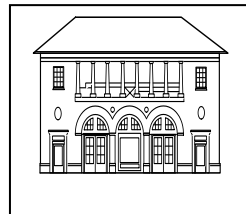


JOURNAL OF LOCAL HISTORY

VOLUME 4 NO. 2

FALL 2012



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Journal of Local History

Who Were Woman's Club's Founding Mothers?

By James O. Clifford, Sr.



Woman's Clubhouse 2012

When the Redwood City Woman's Club's building hit the century mark last year there was frequent lauding of the venerable group's "foremothers," depicted as taking a daring step at a time when women were, as one club official put it, "expected to stay in their homes and concentrate exclusively on their own family."

She might well have added "and glad of it."

Just who were the club's "founding mothers?" Researchers at the Redwood City library's history archives found that most, if not all, were privileged women with a good deal of time and money at their disposal who felt that running a home was a career.

One pioneer member, Mrs. W.H. Kelso, complained in the Redwood City Democrat that the census bureau listed busy wives and mothers "as having no occupation."

"Shall we not rise up in a body and demand that our occupation be given recognition?" she asked. "Let's tell Mr. Census Bureau to try it for a while himself and see what he thinks then!"

In the same issue, a special July 4th edition that will be detailed later, Mrs. Flora Pyle, who headed the state organization of woman's clubs, noted that critics of the clubs feared domestic life would be neglected

because women would spend too much time away from home. Not so, she wrote, insisting that the clubs “would teach the women of tomorrow the true foundation of this great science,” meaning home economics. The page facing Pyle’s column consisted entirely of recipes penned by club members in an era when “fast food” referred to table manners, as in “eating too fast,” rather than cooking time.



Photo by Davey
MRS. C. E. CUMBERSON,
President

Mrs. C. E. Cumberson, 1st President

The first president of the Redwood City Woman’s Club was Katherine Cumberson, wife of Charles Elsworth Cumberson, described variously as a “wealthy capitalist” or “San Francisco businessman.”

There were 33 initial members of the club who were told by Cumberson that they were expected to be “a subtle power behind the throne.” She said women have always had such power “in the home and likewise may wield through her club for community benefit.”

Decades later, Jean Cloud, who once served as chair of the Redwood City Archives Committee, wrote in the Redwood City Almanac that the birth of the club was significant because it “was independent of any men’s group.” She noted there were several other woman’s organizations in the area, but these had “strong ties” to a male counterpart. Cloud also

pointed out that each church had a women’s group that met on a regular basis.

“Women were very much involved,” she concluded. The local Bonita Parlor of the Native Daughters of the Golden West, for example, stretched back to 1887 when it was founded on Main Street in Redwood City.

There was no “Ms” title in those days and all the founders of the Woman’s Club went by the family name of their husband, who, by today’s standards, would be in the “1 percent” or close to it.

Money, however, is no protection against tragedy, which struck the Cumbersons in 1915. In July of that year a former gardener at the family’s home on Roosevelt Ave. shot Mr. Cumberson twice, burned down the house and killed himself with poison.

“All that remains as mute evidence of that night of tragedy are the two brick chimneys of the house,” one newspaper reported.

Mr. Cumberson recovered and the family moved to Palo Alto. He died in 1929 at, appropriately, the Western Woman’s Club in San Francisco.

Another Tragedy



Photo by Davey

MRS. H. C. FINKLER,
Treasurer.

Mrs. Henry Finkler, nee Aileen Jane Brophy of Salem, Oregon, a charter member of the club, became club president in 1915. The husband and wife

both had a keen interest in public affairs. One historian said Mrs. Finkler “though always devoted to home interests, found opportunity and inclination to extend her field of usefulness into the world around her and was long an active and energetic leader in community life.”

Hailed as an inspirational speaker, she was considered a powerful factor in politics. Her resume included a stint on the Federation of Woman’s Clubs national committee on child labor. She was also a member of the Red Cross, the Woman’s Building Association of San Francisco and served on the Republican Party’s State Central Committee from 1916 to 1918.

She became a member of a very prominent family when she married Henry, who served as senior secretary to the State Supreme Court for more than 50 years, a job he took over from his father. Finkler, who was known for his meticulous record keeping, also served as the court’s statistician and historian.

The Finklers lived on land that today is Edgewood Park. Aileen’s friends said she spent much of her time cooking and gardening. Every day she would cook a pot of beans to serve to the poor who stopped by. Mrs. Finkler died in 1927 after being ill for several years. The couple had no children. Three years after his wife died, Finkler shot himself in the heart and died instantly. Many claimed he was despondent over the death of his wife.

Another “true love story” connected to the club’s early years involved charter member Mary Wahl Beeger, wife of wealthy Henry Beeger, who owned the Beeger Tannery. Henry lived only seven years after the last of the couple’s seven children was born in 1891. Nevertheless, Mary considered herself still “married.”

She went on to run the tannery until her son, Henry, a future Redwood City mayor, took over the job. In 1923, Mary, who died in 1941, built an imposing 14-room home at the corner of Hopkins and Fulton that the Redwood City Resources Advisory Committee lists under “historic properties.”

The seven children included Gertrude, who was the Woman’s Club’s first corresponding secretary. In 1976 Gertrude, a Stanford graduate, was interviewed by the Redwood City Archives Committee. She said that her mother “did a great many early things in Redwood City,” recalling that her mother and Mrs. Cumberson decided that “we ought to have a women’s club in Redwood City and, all

right, they got one.” The Beeger line includes Diana Kadash who described “Aunt Trudy” as a “wonderful, gentle soul.” She said her great-aunt lived in the home on Hopkins until she died. “I do believe she was over 100.”

Taking part in the 1976 interview was Emma McCrea who said her mother had considered joining the club but didn’t.

“Ma and Elizabeth Hanson were all dressed up to go join,” she said. “Half way over they said, ‘Oh, if we join they’ll be making us work all the time.’ So they turned around and didn’t go.” Not a bad decision considering all the projects the club would undertake.

Many Tasks Ahead

One of the first of the club’s projects to draw public notice was the flower festival held on May 11, 1912. The San Francisco Call newspaper said “everybody came to the celebration” held on the streets of Redwood City and the clubhouse grounds.

The newspaper’s account of the floral parade from downtown to the club tells of a simpler time: “Little schoolboys rode bicycles or pulled toy wagons behind them, while the tiny girls trundled gaily decorated doll buggies and go carts.”

The parade was organized by Miss Beeger and Mrs. George A. Merrill, whose husband was a leading San Francisco educator. Among other accomplishments, Mr. Merrill served as director of the California School of Mechanical Arts from 1894 until 1939, when he retired and went on to become mayor of Redwood City.

Mrs. Merrill, the former Sarah Elizabeth McKie of San Diego, was well read and had strong convictions, if an article she wrote for a groundbreaking edition of the Redwood City Democrat provides a clue. The issue on July 4, 1910 mainly celebrated the opening of the new San Mateo County Courthouse. It included, however, a 24-page supplement edited by members of the woman’s club, which marked a first.

The newspaper told its readers that the women’s efforts “would go far to convince the public that ladies know what news is and how to write it.” The newspaper certainly reached that goal. Mrs. Merrill fulfilled the promise of “knowing what news is” when she wrote about the importance of America’s relations with Asia. She said that in 1910

those ties seemed “a matter of small consequence.” She added perceptively that “historians of a century hence will see it otherwise.” (Eds Note: For more on the July 4, 1910 issue see “Redwood City 1910: Everything Up To Date” in the Winter 2011 Journal of Local History).

Zoe Fox Thorpe, who was born into a well known family, edited the paper that contained everything from brief histories of San Mateo County towns to the aforementioned recipes. In addition to editing the paper, she wrote a column on patriotism. “As the home is the most powerful factor on the child’s life, let us make that home breathe, speak and think patriotism,” she wrote.

Fox was born on January 15, 1870 to George and Sarah Fox. Her lineage included Benjamin Fox, who served as the first San Mateo County judge in 1856, the year the county was established. Her brother, Charles, served on the California Supreme Court from 1889 to 1891.

In 1892 she married attorney Fayette Thorpe who died in 1908 at the age of 38. The widow taught music and was remembered as charming, and, with a strong network of women friends, she was a natural pick for editor.

The special edition of the Redwood City Democrat cost ten cents and the money went toward building a clubhouse for the new organization.

“How both the newspaper and the Woman’s Club made money with a total population of only 2,500 people is beyond me,” wrote Aileen Foster in “This Old House,” a history of the club. Foster, aka Mrs. Charles J. Foster, wrote the eight-page account in 1973 when she was the club’s recording secretary.

The newspaper was not the only means used by the club to raise money for the building fund. The members also made hats and sold them, a venture that drew the attention of the San Francisco Examiner’s Hazel Pedlar, who wrote the paper’s “Notes For The Women” column.

Pedlar reported in the Sunday, Sept. 8, 1912 edition that Mrs. Cumberson came up with the “millinery method” of raising funds for the building. Club members used Chinese matting and bright material to create “garden hats” which Pedlar deemed a “necessity” in Redwood City. “Every one of the club members and their neighbors count a garden as part of Redwood City life,” she observed.

The Clubhouse Becomes a Reality

Architect LeBaron Olive was selected to design the clubhouse, now a familiar landmark on Clinton Street. There’s little in local archives about Olive, but the Santa Cruz Public Library has a newspaper published in 1889 that contained a column called “Building Notes” that reported on improvements in the coastal town during the “past five years.” The column described Olive as an “architect and builder” who was the son and grandson of builders.

“He served his full time as apprentice at the carpenter’s trade” and went on to develop a resume that included work in Canada, as well as New York and other major American cities. By 1889 Olive had, the newspaper claimed, accomplished so much during the past four years that it would be “impossible to record” it all in detail, but most of the outstanding accomplishments involved small shops or large residences.

A few years later, in the early 1890s, Olive’s reputation had grown to the point that he was awarded a \$25,000 contract, then a considerable sum, to build the “Eastlake” bathhouse in Santa Cruz. The bathhouse “palace” had a wide, gingerbread-trimmed beach veranda and stained-glass doors opening into a two-story plunge. A balcony in the shape of a horseshoe enclosed a bandstand and bleachers. People in the bleachers could view swimmers on glass-lined slides, diving platforms or trapeze gear stationed over the pool.

The account said “the steamy air and sunny multicolored skylight made perfect conditions for the palms, flowers and vines, giving a tropical ambiance.” The pool was lighted with submerged colored light and a tank at one end produced a five-foot-tall waterfall over the restaurant’s observation windows. “The restaurant was dominated by an elegant fireplace and had all the gingerbread and stained glass of a riverboat ballroom,” the “notes” noted, adding that a spiral staircase led to a rooftop sea view observatory.

By 1909 Olive’s reputation had spread north and he designed the Portola Valley School on land donated by Andrew Hallidie, inventor of San Francisco’s cable cars. Initially, Olive wanted the exterior of the woman’s club building to be in Mission Revival, but he switched to wood instead of stucco. Exactly why he made the change is still a mystery.

In "This Old House," Foster, the niece of founding club member Aileen Finkler, said she was "sorry" that she failed to discover why Olive's "beautiful plan for a Spanish Mission building was eliminated" in favor of shingles.

The experience at the Portola school, however, gives a clue. Olive wanted the school in Mission Revival but decided on wood because it was less expensive. The operative part of Redwood City, after all, is redwood.

Foster said she had read Olive's plan for the club house and, except for the outside, it was clear that "the building we have is the one he designed." The interior rooms are the same as described in Olive's plans which featured a large foyer, an auditorium stage, and a tea room.

The club house was dedicated on Oct. 19, 1911 with representatives of all the civic and service clubs on the Peninsula present, along with government officials. The dignitaries included Mrs. A.P. Black, president of the California Federation of Women's Clubs.

A few days later a flower show opened that allowed area growers to display their bounty, which included carnations, orchids, roses and hot house plants of just about every color. Flowers must have been considered important to the Peninsula economy because the event lasted for three days.

Another Mystery

Why Olive changed his plan is not the only mystery. Another is what happened to the club's Well Baby Clinic? In the 1930s, the clinic's work was honored with an extensive article in the California Federation News that noted the club operated the only such clinic in San Mateo County, which, the article, said, "is justly proud of its club women to whom each and every little life is precious."

From the article, it seems the club became the site of the clinic in the late 1920s and catered mainly to poor mothers, many of them immigrants. When the clinic ceased operating is not certain. However, club records contain reports up to the 1950s. (Eds Note: Readers who have information on the clinic please contact The Journal of Local History at the library).

At any rate, the method of operation seemed to be constant. The babies were weighed, their height was measured, and a diet was prescribed. The

mothers were also advised on how to care for the infants. Doctors Adelaide Brown and Ralph Howe were mentioned in the Federation piece. Club volunteers helped the physicians.

Later, the clinic moved to Washington School where club records for 1937 show there were 354 visits by mothers who were seen by a doctor, "our own Mrs. Nelson Andrews." By 1940, Doctor Andrews was referred to as "Doctor Bertha Andrews" who by then was giving immunizations against diphtheria and small pox.

One of the more detailed reports of the clinic's activities was made in 1940 by Eleanor Poole of the club's Child Welfare Section. Poole, who volunteered at the clinic, underlined the fact that the clinic, as the name implied, was for "well children."

Any cases of illness or accident that were brought to the clinic "are immediately referred to the family physician or, if necessary, to the County Health Department,"

Poole reported that between June of 1939 and May of 1940 the clinic staff examined 697 children. There were 33 immunizations, each requiring three injections at three week intervals, as well as 4 small pox vaccinations.

The clinic's reputation drew visitors from the County Health Department, school nurses and students from "social problem classes," Poole reported.

In a few years, the nation was fighting World War II and the club's activities increased. Still, the clinic saw 678 babies during a one-year span. The club carried this out while still finding members and time to devote "over 2,000 hours a month in service work," according to a club report. Among other projects, the club provided flowers for a military hospital, took part in war bond drives, as well as helping the U.S.O. and Red Cross. The women also "met weekly to spend a day sewing or rolling bandages."

In 1950, five year after WWII ended and the Korean War started, the Well Baby Clinic, hit its peak by examining 817 children, according to a 1966 story in the Redwood City Tribune.

In 1956, polio shots were added to the clinic's services as well as interpreters who were needed because "many" foreign languages were spoken.

After this, little is known about the clinic. There is no mention of the clinic in the 1958 report by the club's president. Apparently the county had

taken over the clinic's function. A club report in 1972 said the clinic, now operating out of a union hall, was being administered by Public Health Nurses from the County Health and Welfare Department.

Declining Membership

Today's membership is down to 56, according to club officials who noted with hope that five new members were enrolled recently. This is way below the 400 to 500 figure during World War II when membership was so strong the club was able to burn its mortgage. It's not surprising that membership swelled during and after the war. Historians have noted that the post war years saw the greatest growth in volunteer activity in American history.

Americans joined "neighborhood and community organizations and took part in politics at rates that made the postwar era the 20th Century's golden age," Suzanne Mettler wrote in "Soldier to Citizens: The G.I. Bill and the Making of the Greatest Generation."

Declining membership was noted by the San Mateo Times in 1993 when reporter Heidi Van Zant wrote that only three dozen women gathered for the club's monthly meeting. At the time, there were about 100 members.

Club treasurer Jo Ridgeway said the roster was getting smaller each year.

"They're dying or going into convalescent hospitals," she said. "It's getting harder to get new members."

The Times' piece mentioned that "volunteerism is declining in many other organizations as well, as more women join the workforce and have less time for community activities."

Aileen Brian, who joined the club in 1940, recounted the glory days of the club.

"When children were small this was the thing to do," she told Van Zant. "You always dressed for the meetings. You never wore slacks.."

Elaine Park, the present club historian, said "modern women are unlike our foremothers in so many ways. Our ages run from the early 40s to the late 80s. Many of us work for pay outside the home, or have retired from a career. We include single, partnered, and married women."

Still, she said, today's members are like the club founders in that they want to promote the

original mission of the organization, which is to foster "acquaintances, good fellowship and cooperation among the women of the town."

The year 1911 was a good one for women in Redwood City. Not only did they open a club house, they also got the right to vote. On Oct. 10, 1911, men approved an amendment passed earlier by the legislature. San Mateo County men, however, voted thumbs down, along with male voters in San Francisco and Alameda Counties.

Opponents could be found everywhere in the cities where the saloon and liquor trades openly opposed the measure, according to Molly Murphy MacGregor, cofounder of the National Women's History Project.

"They argued that if women had the ballot, it would be bad for business for every brothel keeper, every keeper of a dive and low saloon," she said.

MacGregor said the anti-suffrage forces warned men that if women got the right to vote prohibition would follow. They were right, but that's a different story.

Building Housed More than One Club

By James O. Clifford, Sr.

The historic Woman's Club building on Clinton Street in Redwood City has been home to more than one women's organization.

The wooden structure with the distinctive half moon driveway, which marked its 100th birthday last year, also hosted the Redwood City Business and Professional Women's Club.

Although little is known about the RWC branch, the national organization reached back to 1919 and lasted until 2009 when it "ceased to operate" but continues as a foundation, according to the California Federation of Business and Professional Women.

The Redwood City club was almost forgotten until Kathy Restaino, a volunteer at the library archives, found the papers of Lelah Butts, a mainstay of the local group that was chartered on Jan. 1, 1935 with Edith Ashley as president. Butts came to San Mateo County from Sonoma County where she was active in that area's chapter. Butts, a member of the

national organization since 1919, headed the Redwood City club in 1945.

From reading Butts' documents, it is clear that war was a key factor in the history of the club, which at one point had at least 120 members in the Redwood City chapter. In 1945, the national organization had a slogan that said there are "Jobs enough to go around," meaning women should not have to leave jobs to make way for men returning from World War II. In 1944, a year before the war ended, 80,000 women belonged to the Business and Professional Women's 1,662 chapters.

The national federation was an outgrowth of World War I when the government recognized the need for an organization to keep track of women's skills and experience. A Women's War Council was established by the War Department to organize the resources of professional women. The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs was founded on July 15, 1919, although the war was over.

In 1943, as World War II raged, the federation claimed it was the largest group of professional and business women in the world. It estimated that 33 percent of its membership consisted of educators, librarians, doctors and lawyers. Women in clerical and sales positions made up 38 percent with the remainder engaged in a variety of fields, ranging from florists and decorators to managers and executives.

Among other goals, the federation said it wanted to "eliminate existing legal restrictions against women." Listed higher, however, was the desire to provide members with "information about the recruitment and training of women for war work." Both aims would dovetail during the war. The prevalence of wage discrimination against women was "not felt until the massive influx of women," who were exempt from the draft, in to the work force. Immediately following the war, the Women's Pay Act of 1945, was introduced in Congress.

Margaret Hickey, the president of the national federation, served as chair of the women's division of the War Manpower Commission. In a speech in San Francisco just two months before the war ended, she said many women workers "fear they will be swept into the scrap heap of society" when the conflict ended.

She estimated that 15 million women wanted to remain in industry, which meant many more females would be in the labor market than before the

war, noting that many single woman would find marriage "an impossibility" because hundreds of thousands of men were killed in the war. "Some of them have dependants to support," she added.

"Women with small children who do not need to work, should not be encouraged to stay in the labor market," Hickey continued. "They will be needed in the post-war" years to help guide "American homes from wartime instabilities to a new sense of security."

In Hickey's opinion, many women would not work if they could provide for their children without doing so, but she said steps must be taken to help those who stay on the job. In a plea that could be sounded today, she called for maternity leave, day nurseries, pre-schools and improved status for domestic workers. She said such steps could lead to the day when "all American children can have educational opportunities, health protection and welfare programs."

Peninsula Hills Woman's Club: What's in a Name?

In 1956 the Golden Gate District of the California Federation of Women's Clubs asked some women in the Redwood City area if they were interested in forming a Junior Women's Club. Several younger members of the Redwood City Woman's Club favored the move, but the general membership of that organization was against sponsoring the venture. Because by-laws required a sponsor, the young women approached the Women's Club of Palo Alto, which agreed to be their advisor through the federation's district. Thus, Peninsula Hills Junior Women's Club became official. The name didn't last, however.

Club Gets "Carded"

At the time, bylaws provided that a woman could not remain a member of a junior club beyond the age of 35. In 1960 thirteen women, most of them former junior club members, formed Peninsula Hills Women's Club, submitting bylaws for State approval. In 1961, Peninsula Hills Women's Club received its

charter and was recognized as a member of the California Federation of Women's Clubs as well as a member of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. For a few years there were two clubs: the Peninsula Hills Junior Women's Club and the Peninsula Hills Women's Club, which essentially absorbed the younger club when members reached 35.

"There were two clubs, both federated, for many years," said longtime member Barbara Britschgi. "Not sure what year there were no 35 year olds left" but eventually "we were all former juniors and that is how Peninsula Hills really got started."

In 2011, the club celebrated its 50th Anniversary with a gala event held at the Redwood City Elk's lodge. Today, Peninsula Hills Women's Club has five members who have held membership in the organization for more than 50 years. Current Peninsula Hills Women's Club membership stands at 40.

Many Projects

The club has helped several organizations, including the archives at the Redwood City Library, which are often used by volunteers who write for this journal. In 1976 the junior club, which then had only 15 members, donated \$2,200 to the library in order to make the Richard Schellens local history collection available to the public. The money was raised through the sale of bicentennial calendars featuring scenes drawn by area students. The money was used to copy material in the collection, thus allowing public access to the research done by Schellens, who died in 1975. Schellens gathered enough information to fill 184 large loose-leaf notebooks. The project included inventorying, organizing, cataloging and supervising the use of the collection. The Redwood City Tribune praised the club in an editorial that said the effort "should be an inspiration to other and perhaps larger service clubs."

A year earlier, the club was honored by the California Parks and Recreation Society for its work in helping needy children take part in camping programs.

The club's history is filled with such projects, including one in 1969 that saw the younger chapter deliver food, clothing and toys to members of the Inter-Tribal Council of Nevada.

"The founding mentors had a deep desire to serve their community by charitable, educational and

service programs," reads a club recruiting pamphlet headlined "Join Now and Help us Help Others."

The club has donated to the Heifer International Project, as well as Christmas Families and the San Mateo County Historical Association. It supports several other activities, including the One Warm Coat Project, the Christmas Giving Trees and the Community Breast Health Project.

As for the current age of the members, the club literature says only that it ranges in age "from thirty something to Golden Girls."

In 2010 the club held a tea, the largest fund raiser in its history, that raised \$5,000 for the Shelter Network and \$5,000 for the Redwood City Education Foundation.