

100 Years Ago, October 1911

by Elaine Park

October 2011 marked two important centennials: 100 years ago this month, women won the right to vote in California, and just days later, the recently incorporated Redwood City Woman's Club dedicated its newly built clubhouse as the heart of its association, a bold act in an era where women were expected to stay in their homes and concentrate exclusively on their own family.

The fundraising drive that paid for this new craftsman style building began two years earlier, in the summer of 1909, when the firm of Baldwin and Howell offered the new club a plot of land in what was then the Dingee Park estate. The land was only the beginning, and our foremothers had to get creative to raise the money to build our clubhouse. One of the ways our club members helped bankroll the \$3,000 construction cost was taking over the July 4th edition of the Redwood City Democrat, writing and selling copies at ten cents apiece. The front page of this issue is currently framed and displayed on the wall of our serving room as a testament to the ingenuity and perseverance of these first members.

In our archives, we have a treasure trove of material that spans the more than 100 years of our clubhouse's life. And looking back at these old documents it's hard to imagine what a radical step starting a woman's club was in those days. Associating in a woman-only group dedicated to activities outside the home put these women at the forefront of the great progressive era of the early 1900's. An entire article in the July 4th Democrat written by Frances Fairchild, titled "Club Life as a Factor in the Home," is devoted to justifying this unprecedented step out of the kitchen.

In the paper she asks, "Can woman do both house work and club duties and do them well? Yes, true womanliness is not in danger, and the sacred duties of wife and mother will be all the more honorably performed." Club work, she reassured her readers, leaves a woman "refreshed, uplifted, rested, and inspired ... this makes them more fruitful of accomplishment hereafter, whether their plan of work includes a personal uplift, their homes and their children, society or the nation." A second author, Blanch Morse, tells us, "Gradually it will be discovered that "home" and "solitary confinement" are not synonymous."

For these women, coming out of the isolation of the home into the sisterhood of a club was a revolution that would not only free them from the “monotony of house work,” as Blanch Morse wrote, but would also result in “radical reconstruction of social and national ideals” coming from “the power of associated womanhood.” Not surprisingly, direct political involvement stood high on the list of many members, and the first registered woman voter in San Mateo County, Mrs. J. H. Nash, was also one of the first members of our club.

Such service to the community, and nation, was the second arm of our founding members’ embrace of club life, and once the clubhouse was built, they wasted no time in using it to stage countless events to raise funds for this work. The clubhouse has been the venue for everything from floral fantasias to art shows, from gala dances to full-on musical reviews, to craft fairs and bingo nights, all to generate money in support of improving life in Redwood City and its neighbors. Along the way the clubhouse has also been used to host speakers on subjects both timeless and topical such as cancer, family life, education, civic issues, women who blackmail, *Mein Kampf*, the dangers of juvenile delinquency, and many, many varieties of gardening.

The traditions begun by the 30 original members of the Redwood City Woman’s Club have continued on for more than a century, and our numbers are only growing. Today our club continues to hear from informative speakers, helps a long list of organizations in Redwood City, and finds the leaders of Redwood City among its membership.

In the 21st century, at the start of the second century of our clubhouse’s life, we modern women are unlike our foremothers in so many ways. Our ages run from early 40s to late 80s. Many of us work for pay outside the home or have retired from a career. We include single, partnered, and married women. We no longer each have a repertoire of songs we can sing or play on demand, and few of us could put together a hat show. But we are like our founding mothers too, in our commitment to the twin missions of the club: “promoting acquaintance, good fellowship and cooperation among the woman of the town,” and providing a space where “questions of importance to the community may be freely discussed.”

And like those first builders of our club, we share a deep love of our clubhouse and the home it gives us.