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Clubwomen and Civic Activism: Willie Lowry and Tampa's Club Movement

by PATRICIA DILLON

In 1900, only six years after moving to Tampa, Florida, Willie Miller Lowry spearheaded a drive to solicit funds from Andrew Carnegie to build a public library. Throughout her correspondence with Carnegie, Lowry repeatedly described Tampa's rapid development and the need for new educational facilities. She argued that the library would not only provide improved educational standards but would also help to cultivate middle-class American values in the city's immigrant population. Lowry reported that "one to one-half of Tampa's population are Cubans and Spaniards, who, though fast becoming Americanized, stand in dire need of uplifting and educational advantages."¹

This event illustrates a common theme among Progressive clubwomen: a desire to expand beyond their private spheres into the public realm of civic improvement. Tampa's unique ethnic composition, however, extended clubwomen's activities beyond "municipal housekeeping" to encompass the socialization and Americanization of their immigrant neighbors. Furthermore, Tampa's clubwomen not only extended their sense of *noblesse oblige* to the city's immigrant population; they also addressed the needs of African Americans and lower- and working-class Anglo Americans. As a leading clubmember, Willie Lowry actively participated in Tampa's Urban League, constructed Tampa's first Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and campaigned for free kindergartens. Nevertheless, she, along with other white middle-class clubwomen, often failed to address such controversial issues as segregation, labor unions, and immigration restrictions. The divergent factors of race, class, and ethnicity that characterized

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1. Willie Lowry to Andrew Carnegie, March 30, 1900, folder 1, box, 13, Willie Miller Lowry Papers, Special Collections, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.

Tampa's club scene, along with the personal liberation that club activities provided for Progressive women, will interest both historians of women and of the South. This article explores these various themes by examining the life of Willie Miller Lowry and her role in Tampa's club movement.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women's participation in clubs and organizations directly altered their ascribed roles in American society. Social, religious, and later political organizations afforded women new opportunities to expand their influence beyond their own homes and into the wider world. As these women strove to improve their communities by such civic endeavors as constructing public libraries, campaigning for pure food and drug laws, and sponsoring beautification projects, they also reaped incalculable personal benefits. Club activities provided women with an enhanced sense of self-esteem and leadership experience. Public recognition of clubwomen's abilities and accomplishments, in turn, served to broaden societal acceptance of women's expanding roles.²

Initially, women's clubs often took the form of self-improvement or literary societies where members explored ways to uplift their individual homes and families. Clubwomen's concentration on personal duties readily corresponded with the prevailing rhetoric emanating from church pulpits and popular literature that urged women to adhere to their proper roles as moral defenders and guardians of their "private sphere." However, with the rapid rise of industrialization in the years following the Civil War, and with corresponding increases in population, pollution, crime, and other social ills, many women began to challenge their narrowly defined societal roles as they increasingly equated the sanctity of their own familial realm with the purity of the larger public world.³

Initially, Florida and other southern clubwomen lagged behind their northern counterparts in creating organizations to change, improve, or challenge their communities.⁴ As northern women ventured into civic affairs they drew upon a long history of

2. Anne Firor Scott, "Women's Voluntary Associations: From Charity to Reform," in Kathleen D. McCarthy, ed., *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy, and Power* (New Brunswick, 1990), 48.

3. Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York, 1980), xii.

4. Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History* (Chicago, 1993), 152.

public debate stemming from the abolitionist and women's rights movements while also benefiting from a relatively open social atmosphere. Northern society, while not always condoning or praising women's expanded public role, nevertheless allowed a relatively wide latitude for female behavior. Women served as important contributors to the expanding industrialization as workers and as entrepreneurs in the burgeoning northern business community. Southern women, on the other hand, faced intense opposition to any deviation from the traditional characteristics of the southern lady—docility, submissiveness, and morality. In the Reconstruction-era South, the image of the southern lady provided an important sense of pride and heritage, while also shoring up traditional racial and economic class structures. Many women also upheld their traditional role by advancing the myth of the Lost Cause, primarily through the United Daughters of the Confederacy, as a way to protect their perceived privileged role in an ever-changing society.⁵ Despite the efforts by many white southerners to cling to traditional and mythical ideals of a glorious Old South, by the turn of the century the New South had emerged, accompanied by changes and uncertainties.

Willie Miller Lowry combined the characteristics of both the Old and New South throughout her life. While she continually upheld the ideology of the "Lost Cause" through her membership in the Daughters of the Confederacy and in her own private memoirs, she also attended college, worked at various jobs, campaigned for female suffrage, and managed her own money even after her marriage. Throughout her long history of club activity she constantly drew upon these experiences and ideals.

"If there was ever a true child of the South in every sense, I was that child," Lowry later recalled.⁶ On July 15, 1862, Willie Louise was born to Dr. William Robarbs Miller and Mary Frances Britton in Raleigh, North Carolina. Willie, however, knew her mother for only a brief time. Only two months after her fourth birthday her mother died from consumption at the age of thirty-two. Willie Louise then spent the majority of her childhood and adolescence in the home of her older sister and brother-in-law, Isabelle and Black-

5. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South: The Leaders of the Woman Suffrage Movement in the Southern States* (New York, 1993), 6-7.

6. Willie Miller Lowry, "A Daughter of Dixie: A Post-War Memoir of a Little Girl of the Old South," unpublished manuscript, August 1941, p. 1, Lowry Papers.

burn Wilson, who lived in Rock Hill, South Carolina. Despite the upheaval of her early childhood, Lowry fondly recalled her father's plantation. "My father's house was a giant old fashioned one, of no particular model . . . just old timey and ample" with extensive land divided by Marsh Creek, a tributary of the Neuse River.⁷ Willie, a product of Lost Cause sentimentality, reminisced about her father's black laborers, former slaves who remained on his plantation following the Civil War. "How well I recall those kindly pleasant black shiny faces of our colored friends . . . Especially dear was my mammy . . . It was on her kindly lap that I was nightly regaled with the weird and compelling negro folk stories and lulled to sleep with the never to be forgotten crooning of that strange and musical race."⁸ This idyllic version of post-bellum plantation life proved an enduring image for Willie Louise and other southern women born in a time of rapid social and economic change.

While Willie Miller and her southern counterparts often bemoaned the changes wrought by the Civil War, they did, however, enjoy wider opportunities than their mothers and grandmothers had experienced. Following the loss of thousands of men during the war, southern women left their private familial spheres and entered into public employment to save their families from economic destruction. Women who grew up during the turbulent post-Civil War years benefited from their mothers' acts of public necessity by enjoying enhanced educational and employment opportunities.⁹ According to historian Karen Blair, changes in women's roles following the Civil War "produced a new woman who was more confident and aggressive because she had alternative channels through which she could express her energies and talents."¹⁰ Willie exemplified the new woman by enrolling in Salem Female Academy at Raleigh, North Carolina, where she mastered secretarial and accounting skills. After graduation, she worked as a secretary for a variety of employers, including the chairman of North Carolina's Democratic Party. She later served as an instructor of typing and shorthand at the Peace Institute in Rock Hill.¹¹ In the following

7. *Ibid.*, 2.

8. *Ibid.*, 3.

9. Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, 99.

10. *Ibid.*

11. "Biographical Sketch of Willie Miller Lowry," Lowry Papers.

years, Willie utilized her educational and occupational experiences in her work within Tampa's various female associations.

Willie Louise moved to Tampa after her marriage to Sumter de Leon Lowry on December 18, 1890. Lowry, a graduate of Kings Mountain Military Academy and the Medical and Pharmaceutical College in Charleston, South Carolina, first moved to Palatka, Florida, in 1886 to open a drugstore. After their marriage, Willie joined Sumter in Palatka, but the family soon moved to Jacksonville, then to St. Augustine, and in 1894, to Tampa. By the time they had settled in Tampa, Sumter had resigned from the pharmaceutical business and had entered the field of insurance sales. Lowry later emerged as a leading figure in both the insurance profession and Tampa city politics where he successfully campaigned for the commission form of city government and served as a commissioner for eight years.¹² During their marriage Sumter and Willie had five children: Willie Louise, Sumter de Leon Jr., Blackburn Wilson, Loper Bailey, and Isabelle Willis.¹³

When the Lowrys moved to Tampa they encountered a dynamic and growing "New South" city. In an 1898 letter to his wife, Sumter Lowry described Tampa as "one of the best towns in the State and . . . fast improving."¹⁴ Since its founding, Tampa had developed rapidly from an isolated gulf coast town of small merchants and cattlemen to a bustling commercial port city and the leading exporter of phosphate and luxury cigars.¹⁵

Although Tampa was originally chartered in 1834, only 720 people resided in the isolated community by 1880. Initially Tampa's early entrepreneurs envisioned steady economic development for their community by serving as the major suppliers for military troops who were stationed in the area during the Seminole Wars. However, yellow fever epidemics, isolation, and primitive living conditions hampered Tampa's development. By 1870 only 796 people lived there, and ten years later the population had declined to 720.¹⁶ The city "took off in the 1880s and by 1890 had bur-

12. The American Historical Society, Inc., "Sumter de Leon Lowry: Man of Affairs," April 8, 1937, Lowry Papers.

13. Margaret Wooten Collier, *Biographies of Representative Women of the South, 1861-1920*, vol. 1 (College Park, Ga., 1938), 89-90.

14. Sumter Lowry to Willie Lowry, June 21, 1898, folder 9, box 12, Lowry Papers.

15. Durward Long, "The Making of Modern Tampa: A City of the New South, 1885-1911," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 49 (April 1971), 334.

16. *Ibid.*

geoned to 6,000 inhabitants. The construction of Henry Bradley Plant's South Florida Railroad, which connected Tampa to Jacksonville, served as the major catalyst for the city's phenomenal development. The discovery of phosphate deposits in the Hillsborough Channel also contributed to Tampa's economic base. By 1900, Tampa boasted two city newspapers, telephone and telegraph services, two railway lines, an electric and water company, a sewage system, a street railway system, and the famous Tampa Bay Hotel and Tampa Bay Casino.¹⁷

While Tampa's urban and economic growth resembled that of other New South cities like Atlanta and Birmingham, the city's ethnic composition set it apart. By 1910 the city's population had reached 56,000, 12,000 of whom were Spanish, Cuban, and Italian immigrants.¹⁸ The majority of Latins immigrated to Tampa to work in Ybor City's cigar industry. Don Vincente Martinez Ybor founded the company town of Ybor City in 1886 (which was soon incorporated into Tampa) when he relocated his cigar industry from Key West to Tampa. Ybor chose Tampa because the city readily met his production and product requirements—access to transportation facilities, cheap land, and excessive humidity. By 1900 the city's two hundred cigar factories had transformed Tampa into the "cigar capital of the world," expanding its economy and permanently altering the area's ethnic composition.¹⁹

While most of Tampa's Anglo population benefited from and approved of the economic contributions of Ybor's cigar industry, some felt uneasy about the city's rapidly rising immigrant population and its enhanced political power. To combat this perceived threat, male community leaders, often in tandem with clubwomen, strove to design social programs and civic improvements to reinforce middle-class values of virtuous behavior, hard work, and thriftiness. Although at times Anglo clubwomen joined with their Latin and African American counterparts on civic projects, the

17. Charlton Tebeau, *A History of Florida* (Coral Gables, 1971), 285-86; Long, "The Making of Modern Tampa," 336; Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, *The Treasure City: Tampa* (Oklahoma City, 1983), 86-89, 94.

18. Nancy Hewitt, "Varieties of Voluntarism: Class, Ethnicity, and Women's Activism in Tampa," in Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin, eds., *Women, Politics, and Change* (New York, 1990), 67.

19. Gary R. Mormino, "Tampa: From Hell Hole to the Good Life," in Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, eds., *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth Since World War II* (Austin, 1983), 139.

boundaries of race and class hindered full cooperation.²⁰ Throughout Willie Lowry's involvement in Tampa's club movement, women's organizations remained strictly segregated.

One of the first clubs Willie Lowry joined upon her arrival in Tampa was the Tampa Woman's Club, organized in 1900 "for the exchange of intellectual work among Tampa women." Members of the club included women from the upper and middle classes who were well educated and well informed of current events.²¹ Embodying these characteristics, Willie Lowry quickly emerged as one of the club's principal leaders.²²

With the inception of the Woman's Club, Tampa joined a growing number of Florida communities that benefited from the growth in women's civic participation. By 1883, so many Florida towns included women's clubs that members of Green Cove Spring's Village Improvement Association called for the creation of a united organization "to bring the women's clubs into acquaintance and mutual helpfulness."²³ Two years later, delegates from Tarpon Springs, Crescent City, Orange City, Jacksonville, and Green Cove Springs organized the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs (FFWC). Tampa's Woman's Club eventually joined the state federation in 1912.²⁴

By this time, Tampa club members had expanded their original goals of concentrating solely on their own intellectual improvement and initiated studies concerning the enhancement of public education and the development of charitable municipal institutions. In 1913, as chair of the club's Literature and Library Extension Department, Willie Lowry created the Storyteller's League, which offered prizes for public schoolchildren who told the best story on any historical subject. Lowry reported that the storytelling

20. For further information concerning Tampa's Latin and African American women's clubs see Nancy Hewitt, "Politicizing Domesticity: Anglo, Black, and Latin Women in Tampa's Progressive Movement," in Nancy S. Dye and Noralee Frankel, eds., *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington, 1991), 24-41.

21. Mary Katharine Hansbrough, "History of Tampa's Woman's Club to the Present Time," unpublished manuscript, 1913, Lowry Papers; Maryclaire P. Crake, "In Unity There is Strength: The Influence of Women's Clubs on Tampa, 1900-1940" (master's thesis, University of South Florida, 1988), 35-36.

22. Tampa Woman's Club to Willie Lowry, November 21, 1900, folder 1, box 13, Lowry Papers.

23. Jessie H. Meyer, *Leading the Way: A Century of Service, The Florida Federation of Women's Clubs, 1895-1995* (Lakeland, 1994), 6.

24. *Ibid.*, 8.

movement represented a national phenomenon “and especially has its appeal to the responsive and romance loving nature of the southerner.”²⁵ Throughout the next twenty years, the Tampa Woman’s Club raised thousands of dollars for the city’s Children’s Home, Old Folks’ Home, YWCA, and the Women’s Exchange. Club members also helped to establish Tampa’s public library, a kindergarten association, and, through the Florida Federation of Women’s Clubs, endorsed a variety of statewide social programs and legislation.²⁶

The Tampa Woman’s Club’s literary activities stemmed from its members’ belief in the importance of education. The club initiated a campaign to solicit funds from the Carnegie Educational Foundation to construct a public library. One of the earliest projects undertaken by women’s clubs across the nation was the sponsorship of local and traveling libraries. In fact, a report by the American Library Association credited women’s clubs with responsibility for initiating seventy-five percent of the public libraries in existence in the United States in 1933.²⁷

Educational institutions, whether public libraries or public schools, provided an important venue for white middle-class clubwomen to socialize minorities, immigrants, and members of the lower classes. Often, however, these endeavors encountered opposition from the groups they were intended to help. In the case of the construction of Tampa’s public library, the Latin community balked at the original proposal to locate the library in an upscale neighborhood, and they also criticized the diversion of public funds from other civic needs such as ambulance service to Ybor City.²⁸ Tampa’s laborers also denounced the construction of the public library, although their opposition stemmed from the source of the library’s funding rather than from the proposed location. Workers publicly criticized Carnegie’s financing public libraries as a means of “erecting temples to himself” rather than as a way to support educational projects.²⁹ Many white citizens also questioned the construction of a public library fearing that it would lead to in-

25. Willie Lowry, “Report of the Work of the Literature and Library Extension Department,” in the *Florida Federation of Woman’s Club’s 1914-1915 Manual*, 75-76, Lowry Papers.

26. Hansbrough, “History of Tampa’s Woman’s Club,” Lowry Papers.

27. Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, 101.

28. *Tampa Tribune*, October 29, 1912.

29. *Tampa Tribune*, January 22, 1902.

tegration. While library proponents adamantly denied this possibility, these divergent issues of ethnicity, race, and class continually manifested themselves throughout the library controversy.

The library project began in March 1900 when Willie Lowry sent a letter to Andrew Carnegie requesting a donation for the construction of a public library in Tampa. In the letter, Lowry contended that "having read of the magnificent gifts of public libraries . . . which you have recently bestowed upon various cities of our country . . . we, the undersigned, have determined to plead for the needs of this community— the city of Tampa, Florida." Lowry continued by extolling the virtues of Tampa while also explaining the city's lack of resources to keep up with its expansion. "Tampa today claims twenty-six thousand people. Her population having trebled within the last five years, her needs have naturally far out stripped her facilities. This is particularly the case in educational matters. Her schools are inadequate and poorly equipped." Lowry also justified the importance of a public library as a means to "Americanize" the city's large Cuban and Spanish populations.³⁰

Through the assistance of A. E. Dick, manager of the Tampa Bay Hotel, and his wife, Helen, president of the Tampa Woman's Club, Lowry's letter reached Andrew Carnegie's office. Following two years of negotiations, Carnegie offered \$25,000 to Tampa for the construction of a public library on the condition that the city provide a site for the library and an annual monetary allowance for building maintenance and book purchases.³¹

Despite Carnegie's generous offer, Tampa officials and business leaders disputed the acceptance of the gift for the next ten years. One of the major controversies revolved around Andrew Carnegie's reputation as a "robber baron." In a series of editorials in the *Tampa Tribune*, one discontented Tampa resident, writing under the pseudonym "Honest Injun," characterized the planned library as a perverse tribute to an unscrupulous businessman. In a 1902 article, "Honest Injun" argued that "none of us can accept Mr. Carnegie's money, for no intelligent person will claim that a man can honestly earn \$200,000,000 in a little more than a quarter of a

30. Willie Lowry to Andrew Carnegie, March 30, 1900, folder 1, box 13, Lowry Papers.

31. Willie Lowry to A. E. Dick, April 10, 1900, and A. E. Dick to Willie Lowry, May 16, 1900, both in folder 1, box 13, Lowry Papers; *Tampa Tribune*, January 17, 1902.

century.³² The editorialist also denounced the proposed financial plan for the library, fearful that Tampa's residents would be forever indebted to their benefactor: "Think of it a moment: Mr. Carnegie gives Tampa \$25,000 on condition that Tampa will tax her citizens \$25,000 per annum in perpetuity! When infant Tampaites get to be fifty years old we will have paid a tribute of \$125,000 to this canny Scotchman's memory!"³³ Many of Tampa's labor organizers backed "Honest Injun's" scathing attacks against Carnegie and his "gift." Repulsed by Carnegie's earlier repression of steel mill strikers in Homestead, Pennsylvania, they denounced Carnegie and accused him of funding city libraries solely as a public relations ploy. Carnegie's detractors, however, failed to mention that the businessman never demanded that any of his libraries or other charitable buildings be named after him or in anyway recognize his largesse.³⁴

The location of the library further fanned the flames of controversy. Members of the Library Association, including Sumter Lowry and other leading Tampa middle- and upper-class businessmen in Tampa, recommended a site in the upscale Hyde Park neighborhood where the majority of them resided. This proposition quickly drew the ire of "Honest Injun" who sarcastically characterized the plan as a way to increase property values and add "to the swellness of the neighborhood."³⁵ Representatives of Ybor City also questioned the Hyde Park location. Proponents of the library paid more attention to the residents of Ybor City because they realized that they might need the support of the immigrant community in the upcoming vote on the library issue. Therefore, the site of the library was changed to a more central location, and promoters promised the Latin community that "if the library is secured" it will include "books in Spanish and Italian . . . with a special librarian to have charge of them."³⁶

Along with male political officials, Tampa's clubwomen launched a decisive effort to gain support for Carnegie's grant by organizing the Women's Library Association. The Association included four hundred clubwomen, including members of the Tampa Woman's Club, the United Daughters of the Confederacy,

32. *Tampa Tribune*, January 27, 1902.

33. *Tampa Tribune*, January 22, 1902.

34. *Tampa Tribune*, October 15, 1983; Foster Rhea Dulles and Melvyn Dubofsky, *Labor in America: A History* (Arlington Heights, 1984), 158-62.

35. *Tampa Tribune*, January 22, 1902.

36. *Tampa Tribune*, October 25, 1912.

the Daughters of the America Revolution, and the American Women's League. Willie Lowry also belonged to the Association. In 1912, when the city again voted on the acceptance of Carnegie's gift, Lowry along with other Association members, although lacking the suffrage themselves, tirelessly and successfully campaigned for the public library. The library bill passed, but it was another five years before the building opened to white patrons.³⁷

Throughout the library debate, detractors raised the specter of interracial mixing and "of whites bumping up against negroes and their using the same books." Library supporters continually assured the general public "that no Southern city," Tampa included, "has ever, or would ever, permit the negro to use the same books as the whites."³⁸ In accordance with this pledge, African Americans were barred from using the main library. However, in the 1920s Tampa's Urban League, in cooperation with several prominent Anglo business leaders, successfully petitioned the city commission to construct the African American Harlem Branch Library.³⁹

Although Tampa's Anglo clubwomen firmly supported segregation, they at times worked with the African American community, primarily the Urban League, on various civic projects. The Urban League's commitment to interracial cooperation and muted criticism of segregation laws prompted several clubwomen, including Willie Lowry, to cooperate with the organization. By 1923, a year after the founding of the League in Tampa, Willie Lowry served on its board of directors and worked with one of its leading members, Blanche Armwood.⁴⁰ Armwood, a member of the National Association of Colored Women, the Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, and first president of Tampa's Negro Woman's Club, served as the League's Executive Secretary and was later appointed supervisor of Hillsborough County's Negro Schools. In her continued fight to improve education for black schoolchildren, Armwood, working with the Tampa Woman's Club, successfully campaigned for the exten-

37. *Marine News*, October 24, 1912; *Tampa Tribune*, October 15, 1983.

38. *Tampa Tribune*, October 20, 1912.

39. Keith Halderman, "Blanche Armwood of Tampa and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 74 (Winter 1996), 302.

40. *Ibid.*, 297-99; Tampa Urban League to Willie Lowry, October 20, 1923, folder 17, box 17, Lowry Papers; Crake, "In Unity There Is Strength," 73-74.

sion of the school year for black children from six months to eight months, equal to the white school term.⁴¹

Although Tampa's Anglo and African American clubwomen cooperated on other projects, including an anti-tuberculosis campaign and the construction of the Florida Negro World War Memorial, racial prejudice served to circumscribe their joint endeavors. This limitation was especially apparent during the fight for female suffrage. Similar to other southern white women, Tampa suffragettes often promoted the franchise as a way to counteract the influence of black male voters, and Florida's suffrage organizations remained strictly segregated.⁴²

As exemplified by the foray of Lowry and other Women's Library Association members into political campaigning, clubwomen continued to expand their role in the public sphere and soon demanded the right to full political participation. As early as 1892, under the leadership of Ella C. Chamberlain, Tampa women had organized an equal suffrage association which developed into the statewide Florida Women Suffrage Association (FWSA). Although the FWSA lasted only five years, Florida women later rejoined the suffrage crusade through the development of the Florida Equal Franchise League (FEFL).⁴³

In November 1913, the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs held its annual meeting in Orlando, Florida. During the convention, local suffragists and federation members formed the FEFL. Representing the Tampa Woman's Club, Lowry attended the Orlando conference and joined the FEFL, serving as a member of the press committee.⁴⁴ Until the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, Lowry remained active in the suffrage crusade. Sumter Lowry even addressed letters to his wife by opening with the affectionate term, "My Dear Suffragette."⁴⁵ Although the Florida legisla-

41. Crake, "In Unity There Is Strength," 74.

42. Marjorie Spruill Wheeler, *New Women of the New South*, 101-102.

43. Kenneth Ray Johnson, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Florida" (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1966), 25, 38-39.

44. Hansbrough, "History of Tampa's Woman's Club," Lowry Papers; Johnson, "The Woman Suffrage Movement," 187.

45. Sumter Lowry to Willie Lowry, November 18, 1914, folder 9, box 16, Lowry Papers.

ture failed to vote on the amendment, Florida lawmakers allowed women to vote in the 1920 general election and the following year passed a law allowing all citizens over twenty-one to participate in state elections.⁴⁶ The Florida legislature failed to formally approve the Nineteenth Amendment until 1969.⁴⁷

Even before the granting of suffrage, Willie Lowry expanded her activities beyond the Tampa Woman's Club by focusing on improving child education and creating social and volunteer organizations for local youth. In 1897, Lowry and a group of local Tampa women formed the Free Kindergarten Association, which later enrolled twenty-two pupils including Lowry's son, de Leon.⁴⁸ To provide further social activities for her own children, Lowry established the "Would-Be-Good" club for her daughters and the "Merry Makers" club for her sons. Both clubs included her children's neighborhood friends ranging in age from nine to fifteen. Club members enjoyed a variety of social events while also engaging in charitable functions. In a brief sketch detailing the activities of "Would-Be-Good" members, Lowry stated: "I wanted to teach them the joys of service to others with this a philanthropic feature. They saved their out grown clothing, broken toys in their treasure box and about twice a year we gathered them up and distributed them among poor families."⁴⁹ Club members also held meetings where they elected officers and formulated club rules and by-laws. Lowry contended that by learning the "simple rudiments of conducting club meetings," members "can feel at ease in a club when they grow up."⁵⁰

Lowry's concern for the welfare and development of Tampa's youth, especially young women, led to her involvement in the formation of the city's first Girl Scout troop. In March 1912, Juliette Low organized the first American Girl Guide troop, forerunner of the Girl Scouts, in her hometown of Savannah, Georgia. Following the English model, Low instructed her Scouts in such domestic skills as cooking and sewing, and in more non-traditional endeavors

46. Elizabeth Taylor, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 36 (July 1957), 60. Although Florida women participated in the National American Woman Suffrage Association, Majorie Spruill Wheeler fails to discuss their activities in detail in *New Women of the New South*.

47. Crake, "In Unity There Is Strength," 58.

48. Willie Lowry to Sumter Lowry, September 13, 1897, folder 9, box 12, Lowry Papers.

49. Willie Lowry to Elizabeth Parkhill Lowry, March 20, 1937, folder 19, box 19, Lowry Papers.

50. *Ibid.*

such as marching and playing basketball.⁵¹ After meeting Juliette Low, Willie Lowry corresponded with her concerning the establishment of a Girl Scout troop in Tampa. From Low's guidelines, Lowry and other Tampa clubwomen organized Tampa's Magnolia Troop, the second Girl Scout troop in the United States. Similar to the Savannah Girls Scouts, Tampa's Scouts learned a variety of traditional domestic tasks while also undertaking more traditionally masculine projects. For example, during World War I, as the influenza epidemic spread through Tampa, local Girl Scout troops delivered Western Union telegrams throughout the city. Many local residents, however, complained of the girls' activities, not out of fear that the scouts might catch or spread the deadly disease, but because "the girls are all over town, and they are wearing PANTS."⁵²

While Tampa's girls benefited from Willie Lowry's development of local Girl Scout troops, the city's working women also gained from Lowry's involvement in the formation of a local Young Women's Christian Association. In 1913, Willie Lowry and other local Tampa women rented a small house with a kitchen, library, and rest room and opened the city's first YWCA. By 1920, the YWCA reported over a thousand members and boasted a budget of more than \$70,000. Elected YWCA president in that same year, Lowry reminisced about the hard work she and other female board members faced as they raised money for the YWCA. "We women worked almost entirely alone in those days, of course the men helped us financially, but all our drives and campaigns were carried on by volunteer women workers."⁵³ Lowry further recounted how she had personally visited downtown businesses to convince local employers to contribute supplies and furnishings to the YWCA. "I told them they couldn't ignore the needs of the YWCA home, it meant money for them in the long run, citing the fact that their female employees could give them better service if they had proper living conditions— and I was turned down only once."⁵⁴

Willie Lowry not only provided shelter and recreational facilities for working women, she also helped to establish the Tampa Women's Exchange as a way for all women to earn extra money. The Ex-

51. Daisy Gordon Lawrence and Gladys Denny Schultz, *Lady From Savannah: The Life of Juliette Low* (New York, 1958), 305-306, 345.

52. Patti Dervaes, "Girl Scouting in Tampa Is Seventy-five Years Old," *The Sunland-Tribune* 13 (November 1987), 32; *Tampa Tribune*, March 16, 1926.

53. *Tampa Tribune*, March 16, 1926.

54. *Ibid.*

change, charging only a ten percent commission, provided women a venue for selling their homemade articles. These products ranged from full-course dinners to fancy needle work and potted plants. The opening day of the Exchange received rave reviews from the city's newspapers and high praise for allowing women a way to earn extra money while not "interfering with their household arrangements."⁵⁵

Tampa business leaders and local citizens not only gained from Willie Lowry's establishment of the Tampa Women's Exchange, YWCA, kindergarten association, Girl Scouts, and the public library, but they also received international recognition through Lowry's coordination of the city's 400th anniversary celebration of the Florida landing of Pánfilo de Narváez, a sixteenth-century Spanish military leader and explorer. Through her membership in the Colonial Dames, a national organization dedicated to the study of American colonial history, and while serving as state chair of the Dames' Historical Research Committee, Lowry wrote a paper detailing the landing of de Narváez near Tampa Bay. In 1528 Pánfilo de Narváez and his crew, the first white men to explore the west coast of Florida, traveled around the future site of Tampa and Hillsborough County and stayed in the region for about five months. To commemorate this achievement, Lowry successfully convinced city leaders to support a week-long celebration.⁵⁶

Throughout the week of March 15-21, 1928, Tampa citizens enjoyed numerous parades, plays, and street dances all celebrating Spanish history and the city's Latin community. In a letter from Sumter Lowry describing the de Narváez celebration to a friend in Lakeland, Florida, he revealed that "the Spaniards were given all honor for the part their nation played, and were really the center of interest the whole week."⁵⁷ The Spanish Consul, located in Tampa, reported the celebration to Spain's King Alphonso. Impressed by Willie Lowry's dedication and enthusiasm for Spanish history, King Alphonso awarded her the Royal Order of the Lace Isabelle Cathlica. This commemoration provided its recipients with entrance into all Spanish royal functions and the highest recognition in court circles. Willie Lowry was the second American ever to receive this award.⁵⁸

55. *Tampa Tribune*, November 17, 1903.

56. "A Summary of the Histories of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America and of the Corporate Societies, 1891-1962," Lowry Papers; Sumter Lowry to Harvey Laird, November 7, 1928, folder 5, box 18, Lowry Papers.

57. Sumter Lowry to Harvey Laird, November 7, 1928, folder 5, box 18, Lowry Papers.

58. *Tampa Times Union*, September 9, 1928.

With or without international recognition, Willie Lowry's dedication and civic involvement still reverberates throughout Tampa. Its citizens still enjoy their public library, while young girls participate in local Girl Scout troops, and women continue to join the YWCA. As did other white middle-class women of her generation, Lowry took early advantage of expanding educational and employment opportunities for women and developed her own skills to advance female associations so they might transform and improve her community. She is one of a growing number of heretofore "invisible" women whose reform activities deserve full treatment in the annals of Florida history.