

Rita Warner

Oral History

2011

Tell me a little bit about your life.

“Well I graduated from high, I did not go to college. I graduated from ‘the school of experience’ I call it. I went to Susquehanna Township in 1954. I had a twin sister. She passed away from brain cancer in 1998. Shortly after that is when they invited me to join the Civic Club. I was married twice before; Greg is my third husband. I have one son, and he is 54 years old. He graduated from Susquehanna Township and Penn State. He is married to a very nice girl named Deb [Rosenberry]. She coached field hockey at Lower Dauphin [school district], and she teaches there as well. My first husband, with whom I had my son, was Ted McKee. We had a house out in West Hanover Township in a very nice community. When I got divorced I moved to the city. I met my second husband at the theater. My second husband, Al Sandness, was from Norway. When we got married we bought a townhouse, and I stayed there until I met Greg. Then I married Greg Warner, who is just wonderful. We had a nice apartment until we found an old house and fixed it up. We like old homes.”

“I joined the club in 1999, but it did not have to do with my sister passing. I was invited to join because my sister and I were very involved in the community. We produced many shows at the Harrisburg Community Theatre. I was Executive Secretary for a while. We volunteered for many things: The Art Association, Keystone State Games, the YMCA...We were involved in anything going on in the city it seems.”

Who invited you to join?

“Let’s see...I think it was Isabel Smith. I think that she was one of my sponsors. The other [sponsor] was Eileen Packer. Isabel was the President at that time, and I was on the Board at Fort Hunter with her. I am now on the Board of The Greater Harrisburg Arts Council.”

What are your passions, and what inspired you to become involved in your community?

“My husband was President of the Historic Harrisburg Association, and I was involved too. I was always fascinated by old buildings, and believed that we needed to save them. The Civic Club of Harrisburg was one building in particular; that I thought was so gorgeous that it just had to be rescued. I was not involved in helping the building to receive its Historic status.”

What was your favorite event at the Civic Club?

“I like the Sunday brunches. I still go to those. I don’t participate in [playing] bridge.”

What about the Sunday Brunch did you love?

“It was the one at Christmas time that was nice. I just thought that it was a nice affair. Karen’s Catering, (she is our house caterer) she did that of course.”

“There were a lot of things that I did when I was the 4th Vice President. I was in charge of the house. We needed to have the electricity brought up to date, because there were fuses blowing every time that we had receptions. Someone would turn on a coffee pot, and a fuse would blow. So I had electricians come in and inspect the wiring and make all of the necessary changes. I had Rick Nisley redo the floor in the ballroom, and later when we discovered that the floor downstairs was all hardwood too, I had him tear up all of the carpeting and refurbish [the hardwood floor]. I also had a new inclinor installed, and was in charge of getting air conditioning for the first floor. I enjoyed the work while I did it. It was a lot of work, but I liked it.”

“There was one crazy experience where we had an opossum. The Packers were working in the yard, and Mr. Packer noticed an opossum entering the building through the roof. So I had to find a wildlife guy to come and get the opossum. [When] that happened again, the Board called me to see who I used to take care of [these] situations...That’s what you do when you are in charge of the house. It’s like your own home. When something goes wrong, you call someone to fix it.”

“I didn’t have any trouble with [repairing] the historic status of the building.... I think that they still have some plumbing problems with the bathrooms, but I think that they are going to be ok.”

Who was invited to the Ice Cream Social?

“The Ice Cream Social was held during the Kipona festival, which is held on the riverfront every Labor Day. I think that they did this at Memorial Day too. You would pay a certain fee, receive a tour of the house, and have ice cream. They did it in 2010, but I think that they did something different this year. To be honest, I think that people paid the five or ten dollars just to come in and sit in the shade for a while.”

What plays did you produce?

“We put on so many. [We produced] a lot of musicals: *Camelot*, *Funny Girl*...The one big one that we produced was *Fiddler on the Roof*. I was Executive Secretary at that time, and [thus] I was in charge of all of the ticket sales. Everyone was begging for tickets all of the time, and I enjoyed the job very much. My sister had gotten me involved after I divorced my first husband. The first [play] that I was involved with was *The Sound of Music*. That was a fun show. Then there were all of the parties. When we would have the opening show, we would have to find a place to have the opening night party, and then at the end we had to have the strike night party. We always made meals for everyone. *Fiddler* was a big hit. In order to thank the cast and crew, we had a big party at St. Steven’s Episcopal Church. They let us use their kitchen, and we made a big turkey dinner for over 100 people. My sister and I did all of the cooking. None of the shows that we produced were performed at the Civic Club. One year we produced *1776*, and we performed it at Founder’s Hall.”

How many members were there when you were active?

“Oh, probably over 200. I know that they are trying to get more members now. They [the Civic Club] need to get more money so that they can keep up with the house. Old houses (keep in mind) need attention to them. Most things go wrong and need updated. I was appointed to the Board in maybe 2000. I served two terms – until I had my knee surgery, and then I couldn’t do it anymore. I used to go to the meetings once in a while. I am a sustaining member, and I belong to the Affiliates, of course. We got them [the Affiliates] involved. Jeanne and Beth got people involved to help get the non-profit status...sometime in the early 2000’s.”

[The Civic Club Affiliates is a separate entity of the Club that exists to increase the Civic Club commitment to the Harrisburg area and operates as a 501(c)(3) organization with separate Bylaws.]

During your tenure, what programs and presentations were offered to the members of the community?

“They give a donation to the city. I don’t know if it is to the fire fighters, but they might [also] give a donation to the park, [Riverfront Park] because they use the park for [automobile] parking. The [stated] purpose is in the book. I don’t know if anyone read that to you. They gave an award to Historic Harrisburg. They always give an award to an entity that takes care of a place – especially a historic place – and has brought it up to standards. Gloria Boyer was the President at that time.”

How do you see the Civic Club fitting into Pennsylvania’s landscape today?

“Well, it is a beautiful setting and it is getting taken care of. I guess that they are getting new grants to help them with that. The gardens are gorgeous there. It’s a beautiful place. I mean, there you are, right on the river; the view is spectacular.”

“I have not been to a meeting in a while, so I do not know what all of their plans are. I used to walk to the meetings, (because I don’t drive) but I had to have a knee replacement about nine years ago, and I became less involved. Gloria Boyer was always good about giving me rides, but I just decided that I could not go as frequently. Also, the meetings are at ten in the morning, and I now get up around ten. I am not too involved in too much anymore. I am involved with the Arts Council, and if someone needs a volunteer, but...I did volunteer with the Ice Cream Social that they had there, but I am kinda taking it easy now.”

What do you believe is in the club’s future?

“I hope that it stays. I hope that it continues, and that they get new members. I think that is what Beth is interested in doing right now, that and trying to get businesses to come and join us. That is what I understand from hearing different people talking. Hopefully they maintain the building and are successful. They are taking good care of the place, and whomever is taking care of the gardens is doing a wonderful job.”

- Original interview edited by Taavi Lehtimäki 2013