

History of Ossoli Circle Comes to Life

By Wendy Smith

Ossoli Circle, the first women's club in the state, celebrated its 125th anniversary with a drama that showcased the colorful characters who played a role in the club's founding – and ultimately, the rights of women.

Faye Julian wrote and directed “A Company of Builders,” which portrayed an encounter between early members of the circle and feminist Margaret Fuller Ossoli, the club's namesake, who, in reality, died just before founder Lizzie Crozier French was born.

Knoxvillian French was inspired to create a literary society for women after visiting the Sorosis Women's Club in New York City. She wanted women to have something to talk about besides children, servants and ailments.

Her sister, Lucy, was also portrayed in the play. Lucy frequently got into hot water because of a “bad habit of expressing opinions freely.”

Ossoli Circle was founded on Nov. 20, 1885, and eventually broadened its scope to include social, educational and civic activities. The club was named after Ossoli, who is considered to be the first liberated woman and the first founder of a women's club. The transcendentalist writer and speaker hosted group “conversations” for women with the goal of helping them realize their full potential in an era when educational opportunities for them were limited.

The group was called a “circle” because the term “club” was reserved solely for men's organizations, said Stephanie Wayland, who portrayed Lizzie Crozier French in the play. She went on to explain the role her character played in helping women get the vote. The 19th Amendment was one vote away from ratification when it came before the state of Tennessee in 1920. Harry Burn, who had indicated he would vote against the bill, broke the deadlock with an affirmative vote at the request of his mother, who had been influenced by French.

After the play, Marion Bloomer revealed the contents of a time capsule that was buried in the clubhouse lawn during its 100th anniversary in 1985. It was accidentally unearthed in 2008 during a landscaping project, and Bloomer decided to open it to see if it contained paperwork for a

treasury bond that was supposedly included.

When the key didn't work, a sledgehammer did the trick. But the capsule's contents were completely waterlogged – except for the bond, which was in a plastic sleeve. It was purchased for \$986.70 in 1985 and is now worth \$13,000.

Circle members presented Steve Cotham, manager of the Knox County Public Library's McClung Collection, with a scrapbook that chronicles Ossoli's 11-year quest to erect the Women's Suffrage Memorial on Market Square. The statue depicts French along with fellow suffragists Elizabeth Avery Meriweather and Anne Dallas Dudley.

Several officers from the General Federation of Women's Clubs, in which Ossoli Circle is a charter member, were in attendance. GWFC International President Carlene Garner lauded the club's longevity.

“It's 125 years of making life better for your neighbors near and far. You've provided an example of what a fine GWFC club looks like.”

Included by permission of West Side Shopper-News, November 29, 2010