

Assistance League's Long and Colorful History

Anne Salenger Recounts the Early Years

By Marianne Buchanan

So you thought you were conversant in the history of our Assistance League? Indeed, I almost fell off my chair as Anne Salenger, National Assistance League Historian, presented the colorful history of the Assistance League which began in Los Angeles in the late 1800s led by Anne Banning, a woman of substance, breeding, position, and note.

Anne's parents were from Confederate Virginia. As a young bride, Anne's mother followed her husband during the Civil War. He was killed in the Battle of Winchester. She decided to reinvent herself and took a ship to Los Angeles where she lived with her brother and father upon arriving. She passed her independent courageous spirit to her daughter

Anne Banning was born in 1870 in Los Angeles, a city alive and buzzing with the new American gold, industry, business opportunities. She was courted by Hancock Banning, son of Los Angeles pioneer Phineas Banning. Hancock was one of the leading people of the day.

The Banning brothers owned Catalina Island, which they sold to the Wrigley brothers. Anne and Hancock had three children.

Anne and her friend, Tulita became leaders of Los Angeles society. Anne and her friends were supported by her husband's pioneer and aristocratic family. Anne was instrumental in founding The Huntington Museum.

In 1894, the most prominent women in Los Angeles formed a new charitable organization named the Assistance League. Anne, then a young wife and mother, was a member of this small group who did local charitable work in an informal way. The first public mention of Assistance League can be found in a *Los Angeles Times* article in 1894 about "The Butterfly Ball". Anne went as Marie Antoinette.

One of the very early and influential groups supporting Assistance League was Theta Sorority. Theta Sorority lent its support to the budding organization by providing members, connections and the support of Ada Day Edward Laughlin, who is another notable name in Assistance League history. (Women who became members had to be sponsored.) Ada is also notable because her husband, Homer Laughlin, produced the chinaware which bore the brand "Fiesta Ware;" which was made in the largest factory in the area. The brand name came from the town where the factory was located which was Fiesta, California. Fiesta Ware is a big collectible in today's antiques.

From a small group of 13, Assistance League has grown into 122 chapters and 26,000 member volunteers donating 2,600,000 hours each year, more than any other volunteer organization.

Earthquakes, Wars

The Assistance League, in its early form, even helped clothe children and others when the dread

fire and earthquake struck in 1906 in San Francisco. Members of the "Bohemian Club" of Knob Hill also contributed to the organization of early Assistance League. Their club house still stands today on Knob Hill. (Mrs. William Gibb Wilson, a relation of President Woodrow Wilson, assisted Anne in getting clothes for needy children later on.)

In 1912 there were 18 members of AL. (Just think, women could not even vote when AL was founded. So, as you may think, AL leaders helped with the Woman Suffrage movement.)

Soldiers of the World War I used Anne's home and were invited to her parties. Assistance League helped out the soldiers through World War II.

Hollywood Helps AL Grow

Anne Banning worked with and for the American Red Cross. Her work there inspired her to begin a Thrift Shop in Los Angeles, right across the street from Fox Movie Studios. Will Rogers came to her and said, "Why don't you have a tea room so that the actors on the set can come and have a good place to eat?" (Lamb Chops were 55 cents in 1936.) Anne Banning, very early on, enlisted Hollywood to help her in Assistance League endeavors. Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford helped her a great deal, especially in those early years, posing, lending their names to events, promoting fund raisers, balls.

In her presentation to our members, Anne Salenger showed menus, programs, newspaper articles, early portraits, and journals of memorable and important people of the day who came to the Thrift Shop: Jean Harlow worked every Friday. Shirley Temple was a member and worked in the Thrift Shop. Alice Roosevelt attended the tea room and signed her name in the Tea Room's guestbook, along with many other notables of the day.

The early group was known as "Anne Banning's Assistance League and was formally founded in 1919 in Los Angeles with 13 founding members. The Art Deco logo depicted a woman with swirling banner, forming an arch over head and sweeping to her feet and to the child standing beside her. Inscribed on the base were the words: "Service for All and All for Service." Another logo theme was "Loyalty, Love, Labor.")

Anne Banning died in 1961 but left a distinguished legacy of work, dedication, loyalty, and service to others.

Operation School Bell, led by Ruth Ann Montgomery, had its formal beginnings in 1958.

Today, we are coast to coast with 122 chapters, and 26,000 member volunteers. 2,600,000 service hours are contributed each year, far more than *any* other volunteer organization in U.S.

Each day we work, lend help, we are adding to the colorful, braided strands of the unique history of the Assistance League, which is not the Assistance League history alone, but the history of America and the world over, beginning in 1871.

I am hoping that Anne Salenger will put all of her historical information into a published book.

It would be fascinating reading.