

Excerpt from the Report of the President General

MRS. HENRY M. ROBERT, Jr.,

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The Fiftieth Anniversary approaches. The visits of the President General to all parts of the country convince her of the interest of the members, of their eagerness to work and of their sincerity of purpose. She suggests as the most important step for the next two years an effort to know your own Society. There are many phases of its activity largely unknown to the general membership. They sometimes look upon the National Board of Management as something remote and apart from themselves, whereas it is you yourselves who make the National Board of Management.

Every member must know that when any state elects its State Regent, it is then choosing a member of the National Board of Management, and that her duties in that capacity may involve even greater responsibilities than those required as the Regent of her State.

As you listen to the reports of the National Chairmen, and realize that the activities of this Society reach out to touch groups of all races, creeds and nationalities in every section of the country, and as you look at this great block of properties with the same problems of maintenance, upkeep and care as any other great city block of buildings, remember that you as individuals within your states and as members of this Continental Congress are determining the character of the direction of these activities and these properties in the selection of your National Officers and State Regents. As members, you should know that this Society, although adhering strictly to business principles in its management, has difficulties not encountered by organizations of a purely business or commercial character.

The members of your National Board of Management serve entirely without compensation. They pay their own expenses, both for traveling and for hotels. They cannot, therefore, be called together for special meetings as need arises, because the Society has no right to put that added strain upon purely voluntary service, however willing the members may themselves be. Because of the fact that the widely scattered directorship cannot be quickly called together, experience has shown that its daily activities of management must be controlled by rules adopted as necessity arises. This is only a fair protection both to the Society and to those officers who may temporarily be in charge in Washington. The Society has been obliged to work out a system of its own adaptable to its needs.

If the executive officers of the Society were resident in Washington, few or no rules would be necessary, for each question could be decided individually as it arises. These are never adopted arbitrarily, but only as actual experience shows their need. For example, soon after Constitution Hall was opened it developed that it would be manifestly unfair to permit an attraction at night by one company when a similar attraction by another company had been given on the same afternoon. In consequence, as a guide to the Managing Director for future similar situations, a rule was adopted providing that when the hall

was engaged for a definite afternoon, no rival attraction of similar nature would be permitted on the night of the same day. Experience dictated this rule as both necessary and fair.

It should be further noted that, having once been adopted, a rule cannot be set aside by any individual officer. It may be changed or suspended only by the same board or authority creating it.

The voluntary basis of service of the Society should at all times be recognized. If it paid its board members, their attendance could be expected whenever needed. The first fact for the general membership to recognize is that with all of the responsibilities of a great business, the Society cannot conduct its affairs by the same methods. Members in every state have contributed to these properties. They are the real owners. They erected these buildings for their own use and have a personal affection for them. They have been happy to share their use with others, not for profit, but as a contribution to the cultural life of Washington. If Constitution Hall had been built commercially, the income has not been sufficient to cover interest alone on the investment, even without maintenance and repairs. If it were operated commercially, thus requiring return on investment, the cost for its use for practically all events now held there would be prohibitive. Only because those who built it for their own use, ask no return upon a great investment, is it possible for the people of this community to share at all in its advantages. The only reason the building exists and that it can be opened to others, is that women in every state and in chapters in other countries through years of hard and united effort brought their gifts to Washington.

In the beginning there were no rules except that all events should be of dignity and refinement and not in contradiction to the ideals of the Society. With experience a number of rules developed. If certain plans proved impracticable, they could not be continued. As a result of actual experience, a rule was adopted which has remained in force through parts of four administrations and which has recently been under discussion. That rule arose because of unpleasant experiences in attempting to go contrary to conditions and customs existing in the District of Columbia, as a result of which the Society was widely criticised in letters and comments in the press for not cooperating, even though actually all restrictions had been waived.

Statements were incorrect and were not based upon facts. Experience showed the Society that it could not go contrary to or further than the customs existing in the city in which its properties were located. There was no question of prejudice, personality or discrimination. This Society has consistently through its nearly fifty years been a friend of, and has worked for, many minority groups. It will continue to do so.

The question was merely this: Could the Society by continuing a practice contrary to accepted custom, cope with its difficulties? In business, if any venture is accompanied with results detrimental to the company or corporation, the practice is discontinued. The rule under question was simply that, under the conditions existing in the District of Columbia, the community did not accept the step which the Society had taken. Experience proved that it could not proceed further than local conditions warranted. The very fact that the rule attracted no attention through parts of four administrations indicated that it was in accordance with existing customs.

In January of this year a committee asked for the use of Constitution Hall for a musical event on April 9. The hall was already engaged by another

musical organization for that date. In so informing the committee, the rules were also explained, and the statement made that any request for exception to those rules should be addressed to the President General. Shortly afterward, with no request yet in writing, letters began to appear in the press. Comment and adverse criticism gathered like a snowball. More than three weeks after the first approach by the committee, during which time agitation and comment had increased, and the Society had been charged with bad faith, the President General received the first communication, and then this asked for April 9, the date which the committee had been informed three weeks previously was already engaged. Much conjecture and untruth was published. For example, question was raised as to whether the hall was really engaged, whereas last October, the Society's magazine published that date as booked, and many subscribers held season tickets including it.

Information and letters received during this period clearly indicated that the question was not one regarding a single artist, but involved far reaching changing social forces. By the time the National Board met on February first, the real question had become so involved with entanglements that it could not be considered alone. Let it be noted that this date was the first on which a Society constituted as ours, could consider the question of a change or an exception in its rules.

An important consideration was that, to make an exception, would be in direct contradiction to existing agreements with concert bureaus who have regularly used the hall for some years and whose agreements cover a period of years. The Society would therefore have opened itself to legal responsibility for violation of its own agreements. This was an important factor affecting the action by the Board.

These facts were stated more briefly in a letter to the National Board which includes the State Regent of every state. The meeting of the National Board at which forty-one members from all parts of the country were present, realized the seriousness of the decision to be made. After careful consideration of all factors involved the Board decided, through a ballot vote, that no exception could be made.

The membership should distinctly understand that to have made an exception would not only have been in violation of signed agreements of the Society, and customs for all similar properties in Washington, but would have meant that the Society retreated under fire of widely scattered groups and organizations, many of whom knew nothing of the facts, and whose interest had nothing to do with the real question.

To have changed a rule while it was entangled with so many factors having nothing to do with the rule, would have been to surrender the Society to influences inimical to its purposes and efforts. When independence of action is threatened, and when fog beclouds real issues, there can be no surrender.

Let all understand that there was never a question of one person or one artist. The only question under discussion was whether in view of all existing conditions an exception could be made in rules of long standing.

If a single inappropriate or undignified comment has been made or published during this discussion, it has been without the authority or knowledge of the National Society.

Is it reasonable that one group of women alone, whose properties are privately owned, whose buildings were possible only through voluntary contributions of its members in all parts of the country accumulated during nearly fifty years of

effort, be expected to work out the problems of vast groups backed by great changing social forces?

Conditions are the same as when experience dictated the need of the rule. This is not a question for the Daughters of the American Revolution alone to solve. When the community at large has worked out its problem, the Daughters of the American Revolution will be willing, as at all times, to adapt its policies to practices and customs in accordance with the highest standards of the community.

If this incident can teach that issues must be kept clear cut, and free from entanglements which obscure the real principles involved; if it can lead the members to know more of the problems and difficulties of the Society and emphasize the necessity of seeing the whole picture before forming judgment; if it can lead those who speak without knowledge to search for truth; if it can emphasize the need of decisions without malice, and a patriotism without prejudice, it will have served its purpose.