

CURRENT TOPICS CLUB



I found this photo the other day of the Current Topics Club that was probably taken in the 1920s or early 1930s. It was one of the women's clubs formed in Greene in 1910. Sandy Bryant looked at the photo and said that it was taken on Monell Street between her house and the house next door to the west. It makes sense because Miss Cora Taft lived in Sandy's house and Mrs. Cornell, another member, lived in the house to the west. The names are inconsequential for this article but Miss Race, first row, first one seated, and Miss Taft, top row, second from right, are two who have been identified and because they are teachers and this has some significance to this article, I will mention their names.

The Current Topics Club was a formal affair in the years of the 1920s and 1930s. The women met in each other's homes and always had a serious topic to discuss. Each was assigned a topic on which she was expected to do research in order to present a paper on her findings to the group. The other women often brought their handiwork and were busy bees while the paper was presented. They met late enough in the day so the school teachers could attend. I am sure that they came to the meetings wearing gloves and their best outfits. They were the epitome of decorum.

Look at the photo. All the women are wearing the same type of dress, the same hairdo and eyeglasses. And the three women identified have Miss and Mrs. in front of their names. It would have been very improper to refer to Miss Taft as "Cora" unless you were a close friend or family member. There is a line in the new movie "The Queen" that is amusing and helps you understand the old-school upbringing. Queen Elizabeth II is about to meet the new Prime Minister and is informed that he prefers to be called Tony instead of Mr. Blair. She makes some remark such as "Oh dear."

How things have changed! In just fifty years, there has been such a change in our society. Our manner of dress, speech, things we talk about and the way we obtain our information have changed so drastically that it is mind boggling.

Two contemporary teachers told me of their experiences when they first wore pants to school. Anne Irwin said she began to wear pants when the new elementary schools were built on the East River Road. As a kindergarten teacher she spent a lot of time on the floor with the kids, and pants were more practical. There were some disparaging comments made, but she wasn't told that she couldn't wear them. That was in 1968! Florence Shabus had the same experience and she said that it took her months to get up the courage to wear them and even then, she only wore them when it was very cold out. Only 38 years ago!

Nowadays, the meetings at Current Topics are much more informal. There is a dessert served and over the table there are always discussions about the happenings in Greene. Then someone says, "I guess we better have our meeting. Now, who's president? Who has the program?" The topic this year was on the National Park System and everyone spoke about one of the parks. No more riffling through outdated encyclopedias in the library, these days the information is right at hand on the computer-- complete with photos and today's weather conditions. Research is much easier, though one has to wonder whether the ladies of Current Topics, 1920 might not have had a more in-depth knowledge of their topic because of the comparative difficulties in research and paper-writing. Our approach to information-gathering is much more relaxed: we know it's only as far away as Google.

The outward changes in how we live that have taken place in a very short time can be seen in the microcosm of a small-town ladies' club. We are more informal, we wear what seems comfortable and practical, we have an information superhighway at our fingertips. Still, the goals of the Current Topics Club haven't changed much over the past 100 years: female fellowship and fun, social chatter mixed with scholarship, improvement of self and community.