

## Sherwin

Belle Sherwin was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the oldest of the four daughters and one son of Henry Alden and Mary Frances (Smith) Sherwin; two of her siblings died in childhood. Both parents were of colonial English ancestry. Her maternal grandfather left New York for Ohio's Western Reserve in 1836. Her father, born in Vermont, migrated to Cleveland about 1860. From modest beginnings in wholesale trade he prospered and, as founder of the paint manufacturing Sherwin-Williams Company, became one of Cleveland's leading industrialists and influential citizens. His oldest daughter inherited his intellectual acuity and executive gifts as well as his devotion to the work ethic. Growing up in an atmosphere of increasing affluence tempered by moral zeal, she early showed signs of charting her own course.

Following primary education in Cleveland's public schools, Belle Sherwin attended St. Margaret's School in Waterbury, Conn. In 1886 she entered Wellesley College, attracted by its stated purpose "to educate learned and useful teachers," and by its dynamic president, ALICE FREEMAN (PALMER), and the faculty of women scholars she had recruited. Among the faculty members who encouraged interest in social reform and served as role models, KATHARINE COMAN, professor of history and economics, was

COMAN, professor of history and economics, was a particularly strong influence on Sherwin. Receiving a B.S. in 1890, Sherwin maintained a lifelong association with Wellesley. Elected a trustee in 1918, she served until 1943 and remained as trustee emerita until 1952. For thirty years she chaired the Building and Grounds Committee, contributing with good judgment and generous gifts to the development of the Wellesley campus.

After graduating from college, Sherwin taught history briefly at St. Margaret's School before pursuing graduate study in history at Oxford University (1894-95). She made a further trial of teaching history at Miss Hersey's School for Girls in Boston, but the constraints imposed on teachers in private schools, combined with her reluctance, since she was financially independent, to limit her choices too narrowly, prompted her return to Cleveland in 1899. She ventured first into social work at Alta House, organizing English classes for Italian immigrants. In 1900 she organized the Cleveland Consumers' League and for several years directed its investigative activities. She became a board member of the newly established Visiting Nurses' Association (VNA) in 1902 and served as chairman of the committee on recruitment and training. Within the next decade, she integrated the VNA into the Cleveland Welfare Federation, upgraded visiting nurse training,

and established a secure place for the visiting nurse in Cleveland's public health system.

Sherwin's reputation as an administrator made her a natural choice to head the war work of Cleveland women in 1917 and to move on rapidly to chairmanship of the Woman's Committee of the Ohio branch of the United States Council of National Defense. She coordinated the activities of sixty women's organizations in carrying out programs of food conservation and production, industrial recruitment, and social welfare. This experience strengthened and disciplined her native talent for what she later defined as "the art of getting things done."

Belle Sherwin's involvement in the suffrage movement began in 1910 when she joined the College Equal Suffrage League during MAUD WOOD PARK's organizing visit to Cleveland. Her welfare activities remained primary, however, until 1916, when a group of wealthy Cleveland women organized a militant branch of the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage which rapidly polarized Cleveland women. In order to provide those antagonized by the extremists on both sides with a forum for rational debate, Sherwin organized the Women's City Club. When her war service ended in 1919, she became president of the Cleveland Suffrage Association and a supporter of CARRIE CHAPMAN

CATT's plan to perpetuate the suffrage coalition until women had mastered the use of the ballot.

In 1920 the National American Woman Suffrage Association reconstituted itself as the National League of Women Voters; the following year, at the first League convention after ratification of the suffrage amendment, Belle Sherwin was elected vice president and chairman of the department charged with training women for their civic duties. From an office in her Cleveland home soon emanated a stream of programs for citizenship classes, instructions on state electoral requirements and on voting, and analyses of political processes. But the poor showing of women in the 1920 and 1922 elections demonstrated that crash programs in civics would not motivate political participation. Sherwin concluded that the lessons had to be learned "from the alphabet upward, and the experience of centuries encapsulated." The necessary psychological reorientation called for the development of innovative methods of political education, a task Sherwin undertook upon her election in 1924 as the League's second president, succeeding Maud Wood Park.

When Sherwin took over, the organization was united in its desire to win a share in governing the country but divided as to methods. Each of its semiautonomous standing committees, which represented the different segments of the

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suffrage coalition, had its own program and specialists. Sherwin saw the possibility of fusing aims and methods. Establishing a residence in Washington, D.C., she made the national headquarters there the functioning center of authority and communications by drawing in previously dispersed activities and systematizing procedures. Since the "art of getting things done" interested her more than specific programs, she directed her conciliatory skills toward achieving consensus on program and policy among the conflicting factions.

The ten years of Sherwin's presidency established the character of the League of Women Voters as a nonpartisan, goal-oriented organization, politically accountable for its policies, and respected for the accuracy and objectivity of the educational materials prepared by its research staff. The institutional structure, educational techniques, and administrative procedures established during this period were largely attributable to her leadership. Under Sherwin, "study before action" became the operative principle of the League. The research and discussion which preceded the formulation of legislative goals and political action to achieve those goals became the means of the members' political education. This decisionmaking process characterized the League's work long after her

education. This decisionmaking process characterized the League's work long after her departure and has largely accounted for its legislative achievements. Sherwin likened the League to "a university without walls . . . whose members enter to learn and remain to shape the curriculum," in the meantime acquiring habits of independent political judgment and disciplined action.

Sherwin's greatest gift as an organizer and administrator was the ability to detect and develop talent. Those who worked most closely with her admired her as a great teacher whose intellectual credentials were evidenced in all of her work. She was a skillful politician, holding together the disparate elements in the organization by a mixture of conciliation and persuasion. Although generous and just, she was a severe taskmaster and impatient with trivialities. She possessed both dignity and style, and wore easily the mantle of authority; none doubted that her quiet self-assurance masked a resolute and forceful character.

In 1934 Sherwin was succeeded as president of the League by MARGUERITE WELLS. That year President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her to the Consumers' Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration; she was also appointed to the Federal Advisory Committee of the United States Employment Service.

Despite long absence, Sherwin never ceased identifying herself as a citizen of Cleveland. In

1942 she sold her Georgetown home and returned to her native city. Still intellectually vigorous and active, she divided her time during the next decade between Winden, the family estate at Kirtland, and a townhouse she designed. Her final years were shadowed by ill health. She died of bronchopneumonia at her Cleveland home at the age of eighty-seven.

[The League of Women Voters of the U.S. Records in the Manuscript Div., Library of Congress, contain official minutes, letters to state presidents, and speeches during her presidency, as well as correspondence with League officers and others. A small collection of materials is in the Belle Sherwin Papers at the Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College. Articles about Sherwin's work appeared in the League's *Woman Citizen*, 1919-23 and 1926-27, and *Woman's Journal*, 1928-31. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *Cleveland Press* gave generous coverage of her career from 1917 to her retirement. Other printed sources include Virginia Abbott, *The History of Woman Suffrage and the League of Women Voters in Cuyahoga County, 1911-1945* (1949); Irene M. Bowker, *Public Health Nursing in Cleveland, 1895-1928* (1930); Avis D. Carlson, "Trail-Blazers in Citizenship," *Survey Graphic*, Sept. 1945, a brief history of the League; Florence Converse, *Wellesley College: A Chronicle of the Years 1875-1938* (1939); Jean Glasscock, ed., *Wellesley College, 1875-1975: A Century of Women* (1975); J. Stanley

Lemons, *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (1973), which contains a useful bibliography; and *How Ohio Mobilized Her Resources for the War: A History of the Activities of the Ohio Branch, Council of National Defense, 1917-1919* (1919). For family background see the autobiography of her nephew, Orville Prescott, *The Five-Dollar Goldpiece* (1956). Obituaries appeared in the *N.Y. Times* and the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, July 10, 1955. Sherwin's niece, Sarah Prescott Michel, furnished a genealogy of the Smith-Sherwin families and valuable personal reminiscences. Additional information about the League years was provided by Julia H. Carson, Beatrice Pitney Lamb, and Marguerite Owen. Death certificate supplied by Ohio Dept. of Health.]

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