

Historical Address

Given By

Mrs. W. F. Dowdy

Upon The Occasion of The Cele-
bration Of The Hundredth Anniver-
sary Of The Benevolent Society
Of New Bern, N. C.

May 14, 1937

Woman's Clubhouse-New Bern, N. C.

I felt honored when I, one of the younger members of the Benevolent Society, was asked to make the historical address upon this occasion of the celebration of the hundredth anniversary, and I feel even more honored after studying its history and wonderful work throughout the past century.

Let us think first of the organization itself. The Benevolent Society is a non-sectarian organization composed of representatives of local churches; founded for the purpose of personal philanthropic work in the community.

It was organized on July 4, 1837 and known as the Female Benevolent Society. After its scope of service broadened it was called the Benevolent Society. It is said to have been an outgrowth of an idea brought back from New England by a New Bern woman who married a northern man and visited in his home.

According to Guion Griffis Johnson, of the Institute for Research in Social Science, at the University of North Carolina, following study and investigation along the line of social welfare, it is the oldest charitable organization in existence in North Carolina and perhaps the nation.

The first president was Miss Janet Taylor who later married Mr. William Hollister. On February 3, 1855, the Society was incorporated by the State.

Meetings have been held regularly throughout the years. The constitution (published in 1874) states-- "Regular quarterly meetings of the Society shall be held on the fourth of October, January, and April besides the one on the fourth of July, when all society business shall be transacted." Records show monthly meetings the first Tuesday in each month. Meetings were held afternoons until April, 1927 when voted to meet mornings at 11 o'clock. This was done because there were so many other meetings in the afternoon.

This statement was found in an old paper. "For a few years on account of "war" troubles, the Society was unable to do any work." With this exception, regular meetings and the work of the Society have gone on for these one hundred years. (now 114)

We shall next consider the purpose of the organization.

The preamble of the constitution (published in 1874) states--"The ladies of New Bern, being desirous of attending to the needs of the deserving poor of their sex in their midst, have determined to form themselves into a society for that purpose."

The object as stated in this constitution is; "The object of this Society shall be to assist temporarily, during sickness, stress of weather, or other unavoidable casualty, such "respectable" females as are ordinarily in the habit of supporting themselves by their own honest industry."

As I read the minutes of the Society beginning with January, 1878 as far back as we have recorded minutes, I was interested in noting that the purpose was ever kept before the members. It was so interesting to me that I have brought to you some gleanings from the minutes along this line.

1878-"discussed the propriety of helping unworthy applicant."

1879-"It was enjoined upon the members that in visiting the sick and old and those having no church privileges to read to them the Bible as opportunity may present. This was found several times.

1883-"The usual conversation on the needs of the poor was held." This in almost every meeting.

1892-"The usual discussion of the needs of the poor in their various wards."

1923-All money on hand in Associated Charities turned over to Benevolent Society provided society agree to help wherever help was needed, men, colored people, and wherever needed in city limits. Accepted--had cooperated with associated charities in every way.

1924-Referring to a girl whom Society had helped to educate. "If this society had accomplished only this one result for the past four years its existence would have been justified in the education and uplift of this young woman."

1926-"The regular October meeting after disbanding(so far as meetings--the work always goes on) was held."

1928-"Each case was to be put in the charge of one woman whose responsibility it would be, thus preserving so far as possible, the rule which always holds in this organization. Personal service and the thorough investigations of each case." This occurs a number of times throughout its work. These two ideals of personal service and thorough investigation have been maintained.

1929-"We must respond whenever possible to all worthy calls."

1931-"One of our aims to prevent overlapping--not supposed to give aid without first investigating."

We are all quite familiar with the quotation from our Bible, "By their fruits (or works) ye shall know them." This is true of our organization and by its works we can know it.

Again I have gleaned from the minutes and quote from them to show some of the typical works of the Society throughout the years.

1878-"Mrs. Mitchell resigned the office of Distributor of Wood." This was an important place as one of the great works throughout the years had been the distribution of wood and the records are full of references to this.

1879-"Have decided to add to the work of the Society that of cutting garments to give work to the poor."

1889-"Voted to send Mrs. B---to La Grange for treatment by Dr. Ivey if she should see fit to go." She went and Society paid for the treatment.

1890- Treasurer's report showed "229.36 expended for wood. 94 $\frac{3}{4}$ cords had been distributed to forty-six families.

I shall not give the year but just cite some of the outstanding activities as shown from the minutes.

Mrs. C---paralyzed, four children and left entirely without means of support. "Ladies of ward to look after needs of children."

Society became responsible for part of Mrs. D---'s expense at local hospital.

Sent girl to school for four years including business school, railroad fare, books, etc. Bore part of expense of another girl at same school.

Paid "55.75 for Mrs. W----'s operation.

Furnished crutches and clothing for a boy in orthopedic hospital.

Colored man blind from cataracts provided hospitalization and sight was completely restored.

Aided an old and infirm colored woman.

We note that the work included aid to both races and both sexes now, though the society first aided only "respectable" females.

Paid for a nurse to cook and care for a sick Mother's children while she was in hospital.

"Paid Lucy D---Is younger sister what she got at Kress' to stay with her." She was a T. B. patient.

Paid for school Books.

I have included the disbursements for the year 1925, which will typify the service rendered during a normal year's activity.

Treasurer's Report:

Rents-----	\$749.25
Milk for School-----	98.75
Nursing-----	235.25
Clothing-----	10.95
Furniture-----	8.50
Water & Lights-----	3.55
Tuition-Summer School	19.70
Burial Expenses-----	27.95
School Books-----	26.00

Charity Bed Fund--Collected-----	\$695.00
Distributed-----	\$572.43

Gave two colored patients hospital beds.

Graduating clothing for Mrs. E---'s grandson.

Teeth for Mrs. K---(record of two sets of teeth given.)

Contributed toward operation for child born with hairlip.
Operation successful.

Kept up husband's insurance. He was unable to work
and wife took in sewing.

Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets to old women.

Clothing for deaf and dumb child sent to Morganton.

Mrs. D----Deserted by husband having young children
and they were given groceries.

"Mrs. W----discussed." Twelve children and her husband
making only twelve dollars per week. Was offered
charity bed for confinement.

Helped defray expense of nurse for Mrs. C----and
daughter.

Twenty-five dollars a month toward support of aged
couple.

1928-Treasurer's Report:(Again showing typical expendi-
tures for year.)

Rent-----	\$629.50
Groceries-----	\$201.02
Wood-----	\$344.50
Medicine-----	\$ 66.96
Milk-----	\$ 94.80

Two members appeared before the Board of Alderman to
ask that the Street Force be paid a stated wage rather than
the uncertain way of being paid for only clear days when
they could work. As a result they were supplied with rub-
ber coats, boots, and hats so as not to lose time.

During nineteen months thirty-four cases were given
hospital treatment. One of the interesting things to me
was the splendid cooperation of the local doctors in this
work.

1931-01 Ladies Home established at the corner of Pollock
and Burn Streets known as the Enoch Wadsworth Memorial
Home. The committee to establish the Home was com-
posed of Mrs. John Dunn, Mrs. W. L. Lewis, and Miss

Mamie Hay. Mrs. E. K. Bishop and Miss Mamie Hay are now trustees for the home. Five women are living there now who otherwise would be homeless.

Our next thought is how has it been possible to carry on the work, or how is it financed? I have chosen that as the next topic. It has been financed mostly by private subscriptions. Over and over again we find in the minutes these words, "From Ladies and gentlemen of the wards." These subscriptions have been solicited and collected by "ward managers" to whom we shall refer later. Though no longer called ward managers the members still solicit and collect. We have an "uptown" and "downtown" book now. The collectors say it is such easy collecting for the contributors give so willingly and cheerfully.

I would like today to pay tribute to those who through these contributions have made the wonderful existence and work of this organization possible throughout the century and more.

Another source of income has been the collections taken on the occasion of the Annual Sermon. The eighth article of the constitution states:-"A regular annual meeting of the Female Benevolent Society of New Bern shall be held on the fourth day of July each year when a clergyman of one of the churches alternately shall be requested to deliver an address in his own church in behalf of the Society and a collection shall be taken up in aid of Society fund."

We also have this statement as the closing paragraph of the constitution;- "At a meeting of the Female Benevolent Society of New Bern held the twenty-eighth of June, 1872, it was unanimously resolved to change the time of holding the annual meeting making it January instead of July. This was done from the fact that in July a large number of the citizens were away from home and, of course, the contributions at the annual meeting would necessarily be smaller."

The minutes each year have accounts of the sermon and collection which are quite interesting and I am going to quote a few.

1891-"The collection taken up at the close of the annual sermon was \$40.11, an unusually large amount and the Society feels indebted to Mr. Willis for his excellent sermon which moved so many to contribute.

1906-Collection from Presbyterian church on occasion of annual sermon preached by Mr. Garth, \$62.44.

1909-Collection \$140.00 Sermon preached by Tabernacle Baptist pastor, Mr. Ham, at the Methodist church because the Baptist church was not large enough.

1921-Sermon preached by Mr. Humble at Methodist Church. He made such a stirring appeal to the congregation that at the close the Society was pledged \$800.00

For a while each pastor was asked to have sermon and collection in his church. One has not been held in several years, but it is a fine custom and I hope that we can go back to it.

In 1922 the Society established a Charity Bed Fund. Contributions for this fund came from church missionary societies, the city, and the county. The hospitals allowed charity rates and physicians gave their services free. This fund was discontinued in 1931 and we now have a sick fund. (Since discontinued-all funds in Treasury now)

For a long number of years the Thanksgiving offering of the children of the public schools was turned over to the Society and the Salvation Army for distribution and was used for Thanksgiving baskets. When the lunch room for underprivileged children was started at the school this was turned over to it.

Three Trust Funds have been left to the Society. In 1851 by the will of Michael Lente of New York City it was left three five hundred dollar bonds which is still used as a trust fund. In 1931 Mrs. Enoch Wadsworth left a fund to be known as the Enoch Wadsworth Memorial Fund and used for the establishment of an old ladies home in memory of her husband. This home, as has been stated above, was established in 1931. In 1937 Miss Bettie D. Windley left one thousand dollars to the Society which is to be invested and used as a trust fund.

In discussing finances of the organization it is significant to note that in all the years no money has been spent for salaries or for the upkeep of the organization in any way. Everything collected has been used for meeting the actual needs of the deserving needy.

Now let us consider the people who have carried on the work. Article three of the constitution is as follows; "This Society shall be governed by A First Directress, A

Second Directress, a Secretary, a Treasurer, and ten Managers, two to each ward in town, chosen as carefully as may be from the different religious congregations so as to avoid even the appearance of sectarianism." The duties of officers as stated in this constitution were the same as of any organization.

The duties of the Managers was stated as follows; "It shall be the duty of the Managers to solicit subscriptions from all the ladies, and donations from all the gentlemen in their respective wards and to pay all money so collected to the treasurer. It shall further be their duty to visit the respectable poor of their wards frequently, to acquaint themselves with their necessities, to draw and receipt money from the treasurer, and to apply it to their relief."

I felt that it would be of enough interest to all to give a list of the officers throughout the years and so have listed them. As has been stated before Miss Janet Taylor was the first directress. We have no record between 1837 and 1874 when the copy of the constitution which we have was published.

Mrs. Charles Ivy was First Directress, Miss Harriett Stanly, Treasurer, and Miss Harriette Lane, Secretary. The place for the Second Directress was left blank. (I guess the nominating committee was looking for one.)

The next record was January 1878 when the following were elected. President, Mrs. Charles Ivy, Vice-President, Mrs. Mayhew, Secretary, Mrs. George Allen, Treasurer, Mrs. T. J. Mitchell. The term directress was not used but there is no record in the minutes of why the change to president and vice-president.

1880-President, Mrs. Susan Dudley, Vice-president, Mrs. Henderson, Secretary, Mrs. Allen, and Treasurer, Mrs. Mitchell.

1888-Mrs. James M. Howard elected vice-president succeeding Mrs. Henderson who had served eight years.

1889-Mrs. J. A. Meadows elected vice-president.

1890-President, Mrs. Dudley, Vice President, Mrs. Jenkins, Secretary, Mrs. N. O. Seymour, succeeding

Mrs. Allen who had served twelve years, Treasurer, Mrs. Meadows, succeeding Mrs. Mitchell who had served twelve years.

1892-Miss Olivia Metts elected vice-president.

1893-Mrs. Dudley died. She had served as president for thirteen years. Her funeral was held "at the very hour and place of the regular meeting of the Benevolent Society." (Quoted from the minutes.)

1894-President, Miss Metts, Vice-President, Miss Rachel Brookfield, Secretary, Mrs. Seymour, Treasurer, Mrs. Meadows.

1901-Same officers elected.

1903-November. Miss Metts moved away. She had served nine years. Mrs. K. E. Brinson elected president.

1906-Mrs. T. G. Hyman elected secretary in place of Mrs. Seymour deceased. She had served sixteen years.

1908-Mrs. Brinson died in June. Had served five years. Mrs. M. deW. Stevenson elected president and Mrs. J. C. Whitty vice-president succeeding Miss Brookfield who served fourteen years.

1919-Mrs. Wade Meadows elected treasurer succeeding Mrs. J. A. Meadows deceased who had served twenty-five years.

1924-Mrs. Stevenson after serving sixteen years as president was made honorary president and Mrs. John Dunn president. Others remained the same.

1926-Same officers elected. "Mrs. Dunn being unable to serve actively Mrs. W. L. Lewis was elected as active vice-president to aid Mrs. Whitty."

1927-Mrs. J. C. Whitty elected honorary president after serving nineteen years as vice-president and Mrs. D. F. Jarvis was elected vice-president. In October Mrs. H. C. Waldrop was elected treasurer succeeding Mrs. Wade Meadows who served eight years. Mrs. Clyde Eby elected treasurer for Charity Bed Fund. In December Mrs. W. J. Lucas elected president succeeding Mrs. John Dunn who had served three years.

1928-Mrs. W. C. Chadwick elected treasurer. Served short term. The president now acting as Treasurer.

1930-Mrs. W. P. M. Bryan elected secretary succeeding Mrs. Hyman who had served twenty-four years.

1933-Charity Bed Fund changed to Sick Fund and Mrs. F. H. Whitty elected treasurer of this fund.

1937-Mrs. E. K. Bishop elected vice-president succeeding Mrs. Jarvis who served ten years. In April Mrs. Owen G. Dunn was elected secretary succeeding Mrs. Bryan who served seven years.

Ward Managers were appointed and replaced as necessary.

In tracing the list of officers certain significant things are noted. One is the length of terms of office. Most officers served until their death or their removal from the city. The society would go for several years before electing officers though it was called for at the January meeting of each year. Most of the time officers were not elected until a need arose because of a death or resignation. As stated before there were very few resignations and these few have been in recent years.

Officers were chosen carefully from the different Religious congregations so as to avoid even the appearance of secarianism. As ward managers of members dropped out another was appointed from the same church. This is still done and I have the privilege of being appointed from my church, Cetenary Methodist, to succeed the late Mrs. W. B. Blades.

Another significant thing along the way has been the sort of family succession in the selection of officers and members. For instance Miss Mamie Hay succeeded her aunt Miss May Hay as a "ward Manager", Mrs. Wade Meadows succeeded her mother-in-law Mrs. J. A. Meadows as Treasurer, Mrs. M.deW. Stevenson, a former president, has two daughters in the society now, one of them, Mrs. E. K. Bishop, is Vice-President. There have been three Mrs. T. J. Mitchell's as members throughout the years, and two Mrs. Whitty's. I could go on and on giving illustrations of this but time will not permit.

In this progress of selections of members of this

splendid organization with its wonderful history of service in our city, we find ourselves today to carry on its work and be responsible for what it may do in the years just ahead. We too are making history.

These noble women of the past
Have set for us a glorious task;
To follow the path which they have trod,
To serve mankind, and thus serve God.

We have a wonderful work ahead
To follow this path where they have led;
The path of service to mankind,
With willing heart and hands and mind.

