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## The Portfolio Club: A Refuge of Friendship and Learning

Constance Carroll

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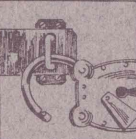


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# The Portfolio Club: A Refuge of Friendship and Learning

BY CONSTANCE CARROLL

A CALLING-CARD case of white suede, embossed with the monogram “PC”, lies among the manuscripts in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections at Syracuse University. In the late nineteenth century, a middle-class lady might have carried a case like this, opening it to present her card to a servant before engaging in that genteel ritual known as the social call. But the monogram on this case, with its finger smudges and matted nap, stands for Portfolio Club, a women’s study circle founded in 1875 in Syracuse, New York. The case contains not calling cards, but two tiny, gilt-edged booklets that bespeak a more intellectual intention: one booklet provides a historical overview of the Club’s first twenty-five years; the other outlines the Club’s presentation topics for 1900–01.

In 1991 the Portfolio Club still thrives. Despite the social upheavals of our century—especially the evolution of the role of women—the Club has maintained its intellectual vitality, while preserving a quality of graciousness that reminds one of a time long past. In 1990 the Club gave Syracuse University its archives from its founding through 1978.

The Club began in October 1875<sup>1</sup> in the aftermath of a conference held at the Wieting Opera House<sup>2</sup> in Syracuse by the Association for the Advancement of Women. Founded in 1873, the Association sought “to discover practical methods for securing for women higher intellectual, moral, and physical conditions for the purpose of improving social and domestic relations”.<sup>3</sup> It had its roots in an ideology that has since been

1. In the Club’s minutes for 1974–75 is a poem by Bette Maltby, excerpted here, that characterizes those times:

Societies for women then were virtually unknown  
For they were just emerging from the home  
Which had held them tight, not allowed to roam,  
Their intellects ignored, talents obscured,  
“Rights for Women” was just beginning to be heard.

2. The Wieting Opera House was a cultural center in Syracuse. The building, which faced Clinton Square, was rebuilt three times after being destroyed by fires in 1856, 1881, and 1896. In 1930 it was demolished.

3. Deborah Pickham Clifford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (Boston: Little Brown, 1979), 201.



Mrs. W. H. Niven (Miss Amelia L. Didama), the first president of the Portfolio Club.  
(Photos in this article courtesy of Syracuse University Library.)

labeled domestic feminism.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the contemporary women's suffrage movement, domestic feminism emphasized women's nurturing, intuition, and sensitivity. According to this view, women were the moral guardians of the home. Whereas the suffrage groups rejected this traditional image of women, the Association encouraged women to build on it by forming groups to strive for the betterment of themselves and society.

The conference attracted women from various parts of the country. Speakers included Antoinette Blackwell, a physician who discussed women in the medical profession, and Julia Ward Howe, author and reformer, who urged her listeners to establish voluntary groups for self-culture in which they could pursue "whatever study or course they considered important to the times or to themselves".<sup>5</sup> One young Syracuse woman later wrote, "The congress was not intended to be a gathering of

4. Daniel Scott Smith, "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America", *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. Mary Hartman and Louis W. Banner (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

5. Bette Maltby and Preston Mitchell, *Portfolio Club, A Goodly Heritage: 1875-1975* (Syracuse: Hall and McChesney, 1975), 6.

radicals [i.e., suffrage supporters], but of awakened and intelligent minds: a preparation for tackling greater issues".<sup>6</sup>

This was an era in which middle-class women began to have enough leisure for such pursuits. Because of the influx of immigrants, many of them had domestic servants to cook, clean, wash, iron, and sew. The wife, as female head of household, still had to supervise the help, plan the daily menus, manage the household finances, take care of the children, and attend to elderly relatives residing with the family. Even so, she now had more time to devote to social causes and self-development.

Not long after the Association conference, nine Syracuse women met "to effect the organization of a society for more thorough culture and education in art".<sup>7</sup> These women were young, single, white, native-born Americans who came from rather affluent families associated with Syracuse University and with the city's manufacturing companies, banks, law firms, and churches. Although they had not gone to college, they had all attended private sketching and drawing classes taught by a public school art teacher, Mrs. Mary Dana Hicks, a woman described as "an inveterate scholar who never considered her education complete".<sup>8</sup> She had encouraged them to attend the Association conference, and it was she who proposed they form a club to study art history under her tutelage. Appropriately, they chose the name Portfolio Club.

In 1900 a Club historian wrote:

Without a doubt the spirit of the times would have been against any other subject as dangerous or revolutionary. There was a great apprehension lest such young women should become strong-minded. They could study art without stepping over the bounds.<sup>9</sup>

Although a departure from traditional domestic concerns, art was considered an appropriate area of study for women because it made them better able to enhance the aesthetic quality of their homes.

Members held meetings at each other's houses on Monday afternoons, because they had fewer social engagements on that day. In the late nineteenth century, mothers and daughters spent considerable time making the social calls necessary to maintain their family's status. But on

6. Ruth Huntington Sessions, *Sixty-Odd: A Personal History* (Brattleboro, Vt.: Stephen Daye Press, 1936), 98–102.

7. L. P. Brown, *The Portfolio Club Our Fifty Years: 1875–1925* (Syracuse, 1925), 7.

8. *Goodly Heritage*, 7.

9. *Our Fifty Years*, 9.

Mondays the young women were free to pursue their own interests, while their mothers spent the day “directing those who washed the clothes and scrubbed the floors and polished the kitchen coal range”.<sup>10</sup>

Mary Hicks and the original nine members developed the early programs. However, they sought the expertise of Julia Ward Howe in setting up administrative aspects of the Club. She corresponded with them, as she had with other newly formed women’s clubs, advising them on the creation of a constitution, by-laws, and an organizational structure. Within three years the Club, stating its goal to be “aesthetic culture”, applied for and received a Certificate of Incorporation from the State of New York.<sup>11</sup> “So bold was this venture”, wrote a Club historian, that “letters of inquiry came from many places . . . asking for the Club’s actions and successes (if any), for Portfolio was a kind of Santa Maria on the sea of discovery to the new world of woman’s future”.<sup>12</sup>

The meeting cycle began in early October and ended in late March. A typical early meeting began in mid-afternoon with a reading on art history, followed by discussion. Two members would then read essays they had written, often using reproductions of art works to illustrate their topics. There would be an interval of music, played by members, and refreshments.

“With the ardor of youth”, wrote Mrs. L. P. Brown, “the Portfolio Club took itself very seriously and members in the early days were promptly notified of all short comings”.<sup>13</sup> The Club imposed fines—five cents for being tardy, ten cents for being absent, and five dollars for not presenting an assigned paper. Mrs. Brown added, “Men are rather inclined to smile at us for this feature of our Club life and we can scarcely blame them. Fancy a man voting to impose a fine upon himself!”<sup>14</sup>

Mrs. Hicks created a curriculum based on a text by the German art critic Wilhelm Lübke, which was enforced for ten years by Club presidents. The women studied art history terms and pronunciation, the biographies of artists, and six areas of art criticism: invention, composition, design, chiaroscuro, color, and expression. For the first few years, members were required to prepare abstracts at the end of each year’s program. This procedure was later abandoned in favor of an annual quiz that tested their comprehension of the material presented. These examina-

10. *Goodly Heritage*, 8.

11. Certificate of Incorporation, 27 February 1878, Portfolio Club Papers, Box 1.

12. *Goodly Heritage*, 8.

13. *Our Fifty Years*, 8.

14. *Ibid.*, 8.

- 1477-1576 *Venetian*
7. Titian-dates? From what *school*? What the principal element of that school? Influenced by what fellow artist? Whence did he seek inspiration? *Nature*. How may his works be divided? Give examples? His favorite theme? *What* may be said of his followers? *Free fr. mannerisms*.
  
  - 1478-1511. *Historical Ideal, Portraits.*  
8. Giorgione-dates? How may his works be divided? Principal elements? Do many of his works remain? *few*. Was his influence extended? *Life & scholars & adopted other influences than some others.* A poem of his life by whom? *Swart Stern*.
  
  - 1530-1588
  9. Paul Veronese-dates? His masterpiece? *St. Sebastian - noted quest to Titian for coloring. Nat., Mythological, allegorical portraits.*
  - 1512-1594. *Colonis of Titian, Drawing & Angelo.*  
10. Tintoretto-dates? What his motto? Was he successful? *at first but not later.*
  
  - 1581-1641
  11. Domenichino-dates? Why did he leave Rome? *Arrivals.* His masterpiece? *Communion of St. Jerome* *harshly persecuted*
  
  - 1575-1642. *Insolent, gambler.*  
12. Guido Reni-dates? Disposition? *rather consistent, methodical independent life or interest.* His characteristics? His masterpiece? *"Aurora"*
  
  - 1615-1673
  13. Salvator Rosa-dates? How was his youth spent? *Banquet.* How did this influence his landscapes? *Peculiar landscape.*
  
  14. Who was the father of modern painting in the North? *Van Eyck.* How did he compare with contemporary Italian artists? *Fin* Why was painting slower of development?
  
  - 1450-1495
  15. Memling-dates? One noted work? *"Shrine of St. Ursula."*
  
  - 1444-1531
  16. Matsys-dates? What work of his at Windsor? *"The Misers."* *Blacksmith artist*
  
  - 1494-1533
  17. Leyden-dates?

Page from an examination dated 22 April 1885.



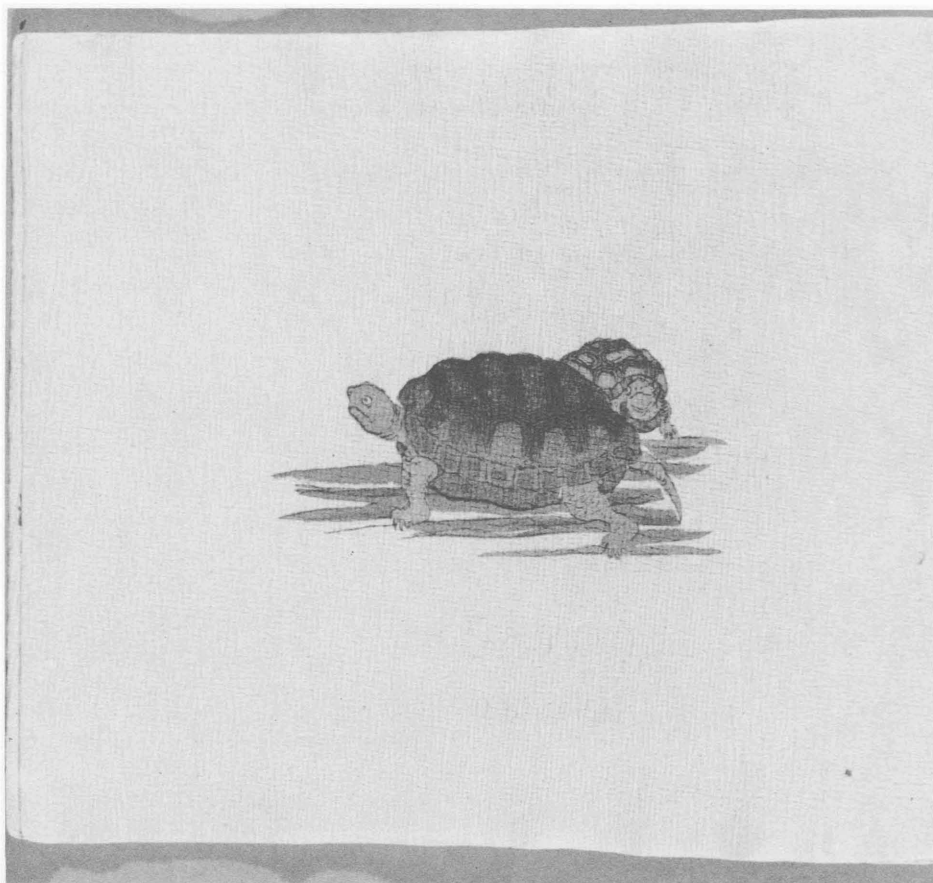


Illustration from the program for “Japan, the Sunrise Empire”.

tions comprised seventy to eighty-five short questions (with subquestions) that demanded good memory skills, the ability to compare and contrast artists’ styles, and an overall understanding of the year’s art history program. The examinations were four or five pages of typed legal sheets attractively tied together with ribbons.

Although the tests were pleasing to look at, preparing for them was not, apparently, as pleasurable. One member observed that “between the examinations and the rigors of studying art history during the Club’s first ten years, the Portfolio Club nearly expired”.<sup>15</sup> In her account of

15. *Our Fifty Years*, 12.

# PORTFOLIO CLUB

OF

SYRACUSE, N. Y.



TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR

1899-1900.

Title page from the program "Japan, the Sunrise Empire".

the early years, Mrs. L. P. Brown recalled that some members couldn't remember the material no matter how many notes they took, and others

were so busy in the spring with their house cleaning and dress making that they were really forced to forego the quiz. . . .

None of us original members were college-bred and you later members who have had the higher education can never know what Mrs. Niven [the 1881-82 president] endured in trying to pull us up to your plane or what it cost us to be thus pulled.<sup>16</sup>

16. *Ibid.*, 12-14.

During the ensuing years, a “storm of conflicting opinion” about whether to continue studying Lübke grew:

Now Lübke’s History of Art is no doubt perfectly authentic, but so, you know, is the unabridged dictionary. We read Lübke meeting after meeting, administration after administration; and I must say, to put it mildly, that we didn’t find him madly and absorbingly interesting.<sup>17</sup>

The president for 1886–87, Miss Hattie Curtis, “with leave from no one at all”,<sup>18</sup> announced that the Club would now study the history, geography, government, and culture of England. It was as though, having dropped their crutches, they realized they could run. Thereafter, each president-elect was allowed to choose a topic for the following year. Having acquired a taste for “travel”, the women successively studied Germany, Russia, France, Spain, America, Scotland, and Holland.

The president would develop a syllabus and a list of recommended readings, and assign to each member a paper topic. In delivering their papers,

some chose to develop their material pedagogically, some with humor, some in the manner of a story teller. . . . some waxed poetic, some delivered their theses without benefit of notes. . . . Whether the papers were too long or too short, each member [was] assured of an appreciative hearing . . .<sup>19</sup>

The annual program booklet became the signature of each president. The program for Scotland pictured a hand-painted thistle. Others featured architectural drawings, Gibson girl-type sketches, and paintings of foreign flags. In 1899–1900, the president’s topic was “Japan, the Sunrise Empire”, and she commissioned rice-paper booklets with hand-tinted drawings and paintings to be done in Japan. Considerable time and money from membership dues were expended on this exquisite piece of artwork.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Portfolio Club, each member received the suede calling-card case with the monogram “PC”. The program for 1900–01 was “Popular Questions of the Day”. The assigned topics and presenters’ names follow:<sup>20</sup>

17. *Ibid.*, 11.

18. *Goodly Heritage*, 10.

19. *Ibid.*, 20.

20. Portfolio Club Papers, Box 6.

The Inheritance of the English Speaking Race	Mrs. Ethan Curtis
Paris Exposition	Miss Pitkin
Great Colonizers	Miss Gardner
Book Review	Miss Spencer
Heroes of the Nations and their Influence on National Character	Mrs. Whitney
Woman's Influence in Developing the Heroes of Nations	Mrs. Stearns
Makers of History	Mrs. Barrett
Current Events	Mrs. Smith
Retrospect	Mrs. Brown
Reminiscences	Mrs. Jones
Life of the Modern Art Student	Miss Barber
Retrospect	Miss Gardner
What Club Life has Done for Women	Mrs. Helen Hiscock Backus of New York

By 1900 the Club had changed considerably. There were college-educated women, including graduates from Oberlin, Smith, Wellesley, Wells, and Mount Holyoke. Most of the original members had married, and about this time the membership committee began to require that letters of recommendation describe the husband's occupation; the membership roster listed husbands' names, followed by the members' first and maiden names in parentheses. The married women, however busy with household responsibilities, continued to participate actively in the Club and most remained in it for the rest of their lives.

By the turn of the century there were thirty members, the agreed limit for membership, and the Club became quite exclusive: an applicant needed five letters of recommendation from active members, and the entire group voted to accept or reject her. Two or more "no" votes were sufficient for rejection. Throughout the Club's history the maiden and married names of the members have remained predominantly of English origin. The membership rosters contain few Irish, Eastern European, or Mediterranean surnames; and no blacks have been members.

However, there has been a wide range of ages; in some cases mothers and daughters have been members.

The women who started the Portfolio Club in 1875 were sensitive to the criticism that women's clubs took too much of their time away from home. In 1900 the members discussed this criticism and concluded that, on the contrary, Club activities restored the members, giving them more energy for their families. In a newspaper article from about 1906, one member characterized the Club as a "homekeeper's college",

and to it she goes for the inspiration which comes from association with others having a common interest. It is not a small matter to be able to read aloud with intelligence, nor indeed to be a good listener; it is something worthwhile to know where to look for knowledge upon a given subject, and to compile and condense such knowledge within the limits of an afternoon's study. It is quite worthwhile to bring out a timid woman and by imposing Club duties upon her to discover her to herself and her associates as a capable and resourceful being.<sup>21</sup>

"The spirit of the Club", said Mrs. Brown, "is something which influences us to give of the best that is in us, to be ourselves without fear of criticism; and this I believe to have been our greatest good".<sup>22</sup>

What the Portfolians saw as vital in Club membership supports the conclusions drawn by Karen Blair in her 1988 book *The Clubwoman as Feminist*. She described women's clubs as an American institution that has fostered self-expression and self-education, and offered members the "rewards of sisterly communion".<sup>23</sup>

Programs after 1900 continued to demonstrate a spirit of graciousness and intellectual adventure. The following excerpts from retrospective accounts and programs provide glimpses of the Club's activities during the next seventy years.

#### 1910-11: "Dixieland"

In the springtime Mrs. Walrath entertain[ed] the Club at a southern luncheon in her Chittenango home. . . . On one occasion, lovely Mrs. Albro[,] who had recently celebrated her 80th birthday [and] had been the recipient of 80 carnations sent

21. Cited in *Our Fifty Years*, 29-30.

22. *Ibid.*, 23.

23. Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Homes and Meier, 1988) 17.

by the Club[,] was ushered in dressed in a quaint silk gown, lace kerchief, high shell comb and lace shawl. For an hour she sat and told of her experiences many years before in the South.

One evening in January, Mrs. Stearns opened her home for a large company of guests. "The Songs of the South" was the subject of Mrs. Sauber's paper and it was beautifully illustrated by Mrs. Ruth Burnham who sang war songs, camp meeting melodies, Negro spirituals and crooning lullabies. Mrs. James Eager sent from the South large quantities of gray moss with which to decorate the rooms.<sup>24</sup>

1920-21: "Greater New York"

[We studied] its history, literary life, opera, parks, architecture, shipping, colleges, its Wall Street, its water supply and its ghettos.

In October the Club celebrated its 45th birthday with the help of Mrs. Dey who presented each member with a rose in honor of the event. Mrs. Archbold, in her report of the Christmas party which was held at Mrs. Brockway's, said, "It was one in which the decorations and the program made a perfect whole with the pageant of the steaming wassail bowl held aloft, the tender legends of the Christmas rose, and the beautiful carols sung by Mrs. Donald M. Dey will long be remembered."<sup>25</sup>

The Program for 1930-31 was "Our Heritage: A Study of Early American History in Relation to Present-day Problems".<sup>26</sup> Below is a list of weekly topics and presenters:

A Visit to Oberammergau	Mrs. McChesney
The Old Dominion	Mrs. Robertson
Life on Colonial Plantations	Mrs. Dey
Appalachian Americans	Mrs. Hudson
Puritan Ideals in the New World	Mrs. Allibone
The Yankee and His Ancestors (guest lecture)	Dr. Burges Johnson
Maryland	Mrs. Salisbury
Through Southern Doorways	Mrs. Lewis
Henry Hudson and His River	Mrs. Broad
The Coming of the Dutch	Mrs. Smith

24. *Our Fifty Years*, 38-39.

25. *Ibid.*, 47-48.

26. Portfolio Club Papers, Box 7.

The Huguenots in America	Mrs. Swartz
Christmas in Early American Homes	Mrs. Amerman
Program [unspecified]	Mrs. Bostick
The Beginning of American Art	Mrs. Holden
William Penn and the Quakers	Mrs. Ida Bond
The Birth of American Literature	Mrs. Abeel
Comparison of Northern and Southern Religious Life	Mrs. Brewer
Beginning of Education in the North	Mrs. Dooley
Beginning of Education in the South	Mrs. Stimson
Manners and Morals of Old New England	Mrs. Taylor
Our Debt to the Indian and the Negro	Mrs. M. J. French
Our Colonial Grandmothers at Home and in Business	Mrs. Archbold
Swedish Emigrants	Mrs. Bond
The Scotch-Irish	Mrs. MacWilliams
Stage Coach and Tavern Days	Mrs. Charles Gere
Colonial Ships and Sailors	Mrs. Jones
Homes and Gardens Along the Northern Highway	Mrs. Wiley
The Development of American Pottery as Presented at the Josiah Wedgwood Bi-Centenary	Mrs. Salisbury

#### 1940-41: "New Horizons in Living"

During the year our thoughts centered on many serious problems in this new world of ours. Among the subjects presented were: "Parenthood and the Family," "Youth," "Housing," "Education," "Women in Business," "Columnists and Commentators," "The Automobile," "Industrial Arts and Vocations," "The Pageant of Electricity."<sup>27</sup>

1950-51: "This is Our Century. What Shall We Make of it?"

The introductory topic was "Man's Struggle for Good over Evil". . . . Fundamental to this aim [peace] is an understanding of other lands and cultures. One of our programs explored the

27. Louise K. French, *The Portfolio Club Our Ten Years: 1935-1945*, 10. Portfolio Club Papers.

ways such ends . . . are being attained. . . . The year ended on a note of personal responsibility. Since world wars are only projections of conflicts in the souls of modern man, to have peace we must begin with the individual.<sup>28</sup>

#### 1960–61 “Africa in the Modern World”

The papers that year told the story of the emergence of new nations, and emphasized the fact that in their transition from empire to freedom they were still only a step away from deeply imbedded superstition and economic underdevelopment. A hatred for the white man, so inextricably mixed with the evils of colonialism, persisted and strengthened the ideal of Africa for the Africans. The great natural resources of that country will not be properly utilized, said Portfolian speakers, without foreign aid in the persons of teachers, doctors, engineers.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Club never took an activist position on suffrage, topics relating to women’s issues often appeared. After the enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment, a member read a paper entitled “The Woman Voter: Her Privileges and Responsibilities”. A 1929–30 paper, “Our Feminists” traced the role of women in the family and society from Biblical times to 1929. The 1952–53 theme, “The American Woman”, brought forth papers on women’s rights, the complex role of career women, the feminine side of a masculine civilization, and education for women. According to Mrs. Preston Mitchell, “So much was said pro and con on these subjects that no one can accuse Portfolio of being passive in the interest of her sex”.<sup>30</sup> In 1970–71 members explored equal opportunity and equal pay, child care, abortion on demand, and careers hitherto closed to women.

Although the Portfolio Club was never a philanthropic organization, the membership at times sponsored charitable activities. While listening to presentation papers, they prepared bandages for World War I soldiers and provided financial support for an orphan in France. During World War II they made regular contributions to the War fund. Other benevolent activities included contributing to the Syracuse Young Women’s Christian Association, making annual donations to the Syracuse Christmas Bureau, and sending memorial gifts to the families of deceased members.

28. Preston Mitchell, *Portfolio Club: 1945–1955* (unpaged).

29. *Goodly Heritage*, 66.

30. *Portfolio Club: 1945–1955* (unpaged).



Presidents sought programs that would inform but not be overly provocative. They chose not to delve into the social, political, and economic upheavals of their times. Mrs. Mitchell explained that “this was not because Portfolians were unaware of them, but devotion to each year’s program brought . . . a welcome interval of release from the complex and distressing confusions . . . in the world about them.”<sup>31</sup>

“Friendship”, declared a member, “has continued as [the Club’s] guiding principle and is the reason for Portfolio’s firm and gentle hold on its members. ‘Portfolio spirit’ is a phrase often used; it means warmth and tolerance and acceptance not always found in the world about.”<sup>32</sup> In 1923 the Club was described as a place where

harmony has always prevailed because we have avoided politics and sectarianism. No one cared whether the member sitting next to her was a Democrat or a Republican, a Baptist or a Unitarian; but we have always studied the great principles of Christianity and the vital questions of the day.<sup>33</sup>

The affection members feel for each other and for the group has continued over the decades. In 1991, a member said that for her the Club is a refuge where she is replenished by the support of the members.<sup>34</sup> Another member who has been in the Club since the 1950s described it as “a serious group of splendid and inspiring women. When a woman presents herself at a meeting, she is at her best. The sharing of the members is an outstanding part of my life and the glow it gives never diminishes.”<sup>35</sup>

The Club has remained an elite organization with a restricted membership and a formal program structure. The Portfolians now meet twice each month for a long luncheon. Only one paper is read, a process lasting from thirty minutes to more than an hour. Yearly program topics continue to be as diverse as the interests of the presidents. Some recent topics have been: “Rivers of the World: Their Contribution to our Heritage”, “Art in the Young Republic”, “The Designing of America”, “Legendary Faces, Legendary Places: Legend as Man’s Link with the Past”, “Quality of Life in the 21st Century”, “Middle America: A Mo-

31. *Goodly Heritage*, 14.

32. *Ibid.*, 19.

33. *Our Fifty Years*, 29.

34. Interview with Sandra Holcombe, 20 March 1991, Syracuse, N.Y.

35. Interview with Barbara Cassel, 13 June 1991, Syracuse, N.Y.

saic of People, Places, and Cultures”, and “Resetting the American Table: Creating a New Alliance of Taste and Health”.

The Club has never joined any national movements. It has never sought publicity, nor has it lacked members. The Portfolio Club has kept itself apart, preserving its enthusiasms and affections like flowers under a Victorian bell jar.