

Carroll County Times "Carroll's Yesteryears" Articles

"Woman's Civic League"

Carroll County Times article for 6 March 1994

By Jay Graybeal

When "Professor" Charles L. Grove of Chambersburg, Pa., arrived in Westminster in January 1913, he had no idea that he was about to anger nearly the entire female population of the town. The details of his brief visit were front page news in the Democratic Advocate:

Considerable excitement was caused here the latter part of last week and the first part of this week by "Prof." Charles L. Grove, a professed mind reader and hypnotist who gave exhibitions several evenings last week at the Opera House, before large audiences.

Among other things he broke a large stone on the breast of a young woman named Mary McAvee, who accompanied him. This was done on Wednesday night of last week. A 16-pound hammer was used in the process, but Grove claimed that it was positively uninjurious to the woman. A man named Slick, who is a carpenter from Taneytown, thought otherwise, and obtained a warrant from Police Justice Brown, for Grove's arrest on a charge of assault. The case was tried before Justice Brown Saturday morning, and the accused was found guilty and fined \$5 and costs.

On Friday night, when Grove, in an exhibition at the Opera House, proposed to repeat the stone-breaking act, persons in the audience objected, and a vote was taken to ascertain the sentiment of the audience on the subject. This was found to be overwhelmingly against the exhibition, but Grove stood on the girl's breast. He also failed in an attempt to hypnotize some persons who volunteered for the experiment, at which he became incensed and said some uncomplimentary things about his audience. This raised a storm of indignation and a threatening demonstration toward the man was started. The performance was brought to a hasty conclusion and Grove managed with the protection of officers, to escape without injury. Both Grove and the woman hail it is said, from Chambersburg, Pa.

On Saturday morning Dr. D. F. Shipley testified that he had examined the girl, Mary McAvee, and found that there were absolutely no injuries upon her body.

However, the youthfulness and unprotected life of the girl so aroused the sympathy of several ladies that they appeared at the trial Saturday morning. Mrs. Charles Billingslea befriended the girl and was instrumental in securing funds to send her to Chambersburg Sunday morning.

On Saturday Grove drank too freely and on Saturday afternoon, as he was about to leave town, he was arrested on the charge of carrying about a concealed weapon. He was lodged in jail but was released on Monday morning upon giving \$200 bail for his appearance before the grand jury.

In the meantime the McAvee girl, upon reaching Chambersburg, hunted up Grove's son, a young man of about 19 years, and told him what had happened. He advised the girl to return to his father as she was under contract with him to fulfil certain engagements, and so the girl returned to this city Monday morning. She left however on the 5:20 p.m. train, Grove following Monday night on the Pittsburg Flyer.

While the local women may not have "reformed" Prof. Grove, his visit had a lasting effect on the community. On January 20 nearly 200 women met in the Westminster Firemen's Hall and formed the Woman's Civic League of Westminster and Carroll County. In addition to looking after the general needs

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of women, the League also sought to improve local living conditions. Standing committees were formed with the following purposes: a playground for children, prevention of certain kinds of moving pictures, sanitation of Westminster, prevention of cruelty to animals and the encouragement of growing flowers by young people. A year later, the organization had added committees for amusement, fly control, expectionation, old paper, social services and forestry.

The Woman's Civic League was a forerunner of a number of present day organizations dedicated to serving the community. All in all we should be glad that Prof. Grove came to town and got himself into so much trouble.

Photo Caption: Mrs. George K. Mather suggested the formation of the Woman's Civic League following the uproar caused by the visit of Prof. Grove in January 1913. Reproduced from History of the Maryland Federation of Women's Clubs, 1899-1941. Historical Society of Carroll County, gift of Mrs. Helen Billingslea, 1992.