OPTOMETRY'S CLUBWOMEN: THE AOA WOMAN'S AUXILIARY

Fig 1. Dr. Catherine Marks.
From: History of the Woman's
Auxiliary, 1952.²

The Woman's Auxiliary (WA) to the American Optometric Association was one of many organizations born out of the Women's Club Movement of the late nineteenth century. In the Victorian era, middle-class women held moral authority in the domestic sphere, their virtue serving as evidence of family "respectability."¹ Well-educated women deftly leveraged this private power into social capital outside the home, creating organizations that promoted the "public good." In this way, they led not only by example, but also through action. In the Progressive

Era, volunteer women's clubs proliferated, conducting fundraising campaigns, creating educational initiatives, and organizing public health and social welfare programs. By the 1930s, "clubwomen" forged powerful networks across the nation, wielding significant political influence.

The WA was first proposed to AOA President Walter Kimball in 1926 by Dr. Catherine R. Marks of Harlan, KY. (Fig. 1) Marks was "convinced" by her long experience as a member of the National Federation of Women's Clubs that an organization of women relatives of optometrists would prove a powerful force for promoting the profession: "members of a Woman's Auxiliary would function as channels of information and keep before their local clubs matters pertaining to eyesight."² Marks noted that the American Medical Association used women's clubs "for propaganda" and asserted: "What is good for medicine is better for Optometry because we need help more."

The 1929 WA constitution defined it as a "progressive" organization which would act "as a medium through which to present to such bodies as Parent-Teacher Associations, Civic and Welfare Leagues, ... and Professional and Business Women's Clubs." The Auxiliary focused first on outreach to school teachers, mothers, and those concerned with "visually handicapped" children (Fig. 2) as child welfare was considered "the natural interest of womankind."²

Fig 2. The Auxiliary Emblem, adopted 1947.
Stamp in black ink.²

The WA was organized like the AOA, with membership in the state body conferring membership in the national one. The Auxiliary met annually in conjunction with the AOA Congress (Fig. 3), by mid-century counting 44 affiliates and earning its own booth in the exhibit hall. The WA was the AOA's first charitable organization with a broad mission to increase public awareness of optometry, provide education about eye health, support optometry students, fund research and

Fig 3. The Woman's Auxiliary AOA Congress ribbon, 1954.
Satin and silk embroidery.
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increase access to eye care. To this end, Auxiliary members at the state and local level organized speeches and socials, distributed literature produced by the AOA's departments of publicity and education, and scripted public service announcements for the radio and, eventually, television. By the mid-1930s, the Auxiliary led the way in creating free optometric clinics in low-income neighborhoods.

The WA also held fundraising campaigns to provide scholarships for optometry students. In 1943, the Auxiliary launched a national poster contest for high school students. The grand prize was a full scholarship to one of four optometry schools. The success of the WA's fundraising capacity was appreciated by the AOA, which began to task the organization with raising funds to produce student procurement films and other projects. By 1952, the Auxiliary had enough steady cashflow to begin awarding annual research grants.

Fig 4. Woman's Auxiliary pendant embossed with the new (1955) emblem, 1964.
Sterling silver. 2015.FIC.0087

In 1954, the WA burst onto the national scene, earning an invitation to participate in President Eisenhower's Highway Safety Conference in Washington, D.C.³ This was a watershed moment—the WA expanded its mission and adopted a new emblem to communicate its broader focus on public health (Fig. 4). In the ensuing years the WA added to its portfolio a Safety Committee to coordinate with municipal agencies, the Legislative Key woman program to lobby Congress for optometry's place in the new public health establishment, and the Volunteers for Vision program which contributed to the national Project Head Start, ensuring that preschoolers from all backgrounds received education on eye health.

The Auxiliary incorporated in 1960, becoming tax-exempt in 1964 and, eventually, a 501c3 charity. In 1970, it became simply "the Auxiliary" and, in 1989, the American Foundation for Vision Awareness (AFVA). In 2002, the AFVA was absorbed by the American Optometric Institute, an entity which shared its mission and which eventually became Optometry Cares - The AOA Foundation.

References

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2. Ezell AR. History of the Woman's Auxiliary to the American Optometric Association from 1927 to 1951. Spartanburg, S.C.: The Long Printing Service, 1952: 5.
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Fig 5. The Woman's Auxiliary Seal (stamp), 1962. The seal was sold for \$1.00 per sheet. Funds raised from the sale of WA seal were used to produce filmstrips, books, and to fund research grants and scholarships. Paper and ink. 2017.FIC.2518

Fig. 6. Seymour Safely, 1970. Seymour was developed for the Auxiliary and the AOA by educator, puppeteer and composer Marion Bartoo as an educational tool for teaching children about vision safety. Seymour Safely was featured in PSAs, children's books and promotional items developed and distributed by the Auxiliary for more than two decades. Original artist's rendering in ink. RG 100 American Optometric Association Records.

Fig. 8. Bicentennial Quilt, 1976. The Auxiliary's tribute quilt made for the AOA Bicentennial celebration in June 26, 1976 in Las Vegas, NV. The quilt is composed of blocks designed and made by each of the 51 affiliated auxiliaries and 10 optometric student auxiliaries. The quilt was presented to the International Library, Archives and Museum of Optometry for permanent display. Cotton, felt and silk. 2017.FIC.2524

Fig. 7. Auxiliary Board Meeting at AOA Headquarters, St. Louis, MO, November 1973. L-R Trustees Doris Wagner, Hamburg PA. and Estelle Blake, Brea, CA; Executive Secretary Mildred Yarrington, St. Louis, MO; President Harriett Stein; Secretary Ruth Spencer, Long Beach, CA; AOA Liaison Trustee Marjorie Ross, O.D., Battle Creek, MI; President-Elect Norma June Schumtz, St. George, UT; and trustees Barbara Van Cleve, Shelbyville, IN, and Nell Barksdale, Opelike, AL. Not pictured, treasurer Ruth Monaghan, Garland, TX. Bromide/Silver Gelatin Print. 2016.IMG.0184

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