

REDWOOD CITY WOMAN'S CLUB

FOUNDING A COMMUNITY

In the spring of 1909 three women began a conversation about starting a women's club in Redwood City: Katherine Cumberson, Aileen Finkler, and Mary Beeger.

Katherine Cumberson was known as the "social ruler of Redwood City" and lived on a large property on Roosevelt Street.

Aileen Finkler lived with her husband Henry, who was secretary of the California Supreme Court. The couple lived on a 450-acre property that is now Edgewood Park.

Both Cumberson and Finkler had moved here from San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. And both women were used to a much more lively social scene than could be found in Redwood City, which at that time had a population of around 3,000 people.



Katherine Cumberson



*Aileen Finkler with husband
Henry Finkler*

Finkler's niece, Aileen Foster, wrote about this in her club history entitled "This Old House:"

"Finding herself somewhat isolated and lonely, and longing for the bright lights of San Francisco and all the many activities she had enjoyed at Woman's Club, she discussed the matter with women friends of the San Francisco Women's Club, and it was agreed that there was a need for a Woman's Club in Redwood City ... The San Francisco friend said she had a friend in Redwood City who would probably enjoy helping form a Woman's Club, her name was Mrs. Cumberson..."

Cumberson also met with Mary Beeger to discuss forming a women's club. Mary Beeger was the president of the Beeger Tannery. She took over running the tannery after her husband died and was probably Redwood City's most prominent woman.

After these conversations, an article ran on May 27, 1909 in the Redwood City Democrat, which read,

“Club life teaches us that there are many kinds of wealth—wealth of ideas, of knowledge, of sympathy, of readiness to be put in any place and to be used in any way for public good.



Sarah Merrill

“Realizing and appreciating the truth of this the women of Redwood are making the initial movement toward organizing a Womens' Club. All women of Redwood and vicinity who are interested are invited to attend an informal social meeting to be held at the home of Mrs C. E. Cumberson on Roosevelt avenue [sic] at 2:30 this afternoon.”

In spite of this very short notice, the meeting, as Cumberson later put it was, “well attended by representative women of the community.” A second meeting was held in June at the town's Odd Fellow's Hall, and plans were made for the club to be officially established.

The founders skillfully leveraged the connections they had through marriage to formalize the club.

One of first women to join was Sarah Merrill, whose husband was the mayor of Redwood City. This connection is probably why the club was given a free building lot for a clubhouse almost immediately.

The club's incorporation documents were drawn up by Mary Ross's husband, attorney George C. Ross. Mary Ross was a member of the club's first executive board.

The documents were filed on September 16 with the county clerk. This was Joseph Nash, whose wife, Lizzy Nash, was a founding member.

From the start, the official name of the club was the Redwood City Woman's Club. To our modern eyes, the name looks like a jarringly blatant grammatical error. However, what is important to know is that the concept of “Womanhood” as a united force was part and parcel of the fledgling women's movement that culminated in women's suffrage in 1920.

This movement was itself part of a larger movement, known as progressivism, that swept the country at the turn of the last century. The progressive movement sought to clean up corrupt politics and improve conditions of disadvantaged people throughout the country. Thousands of impoverished

immigrants were pouring into the country's big cities, and rural poverty was endemic. Progressives wanted to help all those who were living and working in terrible conditions without adequate sanitation, housing, health care, education, or safety regulations.

Women's rights were an important part of progressivism. For many women, forming a women's club was their first opportunity to leave the confines of their kitchen and take part in world as a fully independent adult. The fact that the clubs were focused on cleaning up civic life – what some called "municipal housekeeping" – made the jump from family home to club house more acceptable to husbands and society at large.

The Redwood City Woman's Club in keeping with this trend, was the first club for women in the area that was not affiliated with a church or a corresponding men's group.

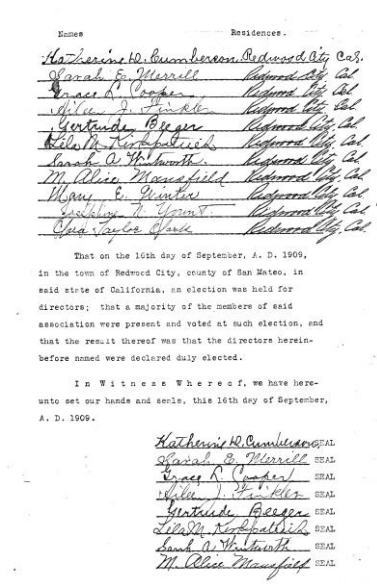
The club's first president and guiding light, Katherine Cumberson, was deeply committed to the progressive cause, to the point that she was an active member of the national Progressive Party, headed by Teddy Roosevelt. It was under her influence that the goals for the club were set as: "the general improvement of Redwood City, the promotion of all movements tending toward the uplifting of the community, and the extension of acquaintance among its members."

Much of what we know about the early years of the club comes from Cumberson's president's report of 1911, which gives us a list of the founders, charter members, and regular members.

Together, those early members represented a cross section of Redwood City society.

The majority of the members were homemakers or widows with their own income. However, many of the single women and less affluent widows did work outside the home. There were seven teachers, a nurse, a clerk, a telegraph manager, a dress maker, a maid, a stenographer, and the president of a company—Mary Beeger.

Members ranged in age from 11 to 66. The vast majority were born in California, with New York a distant second. Five women were immigrants, coming from England, Germany, Italy, and Switzerland.



One other interesting characteristic of the group is family connections. For example, one family, the Teagues, including sisters, mothers, daughters, daughters-in-law, and nieces, accounted for 11 out of 89 members.



Members outside the clubhouse in 1912

While the early club members had lofty goals and ambitions for the club, much of the first two years after incorporation were dedicated to fund raising for a clubhouse.

In 1910 and 1911, the club held two multi-day flower festivals that included floral displays and judging, children’s parades and performances, and booths selling food, Indian rugs, and fancy work or needlework. These events culminated with dinner dances with live music.

For the 1911 festival, members made and decorated garden hats. This project was written up in the *San Francisco Examiner* as the “millinery method of fund raising:”

“The club members made garden hats of Chinese matting, trimmed with bright bits of cretonne. Garden hats are a necessity in Redwood City, for everyone of the club members and her neighbors count a garden as a part of Redwood City life. The hats were sold at a reasonable price, and the money thus obtained was added to the building fund.”

The women also wrote and edited a 24-page supplement for the *Redwood City Democrat* newspaper which was published on July 4, 1910. The purpose of the supplement was to commemorate the newly built county courthouse and promote San Mateo County as a place to live and do business.

In addition to this purpose, the supplement provided a history of the club and essays promoting club life. In one of these essays, the question was asked: “Can women do both housework and club duties and do them well?” And answered: “yes, true womanliness is not in danger.” In another, the assertion is made: “Gradually it will be discovered that “home” and “solitary confinement” are not synonymous...”

A humor page provided jokes such as: “God made man, and then he put him to sleep, and took out his brains and made woman!”

A domestic science page shared recipes and household hints. Among these were a recipe for brain timbale, or pie, and instructions on how to clean white gloves using a mixture of four cups of gasoline and one cup of flour.

The supplement sold for ten cents a copy, with the largest purchasers being the San Mateo County’s Board of Supervisors and Redwood City’s Town Trustees. Ad sales and paid biographies of important citizens contributed to the profit, which amounted to \$875.

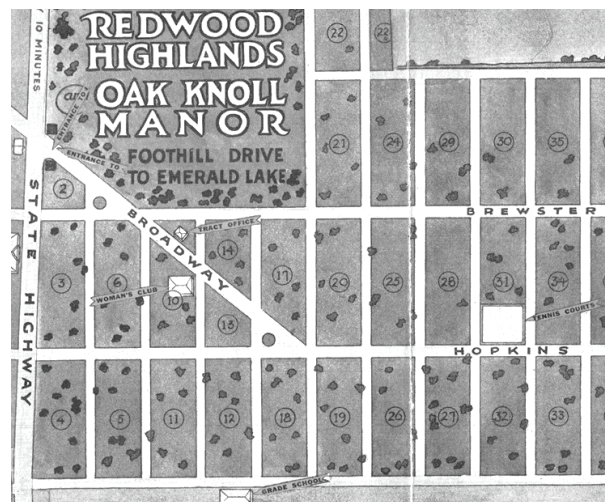
The club also put on several vaudeville nights, which featured plays and performances and drew in members of Redwood City society as cast members. One of these was Otis Carrington, who is the eponym of Sequoia High School’s Carrington Hall, and who performed as a singer at all of these events.

Finally, in March of 1911, the club signed a contract with local contractor Charles Miller to build a Craftsman style clubhouse on the lot that had been gifted to them. This donation had come from the real estate company Bell and Howell, the selling agent for the newly created Dingee Park subdivision. The clubhouse was one of the first buildings to go up in Dingee Park, and was used as a selling point in firm’s marketing material.

Construction began right away and was completed by October of the same year. The grand opening celebration was on October 26, 1911 and featured a flag raising, songs, speeches, and later that evening, the inevitable dinner dance with orchestra.



Club page of the July 4th Redwood City Democrat supplement



Map from marketing brochure showing the clubhouse. Dingee Park was rebranded in 1913 as Redwood Highlands.

In the years that have followed, the clubhouse has hosted many more dinner dances, parties, meetings, theatrical performances, and speeches, continuing as the home and heart of the club.



Clubhouse from a real-photo postcard (RPPC) sent by early member Jo Yount in November 1911

Elaine Park, President
April 4, 2022