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Women's club broke the lock of white power
Politics: A group in Baltimore has dedicated 50 years to trying to get African-Americans in elective offices.

by William F. Zorzi Jr. SUN STAFF The Baltimore Sun

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Once a month, a group of graying ladies in all their finery meets at an unassuming brick home in West Baltimore -- to chat, plot and scheme.

But this is not a social event.

This is a gathering of the Colored Women's Democratic Campaign Committee of Maryland. Politics, pure and simple.

These are the women who over the last half-century organized and launched unprecedented voter-registration drives and get-out-the- vote efforts in the city. They are the anonymous foot soldiers who helped break the white power lock on elective office in Baltimore and reshape city and state politics forever.

"The men had nothing till the women came along. They made all the difference," said Clarence H. Du Burns, Baltimore's first black mayor and a dues-paying, card-carrying member of the club almost since its creation, 50 years ago this month.

Del. Salima S. Marriott, a West Baltimore legislator of another generation, but nonetheless a member of the group, agreed.

"There is no question they have been a major instrument in empowering the black community politically," she said. "These women were there to make it happen."

The women -- everyday housewives, mothers and now grandmothers and great-grandmothers, the backbone of the black community -- made up an army that took to the streets seeking a better life through political power.

They registered tens of thousands of blacks to vote -- as many as 1,000 in a day -- changed the party affiliation of black Republicans to Democrat, and ran a top-flight political organization using the time-honored techniques of the old district bosses.

These days, the women are not as active as they once were: Their ranks have dwindled to 90 from several hundred three decades ago, and this year they mailed out just 500 sample ballots for the November presidential election, compared with registering 30,000 new voters in 1964 for President Lyndon B. Johnson's campaign.

Nevertheless, said Marriott, "people still come to seek their endorsement."

The women meet each month, wading back into politics at the Hanlon Park home of their undisputed leader, Victorine Q. Adams, former school- teacher, legislator, city councilwoman and founder of the club.

Earlier this month, about half of the 50 women on the organization's steering committee gathered at the Adams home for a special meeting -- a memory-filled event where members recounted the political successes, the good times and bad.

An 84-year-old, Adams seemed to move effortlessly -- though she would disagree -- around her living room, greeting club members as they signed the attendance log at the door.

In her distinctive voice, with a lilt that belies her age, Adams called the session to order with a prayer. "It's been a long struggle, and we've come a long way," she said.

Theirs is an extraordinary tale of ordinary women who became the legs of their own political organization -- at a time when Baltimore was segregated and no blacks held elective office.

"We didn't know we were making unusual strides or charting new ground; we just kept on," Adams said. "We had the numerical value to elect somebody, but we didn't believe we could do it."

They did do it, one vote at a time, helping elect black political history-makers such as Harry A. Cole, Verda F. Welcome, Henry G. Parks Jr.-- and Victorine Adams.

The women became block captains, precinct leaders and ward bosses. Poll-watchers, challengers and runners. They formed telephone squads and passed out sample ballots. Taught women and men how to use voting machines. (Adams still has one in her basement.)

"We came in green and didn't know from Adam," said Erla M. McKinnon. "But Mrs. Adams would hold sessions in that basement and teach."

They canvassed West Baltimore's old 4th District door to door, loaded up buses of would-be voters and took them downtown to register -- and then returned to those homes on election day to get out the vote.

"We worked those precincts; we knew every name," said Hortense H. Henry, recalling that when she joined in 1958, she walked West Baltimore with one baby in her arms and another in a stroller.

To trace the history of the women's club is to trace the modern political history of black Baltimore.

Adams said the scheme for a women's political club was hatched at the old York Hotel, a black hostelry on Madison Avenue owned by the late Lloyal Randolph, who succeeded Adams in the House of Delegates.

The concept became a reality Dec. 3, 1946, when Adams convened the first meeting.

In the beginning, the women's Democratic organization found itself backing Republican candidates, including the late Theodore R. McKeldin, a mayor and governor who championed the causes of the black community.

"When we first started, we had no blacks to support," Adams said. "We wanted to make a difference in our community by supporting the white people who veered to us."

Those blacks who did seek office found that they could not win a Democratic primary against the machine, which was controlled in West Baltimore's 4th District by James H. "Jack" Pollack.

In 1954, the Democratic women decided to throw their support behind a black Republican -- Harry A. Cole, a young lawyer running for the state Senate against Pollack's man in the 4th, incumbent Bernard S. Melnicove.

"The black men were like any white organization: They stuck to the old way of doing things," Burns said. "Victorine and her ladies said, `The hell with you. We're going with Harry Cole.' "

Cole had run unsuccessfully for the House of Delegates in 1950 and the City Council in 1951. This time, Adams and her club women joined Cole's own group of loyalists to get Cole supporters to the polls.

Cole won by a mere 37 votes, becoming the first black to be elected to the Senate of Maryland.

"For all the help they gave me, I will always be grateful to Mrs. Adams and all her ladies," said Cole, who later would be named to the Maryland Court of Appeals, the first black to sit on the state's highest court.

Cole's win in 1954 changed politics by harnessing the power of 4th District blacks, the greatest concentration of blacks in the city, and putting it on the line at the polls. "Harry Cole opened the floodgates, because his victory proved we could do it," Adams said.

The next year, Pollack was forced to run a black candidate for City Council from the 4th District. Walter T. Dixon, a loyal member of Pollack's Trenton Democratic Club, became the first black council member in 25 years.

Meanwhile, white West Side boss Irvin Kovens decided to join forces with Adams' husband, William L. "Little Willie" Adams, a one-time numbers kingpin and multimillionaire real estate developer.

Mrs. Adams and her ladies remained independent.

"When I would see them, Victorine was running the women's club, and Willie was running his own with Mr. Kovens," former Gov. William Donald Schaefer recalled recently.

But husband and wife typically found themselves working for the same candidates. One of those times was in 1962, when the push was on to take back the 4th District Senate seat from the Pollack-bossed incumbent, and the women's group swung into action to help elect one of their own, club member Verda F. Welcome.

Welcome won and became the first black woman in the Maryland Senate.

By 1966, Mrs. Adams stepped up and ran for the House of Delegates, winning a seat. The next year, she left the legislature for a seat on the City Council -- the first black woman to hold that office.

Today, the women meet in a Baltimore markedly different than the city of 50 years ago. It has a population that is more than 60 percent black, and the majority of its elected officials are black.

With such political gains, electing African-Americans is less a focus for many black voters. And as part of the natural political order, there are often struggles for power, factional rifts and splits in allegiance.

"We worked together till it got to the point where we could disagree," Adams said with a smile.

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Caption:
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Caption: Nostalgia: Clara B. Coates (left), Victorine Q. Adams, Margaret Brown, Mary A. Cooper and Chessie M. Brailey flip through photographs from the early days of the political club.

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