taken for granted as women’s lot.”⁵⁶ Friedan posited that the reason contributions like Parkhurst’s had been overlooked was because of the phenomenon of the feminine mystique, without acknowledging that she too had disparaged this work.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7-15.

⁵¹ “Obituary: Harriet Vance Parkhurst,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 8 May 1996, available at <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=120038339> (accessed 30 May 2015).

⁵² Scott Hilyard, “Hundreds Gather to Celebrate Woman Who Touched So Many Friends Remember Selflessness and Spirit of Legendary Volunteer,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 14 May 1996, A5.

⁵³ Okeson, “Peoria Friends recall Friedan.” *

⁵⁴ Interview by author with Esther Cohen, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Emphasis in the original. Betty Friedan, “Metamorphosis: Two Generations Later,” in *The Feminine Mystique Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Norton, 2012), 36.

During the 1960s and 70s, the JLP continued to engage in activities intended to promote civic virtue and to educate and train its members to be leaders in their community. It developed health and welfare programs, alcohol and drug programs, adoption services, clinics, convalescent care, and hospital services. It pushed the School Board to provide sex education for public school students. Often it aimed to initiate and develop these programs and then, when fully operational, turn the projects over to the community to sustain them. These activities gave a creative outlet to these women volunteers to use their intelligence and energy to do something that they felt was useful. Their collective work also gave them social capital, making their organizations more powerful and productive.⁵⁷

The Junior League required its members to retire from active service within the organization when they turned forty, although they were encouraged to remain supporters, a term they called “sustaining.” The reason was that the purpose of the League was to train its members to be professional volunteers, to become skilled leaders. Once they were trained they were supposed to take these experiences into the community and serve in additional ways.⁵⁸ And many of them did, their subsequent activities challenging Friedan’s assessment in *The Feminine Mystique* that women volunteers refused to take this next step.⁵⁹ The professional volunteers who left the JLP followed diverse paths. Some of the women, at this point, decided to enter the workforce, using the skills they had developed to pursue paid careers. A number of them went back to university, earned graduate degrees and then embarked on new careers. However, there were some who continued to pursue their volunteer work as leaders in their community. Another quintessential example of the professional volunteer was Sally Page.

Page graduated from Smith College in 1939. She married and moved to Peoria that year. After the war, Page began her volunteer career. She started the Central Volunteer Bureau that organized and helped place volunteers where they were needed. She joined the JLP and won its Volunteer of the Year award in 1947. She served as its president from 1952-54. She helped the JLP establish the Vision and Hearing Conservation Program for the early detection of health issues in children. Her focus on the needs of children led her to become a staunch advocate of birth control and the main force in establishing the Planned Parenthood Chapter in Peoria. She also was the principal force in the establishment of the Peoria Lakeview Museum. She found the land, raised the money, and served as its first Chairman of the Board. In 1968, when Peoria began busing students to comply with court ordered desegregation of its public schools, Page secured volunteers to assist students who needed tutoring and help adjusting to their new schools.⁶⁰ Many in Peoria described Page as the “Grand Dame” of civic engagement for the city.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 19.

⁵⁸ Gordon and Reische, *The Volunteer Powerhouse*, 12-13.

⁵⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 478.

⁶⁰ “Obituary: Sally Page,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 18 October 2011, available at <http://www.legacy.com/obituaries/pjstar/obituary.aspx?n=sally-page&pid=154190729> (accessed 30 May 2015); interview with Sally Snyder, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013.

⁶¹ Conversation between author and her father, Ed Hoerr, Chicago, Illinois, December 2013. Ed Hoerr was born in Peoria, Illinois, in 1935 and lived there for over fifty years.

The women interviewed for this project described how they and their friends who continued their volunteer work outside of the JLP in the 1980s were involved in breaking gender barriers. They fought to serve on community boards for the school district, the hospital, the county, the Red Cross, the United Way and even the banks. All of these were male dominated boards. These women served as the executive director for the community health clinic, Planned Parenthood, and the food bank. Some even ran for public office. They fought their way up in these positions and on these boards, finally serving as the president of some of them by the 1980s. These professional volunteers blazed trails within their communities for women and they made these institutions consider the needs of women and girls in a way they previously had not done. They pushed them to supply birth control and women's health care and childcare. They used their positions to make a difference for women and children in their communities.⁶²

The JLP maintained its exclusive membership and its conservative, nonpolitical stature through the 1970s. It did not admit any nonwhite members until the 1980s.⁶³ There were a few members that tried to move the League into more progressive positions, especially with regard to black civil rights. They took small steps, such as having Frank Campbell, an African American and the president of the Tri-County Urban League come and speak to the group.⁶⁴ But the JLP consistently refused to get involved in the Women's Liberation Movement or the Civil Rights Movement, preferring to maintain its position as a training and service organization rather than an overtly political one. It was innovative in its work, but not radical, although it did work with the more progressive YWCA. The JLP focused consistently on training its white, upper-middle-class members to be effective volunteers to enhance civic life in their community. As Harriet Parkhurst described, the JLP challenged its members to "find within yourself talents you did not know you had." "The training program," she explained, "teaches you all aspects of the community – you also learn to work with people, be cooperative and responsible."⁶⁵

The YWCA of Peoria

The first YWCA was founded in London in the 1850s.⁶⁶ Young, Christian women "of humanitarian bent" began the first U.S. YWCA in Boston in 1866.⁶⁷ Similar women quickly founded additional associations

⁶² Interviews by author with Sally Snyder, Esther Cohen, Zan Ransburg, Joan Krupa, Patty Bash, Carole Ackerman, and Barb Leiter, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013, and Judy Hoerr, Chicago, Illinois, December 2013.

⁶³ Pam Adams, "Junior League Changes Image: White Gloves Off, Group Tries to Diversify," *Peoria Journal Star*, 16 April 1987, page number not available.

⁶⁴ Interview with Judy Hoerr, Chicago, Illinois, December 2013.

⁶⁵ Sharon Oberholtzer, "Junior League: Proud of Serving Others Over the Years," *Peoria Journal Star*, 17 February 1985, B1, 4.

⁶⁶ Steven Rosenberg, "Frank Answers about YWCA," *Peoria Journal Star*, no date, in YWCA file at the Peoria Public Library.

across the East and Midwest, including the Peoria branch in 1893.⁶⁸ Grace Hoadley Dodge established the national YWCA in 1906 in New York as an organization of Christian women that would work *with* (not for) working girls “to advance the physical, social, intellectual, moral, and spiritual interests of young women.”⁶⁹ The national organization consisted of autonomous local associations. One hundred and forty-seven local chapters affiliated immediately, including four associations comprised of African American women. From its inception, the YWCA leadership urged its local associations to racially integrate their membership and to work with and provide social services to young working women of all races.⁷⁰ During its first fifty years, through the end of World War II, it offered social services, education and leadership training to working women and girls in communities throughout the country.⁷¹

During the two decades after World War II, the YWCA fought for both racial integration and international peace. It used educational programs on international affairs to urge support for the United Nations.⁷² It also advanced its own agenda of racial integration and civil rights. In 1946, the YWCA passed an Interracial Charter that included a commitment to desegregate themselves. By 1963, the year Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, the YWCA was fully committed to the push for civil rights. Its student chapters were especially involved in this. They “sponsored voter registration projects, literacy classes, tutoring projects, and conferences on the problems of the inner city.”⁷³ The National Board followed their lead. In 1965 it created the Office of Racial Justice to advance its work on full racial integration, within its own organization and within its communities.⁷⁴ Two years later, in 1967, the national association adopted an amendment that would disaffiliate associations who “were not fully integrated in policy and practice.”⁷⁵ It also elected its first African American president, Helen Wilkins Claytor, who served from 1967-1973.⁷⁶

The Peoria YWCA closely followed the mission of the national association, although its first campaigns were directed at white working women and girls. In the 1890s, the Peoria YWCA fought for labor reforms for working women including minimum wages and better jobs.⁷⁷ It offered classes in French, German, bookkeeping, stenography, and physical fitness. By 1908, it also operated a cafeteria that served lunch to the public. It reached out to young women working in local factories and to improve their working conditions. It also organized girls’ clubs and summer camps, focusing on the needs of the

⁶⁷ Marion O. Robinson, *Women of the YWCA* (New York: National Board of the Young Women’s Christian Association of the USA, 1966), 6.

⁶⁸ “History of the First Fifty Years of the Peoria YWCA,” 1944, 1, in YWCA file at the Peoria Public Library.

⁶⁹ Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-24.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 3; Lynn, *Progressive Women*, 12-13, 39, 67.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁷⁵ Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 177.

⁷⁶ Lynn, *Progressive Women* 147.

⁷⁷ *YWCA brochure*, no date, 1, in YWCA file at the Peoria Public Library.

“under privileged.”⁷⁸ During World War I, the Peoria YWCA increased its outreach efforts. It did offer some classes to young African American women in the area, sponsored clubs for them, and had at least one black woman on its committees. It also included Jewish women as committee members. It worked to secure jobs for girls in the Holt Plant, which later became Caterpillar, Inc. These were the Holt Plant’s first female employees.⁷⁹ It sponsored some of its members to travel overseas to work for girls and women in foreign countries. It established a boarding house to provide a residence for working girls.

After World War I, the Peoria YWCA operated girls’ clubs for both those working in businesses and those working in factories. It also held classes for the unemployed and in 1934, adopted a “policy of no racial discrimination.”⁸⁰ In line with the national organization, its mission became “to empower women and girls and eliminate racism.” Its membership was open “to people of all ethnic, religious, cultural and economic backgrounds.”⁸¹ Such efforts continued later in the century too, although not without some controversy. In the 1970s, the Peoria YWCA sponsored an African American Resource Center, Ashanti Umoja (Swahili for people in unity). There were members of the community who expressed concern about the center and a few board members resigned, but YWCA support of the venture continued.⁸²

During the postwar era, the Peoria YWCA also continued to establish and operate childcare centers, fitness programs, senior services and homeless shelters. It especially focused on the needs of homeless women and children “through several programs designed to help each client obtain the skills and financial means to live independently.”⁸³ These programs included emergency shelters, transitional housing, education and support services for teenage mothers, daycare, and summer camps. It provided “a variety of health, fitness and recreational activities including breast and cervical cancer screening” too. Esther Cohen, a former president, explained that in the 1960s and 70s, the YWCA building “became more like an informal halfway house. It was full of women who could not live alone and yet did not need institutionalization.”⁸⁴ The residents lived there rent free, but engaged in communal chores of cleaning and cooking.

The Peoria YWCA additionally emphasized empowerment of both its clients and its volunteers. It offered leadership mentoring partnerships, peer support for “stay-at-home moms,” and “educational programs designed to help girls ages 6-13 become strong, smart and bold.”⁸⁵ It also offered women who wanted to enter the work force an opportunity for leadership and training. As Susan Frank, the then-executive director, described, “it helps them to be able to get into the business environment and to help them

⁷⁸ “History of the First Fifty Years of the Peoria YWCA.”

⁷⁹ Sarah Okeson, “YWCA Changes with Times to Meet Needs of Community,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 23 October 1994, B1.

⁸⁰ “History,” 8.

⁸¹ *YWCA brochure*, 4.

⁸² Okeson, “YWCA changes with times,” B7.

⁸³ *YWCA brochure*, 2.

⁸⁴ Okeson, “YWCA Changes with Times,” B7.

⁸⁵ *YWCA brochure*, 3.

accept the change from the very traditional role of 'child, kitchen and church' into the working world."⁸⁶ The YWCA affiliated with other community organizations to offer leadership and support including homeless coalitions and welfare-to-work associations. It also allowed community groups to use its facilities for meetings and receptions. The Peoria YWCA was so strong in the 1960s that it raised money, built, and opened a second facility, the Lakeview Headquarters.⁸⁷

Cohen, who as president of the Peoria YWCA had been the driving force behind the new building and many of its programs, was one of the Peoria women who did read *The Feminine Mystique* when it was published, but its message did not resonate with her. She was a member of the Smith Club and related to Friedan by marriage. She explained that she did not feel any pressure to work because she was already so involved in community work. She understood the phenomenon that Friedan described and felt sympathetic for those women, but insists that she was satisfied in her own life because of her volunteer career.⁸⁸ Most of Peoria's female professional volunteers echoed these sentiments.⁸⁹

The Demise of the Professional Volunteer

At the end of the twentieth century, scholars engaged in a debate over the state of civil society. Robert Putnam's important work, *Bowling Alone*, at the heart of these discussions, argued "the vibrancy of American civil society has notably declined over the past several decades."⁹⁰ He attributes this to a reduction in civic engagement. Civic volunteerism had declined for both men and women, but especially among women.⁹¹ The turn away from careers as professional volunteers had a deleterious effect on the civic institutions the volunteers had founded and operated. Many of their endeavors began to fail in the decades before and after the turn of the twenty-first century.⁹² Friedan herself observed this phenomenon and came to a new appreciation of women's volunteer activism. In 1997, she explained that since women had entered the paid workforce in large numbers and women's volunteer work was on the decline, social scientists and politicians were beginning to acknowledge that there was a real virtue in the civic work of the women professional volunteers. These women, through their organizations, she asserted, had provided social welfare that was necessary for the society to flourish.⁹³

⁸⁶ Rosenberg, "Frank Answers."

⁸⁷ "YWCA to Break Ground for Lakeview Park Center," *Peoria Journal Star*, 29 October 1965.

⁸⁸ Interview by author with Esther Cohen, Peoria, October 2013.

⁸⁹ Interviews by author with Carole Ackerman, Sally Snyder, Zan Ransburg, and Barb Leiter, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013, and Judy Hoerr, Chicago, Illinois, December 2013.

⁹⁰ Robert D. Putnam, "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy* 6 (1995): 65.

⁹¹ Thomas Rotolo and John Wilson, "What Happened to the 'Long Civic Generation'? Explaining Cohort Differences in Volunteerism," *Social Forces* 82 (2004): 1091, 1117-1118; Susan Crawford and Peggy Levitt, "Social Change and Civic Engagement: The Case of the PTA," in Skocpol and Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement*, 249-251, 280.

⁹² Crawford and Levitt, "Social Change," 249-251, 280; Jane Eisner, "No Paintbrushes, No Paint," in *Community Works*, Dionne Jr., ed., 75-80; Skocpol, "Don't Blame Big Government," 42-43.

⁹³ Friedan, "Metamorphosis," 35. On the importance of social capital, see also Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 288-89.

This was true in Peoria, especially for the YWCA. In the 1980s, the organization had accrued approximately \$400,000 in debt.⁹⁴ In 1984, it was forced to close its Food for the Hungry program because of inadequate funding.⁹⁵ The Peoria YWCA made a slight recovery, but continued to close and consolidate programs through the 1990s. By 2003, it shut its downtown facility. The local paper called it “the end of an era.”⁹⁶ In 2011, it closed its Lakeview Headquarters and returned the building’s \$3 million mortgage to the bank.⁹⁷ In 2012, the Peoria YWCA filed for bankruptcy and closed down completely.⁹⁸ Its retired president Cohen exclaimed, “I’m horrified, just horrified.”⁹⁹ Although the apparent reason for the closure of the Peoria YWCA was its inability to raise sufficient funds to cover its debt, perhaps the declination of civic engagement was a factor in the failure of its fundraising campaigns.

Fewer women who came of age in the 1980s and beyond followed the career of the professional volunteer.¹⁰⁰ The subsequent generations of the Peoria volunteers represent the shift, as illustrated again by the Page family. Sally Page’s daughter, Sally Snyder, moved back to Peoria in 1963 as a married woman and new mother. She explained that she chose volunteering rather than activism within the women’s movement. She was a member and then president of the Junior League and used the leadership skills she developed to become a leader in the Peoria community. During the 1980s, she fought her way onto many previously all-male boards of important community organizations. She was the first woman on the Proctor Hospital Board, the first woman on the Ambulance Board, and then its first female chair. She was Board Chair of the Health and Education Center. She was elected to the School Board and then became its president. Snyder stated that although Friedan and the Women’s Liberation Movement did not have a direct effect on her life, it permeated the culture and made a difference in the lives of her four daughters. It gave them opportunities and choices she did not have. None of her daughters followed Snyder’s, or their grandmother’s, path as professional volunteers.¹⁰¹

The demise of professional volunteers and the social capital they amassed had some destructive effects on their communities. Their organizations had made it easier to resolve collective problems. Their efforts “grease[d] the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly...[and] widen[ed] out awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked.”¹⁰² As Putnam explains, their social capital and civic engagement made “an enormous difference in our lives.” They helped advance “child welfare

⁹⁴ Okeson, “YWCA Changes with Times,” B7.

⁹⁵ “Hunger Program Runs Out of Funds,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 7 June 1984, B7.

⁹⁶ Steve Tarter, “YWCA set to leave Downtown,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 20 May 2003, A1.

⁹⁷ Pam Adams, “Everyone was Eating and Crying at YWCA,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 1 October 2011, available at <http://www.pjstar.com/article/20111001/NEWS/310019942> (accessed 30 May 2015).

⁹⁸ Wes Schmidgall, “YWCA of Peoria to Close,” *Peoria County New Bulletin*, 16 October 2012, available at <http://chronicleillinois.com/news/peoria-county-news/ywca-of-peoria-to-close/> (accessed 30 May 2015).

⁹⁹ Pam Adams, “Peoria YWCA to Close Due to ‘Dire’ Finances After 118 years,” *Peoria Journal Star*, 3 October 2012, available at <http://www.pjstar.com/article/20121003/News/310039907> (accessed 18 June 2015).

¹⁰⁰ Theda Skocpol, “Advocates without Members: The Recent Transformation of American Civic Life,” in Skocpol and Fiorina, eds., *Civic Engagement*, 481, 486-487, 504.

¹⁰¹ Interview by author with Sally Snyder, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013.

¹⁰² Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 288.

and education; healthy and productive neighborhoods; health and happiness; and democratic citizenship and government performance.” Putnam asserts that this kind of civic engagement “makes us smarter, healthier, safer, richer, and better able to govern a just and stable democracy.”¹⁰³

These professional volunteers also helped lay the groundwork for women’s liberation from outside the movement. What communities lost with the declination of civic engagement by women professional volunteers must be balanced against what communities, families, and individuals gained by women’s increased participation in the paid work.¹⁰⁴ Only in retrospect do some of the professional volunteers acknowledge that Friedan and the Women’s Liberation Movement raised their consciousness and helped change the culture to allow their daughters the choices and opportunities they had been denied. Whether the professional volunteers read the book or identified with it or not, it did influence their lives. This is why Peoria held its celebration for the book’s fiftieth anniversary, but also why, when the program was announced, so many in her hometown asked, “Who’s Betty Friedan?”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, 290.

¹⁰⁴ Discussion between author and Barb Drake, Peoria, Illinois, May 2015; Collins, *The Amazing Journey of American Women*, 408-409.

¹⁰⁵ Interview by author with Barb Drake, Peoria, Illinois, October 2013.