

Local history: What in the world is a Witan?

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By Akron Beacon Journal Staff

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Put on your thinking cap. It's time for a pop quiz.

Question: What is the definition of Witan?

1. *A small island in the South Pacific.*
2. *An exotic species of flowering vine.*
3. *A popular brand of wicker furniture.*
4. *An abbreviation in Old English.*

If you responded in Old English, congratulations! You just might be in touch with Akron's needs.

In 1943, seven young women formed a club that they hoped would be an asset to the community during World War II.

The founders were Mary Brittain, Betty Clemmer, Pat Krans, Gretchen Parsons, Billie Miller Schlegel, Audrey Stevens and Eleanor Woodward, the wives of Akron men who belonged to the Junior Chamber of Commerce.

The women named their group "Witan" — pronounced wi-TAHN — after the Anglo-Saxon word witenagemot, which is defined as "a group of councilors carefully selected, and acting under a democratic form of government."

The club recruited 50 women as charter members and sponsored 50 others for membership at a fancy tea party during the first months of activity. Mary Brittain was elected as Witan's first president.

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“We feel that Akron needs a club of young women who are interested in the welfare of the city, so they may work together in a congenial manner,” Miller Schlegel, a member of the organizing committee, explained in 1943.

One of the club’s earliest functions was a luncheon at the Mayflower Hotel to hear Beacon Journal reporter Kenneth Nichols discuss the United War Chest of Summit County campaign. Members wore hats, gloves and formal attire.

“From the start, Witan was very busy in the community,” explained Karen Clark, Witan’s president for 2012-2013. “Witan was involved in the sorting of the United National Clothing Collection for Akron and Summit County. This was a huge collection of clothing from all over the city of Akron and the nation. The clothing was sorted and sent overseas to people in war-torn countries.”

Club members held benefit bridge parties, sold tickets to shows at Goodyear Theater, sponsored Valentine’s Day dances, whipped up Christmas eggnog socials and served as soda jerks at the Akron YWCA, Clark said.

Witan also volunteered for the Summit County Children’s Home, Akron Children’s Hospital, Kate Waller Barrett Training School, March of Dimes, Akron Symphony Orchestra and the Summit County Society of the Blind.

In addition to improving the community, Witan members improved themselves.

“In the old days, when women weren’t allowed to sit on boards because ‘what could we possibly contribute,’ this was a way to train women to be on boards, to understand Robert’s Rules, to understand board procedures, and to understand financial statements and things like that,” said 2012-2013 membership chair Cherie Morris Shechter. “It was a training class, really. Your experience in Witan prepared you for doing something better.”

The club reflected the changing roles of women and housewives in American society. In 1959 interviews with United Press International, Witan members pointed out that club activities were a nice complement to housework.

“I think the clubwoman is a much better homemaker than that perfect little housewife who is home all day,” President Mary Jane Tenney told a reporter. “The clubwoman has been out mixing with people. She comes home to her family with interesting things to talk about. Her conversation is not centered on the washing machine breaking down or something else that went wrong.”

Past President Lucy Palmer added: “I think the hardest part of the day for a woman is 4 to 6. Husband home, children home, and me trying to get dinner on. All I hear is questions, questions, questions.”

Jeanne Ilse concluded: “None of us is a perfect housewife, I can tell you. None of us is what I’d call a typical clubwoman either.”

Since 1943, Witan has volunteered more than 3 million hours in the community and granted more than \$1 million to nonprofit agencies. Through fundraising projects, Witan donates \$50,000 per year to community projects.

Among its notable achievements, the group:

- Pledged \$75,000 to Stewart’s Caring Place in Fairlawn.
- Commissioned composer Carlos Chavez to write an original score for the opening of E.J. Thomas Hall.
- Founded the Deaf Children’s Nursery at the Rehabilitation Center.
- Restored historic, stained-glass windows in the Chapel at Glendale Cemetery.
- Granted funds to the burn center at Akron Children’s Hospital.
- Pledged \$25,000 to Ronald McDonald House at its inception.
- Provided seed money to establish an arboretum at the F.A. Seiberling Nature Realm.
- Funded the soup kitchen at St. John’s Episcopal Church.
- Sponsored the cost of Petie the Pony at Victory Gallop.
- Purchased kitchen equipment for group homes of Hattie Larlham in Summit County.

- Funded scholarships for the Children's Concert Society.
- Purchased lumber to build Habitat for Humanity housing.

After 70 years, Witan is still going strong. It has nearly 100 active members and another 200 sustaining members.

Shechter described Witan as a fellowship where members can make wonderful friends.

"If you came into this community and didn't know anybody, and you wanted to get to know people fast, we have people from all over Akron," she said.

In recent years, Witan has unofficially become WITAN. An informal acronym, Women In Touch with Akron's Needs, was adopted nearly a decade ago to further describe the group's mission.

At least it's not called witenagemot.

"It's an unpronounceable word," Shechter said. "Fortunately, they've shortened it to Witan."

The philanthropic group sponsors two major fundraisers each year and they are both held in February.

"There's nothing to do here in February," Shechter said with a laugh.

A black-tie gala, the WOW Imagine Ball, is held at the beginning of the month. This year's event raised \$24,000.

The other major fundraiser is the French Market, which will be held this Friday and Saturday at Todaro's Party Center in Cuyahoga Falls. Started in 1978, the market is a juried arts and crafts show with custom-made jewelry, homemade baked goods, daily luncheons and more. Admission is \$6.

The event is expected to attract thousands of visitors and raise more than \$25,000 for community projects.

"It's just a fun thing to do and, fortunately for us, it makes a lot of money for a lot of good causes," Shechter said.

For more about Witan, visit <http://www.witaninfo.org>. Beacon Journal copy editor Mark J. Price is the author of *The Rest Is History: True Tales From Akron's Vibrant Past*, a book from the University of Akron Press. He can be reached at 330-996-3850 or mjprice@thebeaconjournal.com.