

REDWOOD CITY WOMAN'S CLUB

Serving the community since 1909

Redwood City Woman's Club and Women's Suffrage

A Different Kind of American Revolution

When we think of the campaign for women's suffrage, we tend to think of the dramatic acts of the brave women who were arrested and imprisoned in the fight for the right to vote. Their headline-grabbing struggle finally succeeded when the 19th Amendment was adopted on August 26, 1920 guaranteeing that the right to vote "shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

Behind the bold headlines however, there was a different kind of revolution rolling across America in the early years of the 20th century, one that saw women breaking out of the confines of their homes and taking their place in civic life.

This period of history is known as the Progressive Era. During this time, thousands of organizations were formed to improve life for the masses of people who were suffering from poor sanitation, unsafe working conditions, lack of education, poverty, and other social ills.



People gathered at the building site of Redwood City Woman's Club around a parade float with a banner reading "Fund for Mexico."

Women's clubs were part of this movement, and forming a club gave women, especially married upper- and middle-class women, an unprecedented path to participating in and shaping their communities through civic action. These women believed there was a natural and necessary connection between what was traditionally seen as a woman's only place – taking care of house and family – and “municipal housekeeping,” or tending to the world outside the home. Women's suffrage topped the to do list for many club members, as they believed they would have more power to improve society once they could vote.

Redwood City Women Join the Movement



Members of the Redwood City Woman's Club posing for a photograph outside their clubhouse after a variety show performance in 1912

The women of Redwood City and neighboring areas shared the desire to belong to an organization where they could bring a woman's touch to improving civic life. In the spring of 1909, a group of around 30 of them met and formed the Redwood City Woman's Club.

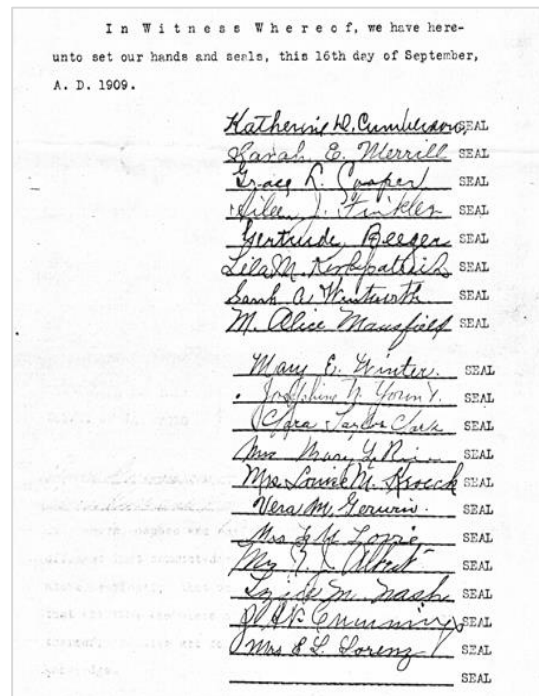
Among the club's goals were: “Promote acquaintanceship, good fellowship, and cooperation among the women of Redwood City and vicinity; furnish a recognized center where all questions of importance to the community may be freely discussed and acted upon; and afford an agency through which helpful and uplifting influences may be extended.”

The club was one of San Mateo County's first fully independent women's organizations – one that was not an auxiliary to a men's group or a religious body. The members were well aware of this status. The founders' use of the name “woman's club” was intentional and signaled their commitment to “the power of associated womanhood,” as they phrased it in an article they published in the July 4, 1910 *Redwood City Democrat*.

A name of one's own

The developers of the new Dingee Park subdivision in Redwood City donated a vacant lot to the club soon after it formed, so the members could build a clubhouse. President Katherine Cumberson and secretary Leone Walker signed the property deed – in their own names. The rules of society at the time dictated that married women were addressed by their husband's first name, and not their own, which effectively hid their personal identity.

Leadership in the club gave these women a rare opportunity to have an identity independent from their family relationships. The deed's signature page gives us a glimpse behind the veil of anonymity of “Mrs. C.E. Cumberson” and “Mrs. Hugh Walker.”



Incorporation document signature page for the Redwood City Women's Club.

The founding members also used their personal names on the incorporation documents that they filed on September 16, 1909.

Entering the political world

On October 10, 1911, just nine days before the grand opening of the Redwood City Woman's clubhouse, women won the right to vote in California.

The club's members were more than ready to take a leadership role in politics. Lizzie Nash, a club founder, became the first woman in San Mateo County to register to vote, and in 1919, became the first woman in California to hold the elected office of county clerk.



Lizzie Nash (later Elizabeth Kneese), San Mateo County clerk, 1919 to 1930 (Photo from San Mateo County Historical Association Archives)

The club's third president, Aileen Finkler, was elected to the West Union (now Woodside) school district board of trustees in 1913.

While never elected to office, first president Katherine Cumberson was politically active as a member of National Board of the Woman's International League for Peace and Freedom, a global organization that was affiliated with leading suffragist Jane Addams.

Joining the fight for suffrage at the national level, the club included a voting rights sketch, "Mere Men," in a vaudeville performance in 1913.

The long-lasting effect of the club's participation in the suffrage movement was clearly visible in 2020, the year of the 19th Amendment's centenary, when six of the seven members of Redwood City's city council were women.

Note: This article was written by club president Elaine Park for use as a handout to accompany the exhibit "Women Changed America and Won the Vote," displayed in the San Mateo County History Museum in 2021. Many thanks to the museum staff and the members of the Redwood City Woman's Club history committee for making this project possible.

In 1913, Redwood City Woman's Club members included the voting rights sketch "Mere Men," as part of a vaudeville night fund raiser.

CLUB LEADERS WHO ARE DIRECTING SHOW

Mrs. George Merrill.



Miss Vera Gerwin.

Women to Portray Vote War on Stage

Redwood City Woman's Club Will Give Vaudeville Performance Next Saturday Night.

The Redwood City Woman's Club will give a vaudeville performance Saturday night at the Alhambra Theatre, designated as "A Night at the Orpheum."

Countryside society will be represented well on the stage and in the audience. Mrs. George Merrill, the president, wife of Redwood City's mayor, is directing the affair.

The chief feature will be a sketch entitled "Mere Man," dealing with the suffragette situation.

Following is the cast:

President of Emancipated Woman's Club Mrs. F. Liggman
Lady Betty Miss Vera Gerwin
Dolly Mrs. R. Parkinson
Maisie Miss Emily Hess
Irene Mrs. A. Foster
Mrs. Rickerly Mrs. John P. Waller
Amelia Miss Claire Shields
Miss Goodby Mrs. James Eva