

Catholic Women's Club marks 75th anniversary

By Lee Strong
Senior staff writer

ROCHESTER — Last Thursday, April 28, approximately 32 women gathered around tables playing cards at the Catholic Women's Club, 492 East Ave.

The monthly card playing is among the regular events the club sponsors. But anyone who thinks that card meetings are all the club's about is sadly unaware of its history and activities.

In addition to this year celebrating 75 years of service to women around the diocese, the Catholic Women's Club is marking decades of assistance to the poor, missions and the community at large.

"I think the founders established a strong base with very strong purpose directed toward the well being and welfare of women, to help wherever possible," noted Eugenia Crayton, the club's current president and a 30-year member. "We have extended our goals to include cultural, charitable, social work, educational, and spiritual goals."

Each year the club's 450 members sponsor a variety of events — from card parties to fashion shows — to raise funds and provide gifts to support students attending area Catholic high schools, the residents of Melita and Bethany houses, and the women religious at the Carmelite Monastery of Our Lady and St. Joseph, 1931 Jefferson Road, Pittsford.

Other club business includes: a monthly Mission Group which meets to roll bandages for medical missionaries; delivering food monthly to St. Joseph's House of Hospitality; visiting St. Ann's Home every June to present a rose to each resident; sending seasonal holiday cards through the Remembrance Committee to past and current members who are living in nursing homes or are homebound.

Meanwhile, the club also sponsors a First Friday Mass at the Cenacle Center, 693 East Ave.; hosts an Ash Wednesday Day of Reflection at the Cenacle; and sponsors a yearly memorial Mass at the Carmelite Monastery to remember deceased club members.

The club's past — and future — service to the community will be marked at 10 a.m. Wednesday, May 18, during a Mass celebrated by Bishop Matthew H. Clark at St. Thomas More Church, 2617 East Ave. The Mass will be followed by a social hour and luncheon at Oak Hill Country Club, Kilborn Road, Pittsford. The reservation deadline for tickets is May 11. (Call 716/461-9173).

Such gatherings help to illustrate that the club does more than provide opportunities for good works. It fills an-



Provided photo
A group of women under the sponsorship of the Catholic Women's Club posed in 1932 under a tree at Camp Madonna, located on Canandaigua Lake's western shore. The club is currently celebrating 75 years of service to the Rochester diocese.

other need, Crayton observed.

"I never would have met so many wonderful people," Crayton explained. "You feel a real bonding with the group."

Eleanor Heier, past president and a club member for 19 years, noted that women can socialize with people in secular clubs. But the Catholic Women's Club offers something more.

"I wanted something that touched on my Catholic faith," Heier recalled.

And even though parishes also provide opportunities for social activities and spiritual growth, Heier continued, "It's nice to expand your group of friends. At the parish, it's the same people. Here, you can meet people from other parishes."

The club began drawing together Catholic women from across Rochester on Dec. 5, 1919. Mary Nier, a young widow, invited a group of women to her home to discuss creating a Catholic Women's Club.

Monthly meetings began shortly thereafter. The organization received the immediate support of then-Bishop of Rochester Thomas F. Hickey, who be-

came the club's spiritual adviser — a role filled since 1974 by Father Joseph D'Aurizio, pastor of St. John the Evangelist Parish, 2400 Ridge Road W., Greece.

The club's relationship with diocesan bishops continues to this day, with some of them serving as spiritual advisers. The late Bishop James E. Kearney, in particular, took an active interest in the club's activities. One of the highlights of the club's year during his years as Bishop of Rochester was the annual Bishop's Dinner.

After its founding, the club expanded rapidly, adding club rooms in parishes across Rochester. Membership rose above 4,500 in the 1920s. The organization was incorporated in May, 1922.

Club members early on became involved in social work. Following a talk in 1922 by Katherine D'Olier, head of Catholic Charities, the club formed a Mission Group to assist missions, and to receive — on consignment to sell — goods produced at the missions.

Members began hosting regular fundraising events to help support various charitable activities. Each year, for

example, they hold a shower to provide baby items and clothing for single mothers at Melita House.

In addition, club members began working with the Association for the Blind to help prepare Braille books; began visiting shut-ins; and organized clothing drives for the residents of Bethany House and Vietnam Veterans.

The organization started a Big Sister program that same year to provide "big sisters" for girls facing family or financial problems and who might benefit from an older women's guidance. In 1930, the club also created the first Catholic Girl Troop in Rochester, later adding a second troop, and a Mariner Troop for the older girls.

Also in 1922, the club provided funds for a scholarship to Nazareth Academy, 1001 Lake Ave. This effort has grown over the years. Today the club still sponsors three annual scholarships for girls attending Catholic high schools. The club also established a summer school at the former St. Patrick's Cathedral, offering religious education programs for Catholic children not attending Catholic schools.

As part of its outreach to young women, the club established Camp Madonna on donated land on Canandaigua Lake in 1923. The camp was finally sold in 1961.

From its earliest days, the club has reached out to working women. Members created a small cafeteria on Clinton Avenue to serve working women light lunches. In 1930, a Business Women's Group was established to help meet Catholic business women's needs.

In addition, the club established a Young Matron's Group to help mothers with young families, and to give them opportunities to get out of the house.

Betty Lang, a club member for 51 years, took advantage of this group.

"I had two small children," Lang recalled. "I couldn't go to the day meetings. It was my night out."

During World War II, the organization created a Red Cross unit to knit and sew items for American soldiers, sold war bonds and stamps, and organized blood drives and training courses for civil defense.

As the years have passed, the club has extended its activities to providing recreation programs for the elderly, assisting civic organizations in housing surveys, and recruiting volunteers to work in inner city libraries and as teacher's aides.

Today, club members remain active by supporting parishes, schools and organizations from Birthright to School of the Holy Childhood.

And, of course, they still play cards.

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