

Building a Community

A History of the Redwood City Woman's Club 1909 - 1919

From its start, the Redwood City Woman's Club was recognized as an important contributor to the development of Redwood City. In promoting the City's new Dingee Park subdivision, for example, H. C. Tuchsén, a representative of the Baldwin and Howell Real Estate Company, declared: "the club itself is a factor that has made itself felt in the matters of civic betterment at Redwood City."¹

The group's clubhouse was one of the first buildings to go up in Dingee Park, on a lot that had been donated by Baldwin and Howell with the express condition that they build on it.² The gift of land must be seen as a testament to the importance given to the Club and the belief that its presence would be a significant draw to the area.

At the time construction on the clubhouse started, the Club itself was only two years old. Late in May 1909, "an invitation was extended through the local press to the women of Redwood City and vicinity to attend a meeting at the home of Mrs. C. E. Cumberson for the purpose of organizing a woman's club."³ The meeting was attended by "a number of women well known in local society" and led to the selection of Katherine Cumberson as chairman and Gertrude Beeger as secretary. A second meeting was held at the Odd Fellow's Hall in June, and the Redwood City Woman's Club was officially brought into being. The Club was incorporated on September 16, 1909 with around 35 members including many, if not most, of the leading women of Redwood City's social scene.⁴

¹ "Peninsula Popular with Home Builders." *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. 4, 22 Jul 1911. *Newspapers.com*, newspapers.com/image/27604091

² Foster Aileen, "This Old House," 1973 p. 1. Redwood City Woman's Club Archives

³ *Redwood City Woman's Club President's Report 1909 - 1910* p. 9. Redwood City Woman's Club Archives

⁴ See Appendix I: Members of Note

Club members immediately began working on numerous projects, including installing a mission bell at the nearby corner of El Camino Real and Broadway Street. Fundraising for the clubhouse began quickly as well. On July 4, 1910, the Club published 10,000 issues of 24-page special edition of the Redwood City Democrat, written and edited by Club members. The newspaper attracted a great deal of attention, including coverage in the *Oakland Tribune* and the *San Francisco Examiner*, which reported, “The club women of Redwood City as newspaper publishers have made good,” in an article titled “Women Issue Newspaper – Prove Big Success as Editors of Redwood City Publication.”⁵ The paper sold for ten cents with additional revenue coming from advertising sales. The biggest purchasers were the Board of Supervisors of San Mateo County, which bought 5,000 copies and the Town Trustees, who bought 1,000 “to be used for promotional purposes.”⁶

In May 1911, the Club produced a flower festival that lasted three days with floral displays, a children’s parade, and a maypole, culminating in a calico ball. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “the festival was given for the purpose of enriching the treasury of the club ... it is believed that the total receipts will approximate \$2000.”⁷ The Club made use of a school gymnasium for the dance, which led to a short skirmish with the Bachelor’s Club, colorfully reported by the *Chronicle* as “Women Defeat Men in a Contest for Gymnasium.”⁸ After threats of a lawsuit and the Woman’s Club appealing directly to the school board and receiving permission to use the space, the two clubs held a summit meeting. The upshot of this was: “the papers received most of the blame, and each side decided the other wasn’t so bad, the men finally agreeing to be present in force of the calico ball.”⁹

Although the women were planning to lay the building’s cornerstone by July 4, 1910, it was a full year before they signed a contract with builder Charles Miller. In the interim, the group hired architect Le Baron Olive who produced plans for a one-and-a-half story Mission

⁵ “Women Issue Newspaper – Prove Big Success as Editors of Redwood City Publication.” *San Francisco Examiner*, p. 20, 28 Jun 1910. *Newspapers.com*, newspapers.com/image/76940919

⁶ *President’s Report* p. 12

⁷ “Redwood City Festival Career Brief but Successful.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. 49, 7 May 7 1911. *Newspapers.com*, newspapers.com/image/27514428

^{8,8} “Women Defeat Men in a Contest for Gymnasium.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, p. 11, 29 April 1911. *Newspapers.com*, newspapers.com/image/27347964

Revival style building. However, an announcement in the “Building Contracts Awarded” section of *Building and Industrial News* on July 25, 1911 shows no architect, and lists only Miller as the contractor for “a one-story and basement frame club house” at a cost of \$2836. It seems likely that Miller both designed and built the house for the Club, as its Craftsman style closely matches many of the other houses going up in the neighborhood at that time.

Construction went swiftly, and the clubhouse officially opened on October 19, 1911. The opening ceremonies included a flag raising, speeches, musical performances, and a dance with an orchestra. A week later, the Club held its first flower festival at the clubhouse, which again lasted for three days and featured floral displays and prizes. Another festival was held the following May and included a poultry competition. Floral festivals remained popular with the Club, which eventually partnered with the City to produce an even larger flower show that eventually incorporated an art show and ran from 1960 to 1984.

From the day the doors opened, the clubhouse has been the heart of the Club. Members have come to conduct club business, hear speakers, hold variety shows, and enjoy each other’s company at luncheons, teas, dinners, and dances. The clubhouse has enabled the Club to meet its goal of supporting charitable and civic causes by using rental revenue to generate income for donations, holding fundraising events, allowing free use by other groups, and even providing a home for San Mateo County’s Well Baby Clinic during the Great Depression. The importance and value of the building to the life of the Club is well illustrated by a dramatic moment in 1915, when, “prominent club members aided scores of other citizens to fight a dangerous grass fire threatening to destroy the woman’s club house.”¹⁰ Fortunately, the women prevailed, and the clubhouse was saved.

Much of the business of the Club over the past 100 years has been wrapped up in preserving and improving the Clubhouse. Major renovations have included widening the dining room in 1939; adding a storage area and lounge and enlarging and updating the kitchen in 1973; and in 2019, restoring the main bathroom to a more historically accurate style that also complies with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Over the years, the clubhouse has been repainted several times, most recently in a partnership with Habitat for Humanity, a project

¹⁰ “Club Women Save Home from Fire,” *Oakland Tribune* p. 5, 7 Aug 1915. *Newspapers.com*, newspapers.com/image/80746429

that returned the interior to a period-appropriate color palette. The current membership feels so strongly the need to preserve the building for the benefit of the local community, that they enshrined this commitment in their new mission statement: "Our mission is to provide service to the community, a spirit of sisterhood where women can socialize together, and preservation of a historical resource for Redwood City – our Clubhouse."

From the beginning of the Club's life, the organization – and its clubhouse – have been woven into the life of the Redwood City area. By 1916, the head of the Chamber of Commerce was quoted in the *Redwood City Tribune* as saying, "the woman's club bears the same relationship to town development as the Chamber of Commerce – and whose lines merged into one strong cable."¹¹ The intertwining of the Club with the community has continued unabated since then with a membership that has been affiliated with every aspect of Redwood City's civic life from small nonprofits to City Hall.

The founders of the Redwood City Woman's Club set as their goal the "general improvement of Redwood City, the promotion of all movements tending toward the uplifting of the community, and the extension of acquaintance among its members."¹² The work done by the members of the Club, and their loving preservation of their beautiful, historic clubhouse, have truly improved life in Redwood City and helped create the thriving, vibrant city it is today.

Elaine Park, President
October 2019

¹¹ Foster p.3

¹² Foster p. 1