

## **Ruth Romer at 35th Anniversary Dinner of Cambridge Civic Association, October 15, 1980**

I would like to begin by saying that I shouldn't be the person speaking to you tonight about events leading to the formation of the Cambridge Civic Association. George McLaughlin should be here as he was very much involved in the ancestor organization of the C.C.A. which was the Cambridge Committee for Plan E. He served as counsel for that group, and also, of course, was the first president of the C.C.A. in 1945 and then served on the Board of Directors. Unfortunately George has been ill and couldn't be here. I had a long phone chat with him a couple of weeks ago. He is recovering from his illness, is in very good spirits, and asked me to send greetings to all of you which I do, here, now.

But, if you are willing in this age when looking for roots is in vogue, to go back quite a bit before 1945, I, perhaps, qualify as someone involved in the early charter reform efforts.

As a then recent arrival in Cambridge in 1934, I found two efforts toward reform of Cambridge city government already underway. Credit should be given to those pioneers. Professor Lewis Jerome Johnson and his wife and his son Chandler, and the Cambridge League of Women Voters. The impetus, I am sure, for the League's study of various possible forms of change came from the Johnsons who were very much impressed with the achievements of the relatively new charter in Cincinnati, Ohio.

After World War One, a group of returning servicemen coming back to Cincinnati decided to do something about their city notorious for its political bosses and poor physical condition. Their first campaign fascinated me. It was the call for a "birdless ballot". You see you could vote in Cincinnati whether you could read or not. At the top of the list of each slate of candidates was an easily recognized picture of a bird. You could vote for that entire slate by making one mark opposite one of the birds. The campaign slogans were very simple such as, "vote for the rooster", or whatever other bird.

The League of Women Voters decided to join in efforts to give the voters of Cambridge to vote on a Cincinnati type charter. The first efforts, of course, had to go into getting a bill through the state legislature adding a new form of charter to the list of standard charters available to Massachusetts cities by petition and referendum.

Cambridge was then operating under a modified Plan B charter with a city council of 15, one from each ward and four elected at large. There were already four charters, A, B, C, D, such as strong mayor with a weak council, strong council with a weak mayor, council elected by wards or at-large, and so forth. So we worked to get a fifth form, Plan E, added.

In 1938 we were successful, and Plan E became available. I forget the exact date, but I would guess in about the Spring of 1938. This accomplished, the petition could get underway in Cambridge. The League of Women Voters was given the task of ward and precinct organization which was to educate voters and get petitions signed. We needed 10% of the registered voters of the city.

Our first activity was to hold information meetings called "butterfly teas" wherever we could in the city. If you look at a map of Cambridge, you'll understand why that name. After that we got down to the nitty-gritty, door-to-door canvassing.

At that time a truly remarkable woman, Mrs. Amelia Fiske was chairman of the League's city committee, and I just happened to be her vice chairman. If I had to name the one person most responsible for organizing the push for a charter change, I'd choose Mrs. Fiske.

Because of lack of time, we largely concentrated on those wards where we felt we had the best chance of success. During the last week before the election in the fall of 1938, I came home discouraged. I said to my husband, "What do you think Amelia wants us to do now?"

His answer: "Canvass the remaining wards of the city."

Of course! He knew her better than I did, and we did, of course, go into all the remaining wards of the city during that last week.

I must say, my family suffered by my involvement. I happened to hear my small daughter playing in the next room say to her friend, "This is a mommy duck, because it goes to meetings all the time."

We also had a bit of drama in that year of 1938. We were successful just in time to get more than enough signatures certified on our petition to have the question on the 1938 ballot. All that remained was for the City Council to transmit the petition to the Secretary of State's Office by a certain date. This transfer was mandatory, but the majority of the City Council were opposed to Plan E and refused to send the petition as required by law. Here our counsel, George McLaughlin, came into the picture.

A special session of the Supreme Judicial Court was called on a Saturday afternoon. A writ of mandamus was issued, and the Secretary of State, Frederick Cook, announced he would keep his office open until midnight on that Saturday evening, the last day that he could receive it and still have it appear on the Cambridge ballot.

The Council was finally given the writ and finally voted to transfer the petition. It was exciting, and the resulting publicity didn't hurt our cause a bit. But, in spite of that flying start, we lost that first attempt by 1,328 votes out of about 42,000 people voting.

Now I can move on more rapidly. In 1940, we went through the petition process again, and this time, we won handily, 26,000 -18,000. We were helped that time by the fact that the Mayor of Cambridge had been convicted of bribery and later served a jail sentence. We were also helped by the fact that the Communist Party of Cambridge came out against Plan E. It was part of a group that called itself The People's Committee for the Protection of Democracy in Cambridge. We were called, in some of their literature, the brainchild of wealthy Harvard.

I supposed that sounded plausible to some voters, as Jim Landis, Dean of the Harvard Law School, was the hard working and energetic chairman of the Plan E Committee, and he was also given to making controversial, highly quotable remarks.

Of course all this was only the preliminary, necessary as it was. In 1941 we had the first election under the new charter and won a 5-4 majority on the Council, with John Corcoran becoming Mayor, and John B. Atkinson, our first City Manager. Due to the ease of running under Plan E, and I think I'm right when I say that it takes only 100 names to get on the ballot, in that first election there were 82 candidates running for the City Council and 22 for the School Committee.

Realistically, by the next election, the number dropped drastically. Aside from running campaigns every other year, we always had to be alert against attacks in the legislature on our new charter. Its constitutionality was questioned and then upheld in court. Three times, 1952, 1953, and 1957, the question of throwing out PR was on the ballot in Cambridge, and each time it was kept by an increasing majority.

I wish I could name all the people who worked so very hard in the late 30's and early 40's such as Nick Diodotti, a director who, beside lots of hard work, made available at no cost to the committee headquarters space in a building he either owned or, perhaps, managed. Tony Colosimo, a naturalized citizen and dedicated worker for Plan E and for good government in Cambridge, Mrs. A. Kingsley Porter of Elmwood who made available her entire third floor, complete with telephones, for Election Day headquarters.

Speaking of Tony Colosimo, I can't resist telling you one of my favorite Cambridge stories.

Early on one election day, I forget which year, I took handout material to Tony's house. As I left for my next stop, I left it with Mrs. Colosimo because Tony wasn't there. I said to her, "Don't you forget to vote."

"Oh," she said, "I can't vote." It seems she and Tony were married before 1922. Of course she immediately lost her American citizenship under the then current law.

Then, after 1922, her husband had become naturalized. Nineteen twenty-two was the year women could become citizens in their own right and no longer had to assume the status of their husbands. So when Tony became naturalized, she couldn't come back in with him. She was mad because she had been born and lived in Cambridge all her life, and her husband had been born in Italy. He could vote and she could not. I stressed the fact that in the future, that is after 1922, no woman would lose her U.S. citizenship if she married a non-citizen. I must say that later Mrs. Colosimo became a citizen again as the wife of an already citizen.

One very special person was Herman Loeffler, living in Cambridge but working with the Boston Municipal Research Bureau. He was a tremendous help to us with his scholarly writing on the Plan E-type of charter. I'd like to introduce his widow, Helen, who is with us tonight. She deserves recognition in her own right as well as representing Herm.

I've had fun reading many of the old scrapbooks of those early Plan E years, some put together by the League of Women Voters and other ones by Herman Loeffler. Besides being fascinating, they have helped my fading memory. In those early years, our energies seemed to be used up fighting anti-Plan E bills in the legislature, organizing the vote for the three attempts to throw out PR voting, and, of course, running a slate of candidates every two years. It was left to the Cambridge Civic Association, broader based in its concept, to work year-round with its important watchdog committees.

So now we can move along in time to the story of the C.C.A. itself.

Ruth Romer, October 15, 1980