

MAKING A DIFFERENCE



Making a Difference

Introduction

The Progressive Era in US history, or the period between the 1890s and ca. 1920, was characterized by an unprecedented rise of social reform movements. Progressive reformers were not united by any single cause but rather fought to address a wide variety of social, economic, and political problems with the goal of creating a more equal and just society. Local, state, and national organizations promoted numerous causes that sought to address injustices inherent in the economic, political, and legal structures of the contemporary United States. Examples of progressive causes include fighting against child labor, promoting legislation to ensure safer labor conditions in factories and mines, improving housing in the poorest urban neighborhoods, helping immigrants adjust to life in American cities, supporting free universal public education, fighting government corruption, and even opposing large corporations that created monopolies.

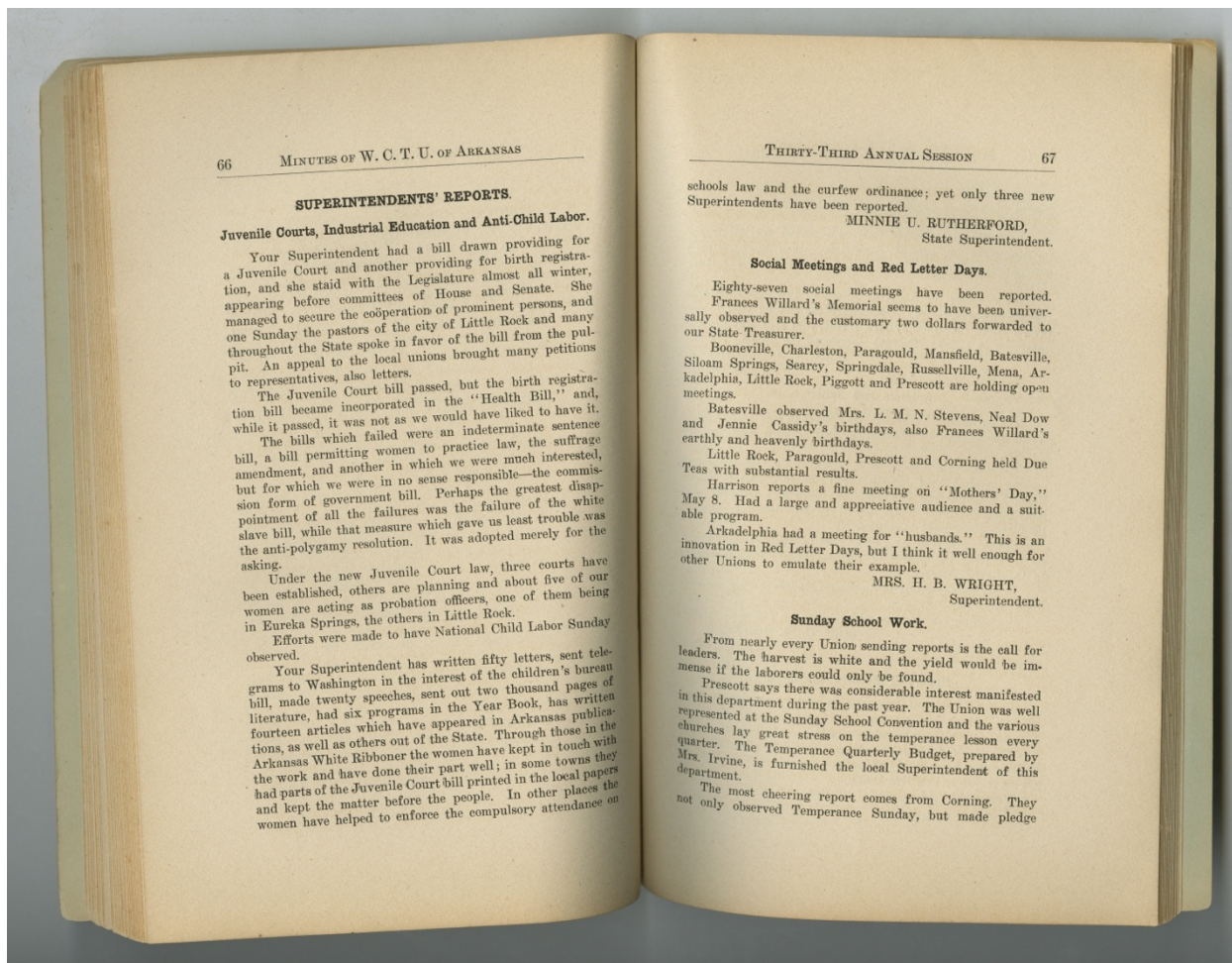
Women and particularly middle-class women lead many progressive causes and organizations. At the time when American women still did not have universal voting rights and their opportunities to serve directly in local or national government were limited, women engaged in politics through grassroots social activism that often resulted in sweeping legislative changes.

One of the most popular causes during the Progressive Era was temperance or a movement that advocated the prohibition of the sale, manufacture, and consumption of alcohol. Although the movement emerged already in the 18th century (1700s) and gained popularity in the first half of the 19th century (1800s), its greatest successes overlapped with the Progressive Era. In 1873, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the leading temperance organization in the United States at the time, was created in Ohio and its Arkansas chapter was established in 1879. By the early 20th century (1900s), WCTU activists promoted not only the cause of abstinence from alcohol but, like many organizations of the Progressive Era, engaged in many other social reform campaigns. In this activity, you will examine a 1911 report of the Arkansas chapter of WCTU that illustrates how women engaged in politics and affected political changes before they were able to vote.

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CENTER FOR ARKANSAS
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UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS AT LITTLE ROCK



“Superintendent’s Reports: Juvenile Courts, Industrial Education and Anti-Child Labor,” in *Minutes of W.C.T.U. of Arkansas, Thirty-Third Annual Sessions*, p. 66-67, 1911 (Woman's Christian Temperance Union Collection)

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Questions:

1. What was the main purpose of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU)? See "Introduction" for more information.
2. What causes, in addition to temperance, did the Arkansas chapter of WCTU support according to their 1911 superintendent's report?
3. What strategies did WCTU activists implement to achieve their goals? How did they popularize their causes and what did they do to push their agenda?
4. The report lists some initiatives that were successful and others that failed. What causes gained the support of legislators, all of whom were men, and what causes did not?
5. Based on this report, how did American women engage in politics before they were able to vote?
6. One of the most powerful and effective strategies applied by WCTU members was to write letters and telegrams to local and national legislators. Think of one social justice cause that you care about and write a letter to a member of a state or national legislature in support of the cause.
7. The temperance movement was one of the most popular movements in US history. Temperance was also one of few causes that attracted the support of women from all walks of life – rich, poor, urban, rural, educated, and those who never went to school. Why do you think the temperance cause was so popular in the United States and especially among women?