

Stepford wives need not apply

by Bruce A. Love

On July 13, 1848, five women met for tea in upstate New York. Their conversation turned to the plight of women in America. At that time, women did not have the right to vote, hold elective office, attend college, or even earn a living. If married, they could not make legal contracts, divorce an abusive husband, or gain custody of their children.

While others may have expressed similar concerns over tea, these 5 women galvanized their thoughts into action, and placed an ad in a local paper announcing "a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious conditions and rights of woman." Six days later, the convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. Over 300 men and women attended the convention. Of these, 68 women and 32 men signed what was called the "Declaration of Sentiments," listing a series of grievances against the oppressive male-dominated society. Only one woman attending the convention lived to see the primary grievance rectified by the Federal Government 72 years later.

This week, America marks the 156th anniversary of the convention, and on August 26, America celebrates the 84th anniversary of the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. These events launched a new era acknowledging the contributions and rights of women, and have ultimately produced many new opportunities for women that had not previously existed.

Today, numerous organizations continue to represent the causes and concerns of women. Some have very specific social objectives and are politically active. Others focus on business opportunities, employment equality, and occupational health and safety issues. Two organizations, having local chapters, typify the diverse interests, concerns, and personalities of business-oriented organizations representing women.

The mission of Business Professional Women (BPW) is "to achieve equity for all women in the workplace through advocacy, education, and information." This organization was started in 1919, just before women "got the vote." Unlike some business-

oriented organizations, BPW has elected to place a controversial plank in their platform supporting reproductive rights of women, and fund a Political Action Committee (PAC) that supports only pro-choice candidates. While national membership had been nearly 100,000 in the 1980's, the ranks of BPW have declined, but still number about 35,000, and include both women and men. According to Sherry Saunders, Director of Communications for BPW/USA, one possible explanation for the decline, ironically, is the 1984 Supreme Court decision that opened previously all-male organizations to women. That decision had the unexpected consequence of drawing members away from several "women" organizations.

Another organization representing the interests of women in business is the American Business Women's Association (ABWA). Launched in 1949, their membership has grown to 50,000 women nationally. According to Elizabeth Kennedy, Writer and Public Relations Coordinator for ABWA, their mission is "to bring together businesswomen of diverse occupations and to provide opportunities for them to help themselves and others grow personally and professionally through leadership, education, networking support, and national recognition." ABWA has no lobbying group and supports no political candidates. Helen Ivory, President of the Horseshoe Curve Charter Chapter of the ABWA, indicated that the activities of greatest interest locally include networking events, professional development, and an opportunity to contribute to the community. Of particular interest among many local members is the National scholarship program, which provides tuition assistance.

Great strides have been made to secure and expand the rights and liberties of women. Many organizations have used various approaches to accomplish these objectives. As you consider joining any organization, determine which one(s) best represent your interests and values, and then dedicate yourself to supporting them. For information about organizations representing the interests of women in business, visit the Small Business Administration:

www.onlinewbc.gov/womens_business.html.

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