

UI Women's Club Celebrates A Century

From teas to scholarships, group fosters 100 years of community

By John Franch

In 1906, Theodore Roosevelt was president, the University of Illinois had fewer than 4,000 students and the right of American women to vote was still more than a decade away. That year, the remarkable Anna James, wife of Edmund James, then president of the University, is said to have established the University of Illinois Women's Club.

Fluent in four languages and a strong advocate of women's suffrage, the German-born Anna James put together a club that is now celebrating its 100th year. To honor its centennial anniversary, the organization will hold events throughout 2006, starting with "Night of 100 Lights, A Centennial Celebration," featuring desserts, dancing and musical entertainment in the Illini Union Ballroom on Jan. 21. In February, a Valentine's Day celebration will focus on the club's history. Other activities will be announced as the year progresses.

"Our centennial year is a huge milestone," said club president Sandi Thomas. "The anniversary allows us to be proud of our rich heritage which has always promoted friendship and education."

According to the minutes of the first meeting held on Feb. 22, 1906, in the Woman's Building (later renamed the English Building), Mrs. Thomas J. Burrill and Mrs. Stephen A. Forbes called for the organization of "an informal club, the purpose of which should be purely social" for the benefit of faculty women and the wives of faculty. Annual dues were set at 25 cents per member and meetings scheduled for the first Tuesday of every month.

True to the conception of its founders, social activities – luncheons, teas, bridge matches and informational lectures – set the tone for the early years of the club. On Feb. 14, 1911, for example, hostesses wearing large red hearts served members "pineapple ice" and "delicate little cakes in heart and fancy shapes."

By 1915, however, the club's leaders wanted a new purpose, so they created "the Tuesday Tea Loan." The surplus left over from dues was deposited in a fund for "needy girl students." During a 10-year period, the group gave a total of \$2,339 to 76 students, with the loan amounts varying from \$5 to \$50. These

loans eventually became outright scholarships. In 1996, the club set up its first named scholarship in honor of Judith Life Ikenberry, wife of Stanley Ikenberry, HON '02, former president of the University.

The group has not been immune to the forces of history. During the last years of World War I, club attendance dwindled because of the large number of women occupied with Red Cross work. The October 1918 meeting had to be postponed thanks to the influenza pandemic. At the height of the Depression, the closing of the First National Bank of Champaign rendered the club's funds temporarily inaccessible. In 1943 members contributed to the war effort by purchasing Liberty bonds. During the 1960s, when many women returned to school or entered the work force, the club suffered a slight decline in its numbers. Then, in 1975 – "the year of the big change," as the group's then-president called it – the University's affirmative action committee required the club to open its membership to men and to give scholarships to male students as well as female.

The club has withstood the vicissitudes of time and four name changes.

One thing, though, has remained constant. The club has continuously sought to foster a sense of community, perhaps most notably through its various interest groups. These small groups allow members to come together in their homes and explore such subjects as bridge, gourmet cooking and literature.

"Bringing together people from all departments of the University is really what



Photo courtesy of UI Archives



Photo courtesy of UI Archives

At top, the information provided with this late 1960s photo of Women's Club members reveals the scope of the club's offerings: Mrs. John Erickson, seated, music appreciation; standing, from left, Mrs. Ronald Sterkel, third vice president; Mrs. Charles E. King, art appreciation; and Mrs. James Kitzmiller, cosmopolitan. Above, Women's Club members Ann Ellis Campbell, MUP '79 FAA, left, and Pat Smiles Ziebart, MS '05 LIS, sit at an information table at Lincoln Square Mall in Urbana in 2002.

it's all about," a member once explained, and in a sentence summed up the 100-year-long mission of the Women's Club at the University of Illinois.

Franch '89 COM is a free-lance writer living in Champaign.