

A Short History of the Anna D. Sparks Alliance – The Anna Ds

A talk given at the Anna Ds Tea on November 9, 2019

At the First Unitarian Church, Alton IL

Mary E. Johnson

121 years ago, in 1898, 12 women of this church formed an organization to help the needy in the community. The women named their group the Anna D. Sparks Alliance in memory of Anna Davenport Chapman Sparks – a woman of indomitable spirit – who had died suddenly two years previously at the age of 66.

Last month, Alice Reynolds, Anna's great great granddaughter, shared family lore with me about Anna. Alice said that she remembered her mother and grandmother telling her how Anna took food to the men in the Confederate prison here in Alton during the Civil War, and told about her drive to make a difference in the community. Alice said that Anna's sense of what was right and her willingness to do something about wrongs, was a key cultural message passed down in their family, especially to the women.

Anna married David Sparks when she was 19. Over the years they raised 6 children. David served as a Captain in the Union army during the Civil War and later became an influential flour mill owner who, in 1877, along with several other mill owners, formed Millers Mutual Insurance Company, for years headquartered in the building on 4th Street adjacent to the church.

Our church's archival records mention that Anna opened her home to the wives and mothers of the Alton troops serving under her husband's command, and she helped their families however she could. Anna also had leadership roles in several community organizations, including the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Women's Council. If there were a need, she found a way to fill that need. In 1878, after this church had been without a minister for three years, and was on the brink of closing, the women of the church convinced the men to finally take action and obtain a minister, and when that minister arrived, Anna stepped up to be the church treasurer – a position not usually held by a woman in those times. She held this position for at least 8 years, and by 1886 the church was reported "financially out of debt and in a prosperous condition."

The Anna D. Sparks Alliance is perhaps the oldest continuous women's organization in Alton. It was never limited to Unitarian women, but was open to any woman in the community who wished to join – and many did. At one time there were at about 80 members on the rolls.

In a 1943 booklet written about the history of the Anna Ds, it is mentioned they had three main areas of interest: concern for the welfare of the community, denominational activities, and support of the church.

Their efforts included working with and providing funds for the Alton Associated Charities; for years hosting an annual Christmas party for underprivileged children; being a participating group in the Needlework Guild making clothing for those in need; contributing, along with the church, funding for the building of Alton Memorial Hospital; financially supporting and participating in the work of the YWCA; actively supporting the Maternal Health League, and the women provided bandages and aid during World Wars I and II. If there were a “socially justifiable enterprise” the Anna Ds would help support it. Their monthly meetings would include programs given by members or outside speakers related to societal and political issues. They also paid for subscriptions of the national Unitarian magazine, *The Christian Register*, to be sent to area libraries, and also used the articles in that magazine as part of their program material.

In 1978, the Anna Ds celebrated their 80th anniversary. They received a congratulatory card from President Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. An article in the *Alton Telegraph*, speaks to some of the activities the Anna Ds were engaged during the 50s, 60s and 70s. They actively worked for the United Way, the YW, Alton League of Women Voters, Alton Memorial Hospital, the Alton Mental Health Center, and helped to start the Oasis Women’s Center.

Over the years, they had a variety of fundraising projects to support their community efforts and to be able to make a substantial annual pledge to the church.

Much coverage in the *Alton Telegraph* was given to one major ongoing fundraiser – a bridge tournament which started in 1955 and brought in women from throughout the community who paid to play. The women played monthly from October through May and the players would be rewarded at the end of the season with a “Play Day” salad luncheon and prizes. This tournament project continued annually until around 1999. By that time the Anna D membership had been significantly reduced by the aging of its tireless workers, and the change in society whereby most of the younger women in the church were now employed outside the home.

Also covered in *The Telegraph* were the Anna Ds Christmas Tea and community Christmas card sales which started in the early 1950s. This must have been a successful project as it was an annual event until at least 1960. In the 1960s they held Christmas teas and bazaars where all sorts of crafts were sold.

For another fundraiser, in 1963 the Anna Ds produced a cookbook entitled “*Our Favorite Recipes.*” It was a recipe compilation of dishes made by Anna D members. There was also a section called “Men Only” which were recipes submitted by the men of the church. There was only one run published of the cookbook so those of us not with the church at the time got copies only if someone later gave up their copy or when an Anna D member died her copy may have been offered to the church members. That’s how I

got my copy, complete with handwritten notes about some of the recipes. My copy is rather torn up, but we have one pristine, unused copy in our archives.

For many years in the summer months during the 50s through the 70s the Anna Ds did canning in the un-air-conditioned church kitchen and sold preserves, jams, and jellies. When finally one member of the Anna Ds got air-conditioning installed in her home the canning process moved there.

For years as another fundraiser they also made chocolate sauce - a “secret” recipe that apparently they all swore not to divulge to anyone outside the group. It was called “Pearlie’s Chocolate Sauce” and it wasn’t until after the woman who had control of the recipe, died in 2005, that the recipe was divulged. A copy of the recipe for that delicious sauce is now available.

In November 1988 the Anna Ds celebrated their 90th anniversary, again with a nice write up in the *Alton Telegraph*. The article mentioned that through their fundraising activities the past few years the Anna Ds had been able to carpet and redecorate the Kate Wuerker Room (our fellowship hall), fix up the kitchen, maintain their annual pledge to the church, and help when the church was in a financial crisis.

By the time of the 100th anniversary of the Anna Ds, in 1998, their numbers were fewer, many of the “old guard” had died, and most of their members were struggling with issues related to aging. They had no large celebration, or community recognition event, but met together at a member’s home for a luncheon. It was feared that the Anna Ds would have to disband.

“Nevertheless they persisted” – as the saying goes. It’s now almost 2020 and the Anna Ds are still here, supporting as best they can, the community, the denomination, the church, and hosting this community Tea.

A binder with selected documents and photographs from our church archives will be shelved on a bookcase in the Kate Wuerker Room.

May the indomitable spirit of Anna D Sparks, and the spirit of all those women who for over a century have made a difference in our church and our community, be with us all.