
Vineyard women's club reflects on 125 years

From domestic science classes then to drives and donations now.

By **Nikeya Tankard** - January 3, 2024



The Woman's Club of Martha's Vineyard celebrating their 125th year in 2023. —Courtesy the Woman's Club of MV

Updated, Jan. 4

In 1642, the first settlers arrived on Martha's Vineyard. Two centuries and a few decades later, the Woman's Club of Martha's Vineyard was founded, celebrating its 125-year history this past March.

The women's club held an initial celebration this past spring, and are continuing to look for ways to rebuild their membership numbers — which have been reduced by almost half compared with prior years — in the year ahead.

The idea for the women's club was inspired by the formation of other clubs across the country, specifically the Lynn Woman's Club in Lynn, Mass., which Vineyard founder Sara Joy Mayhew attended.

Mayhew descended from the first few settlers on the Vineyard, and she wrote in her 50th anniversary address to the Vineyard Club, “My wonder and enthusiasm quickly developed into real intention to found such a club for study and improvement.”

To form the club, she joined forces with Mary Wesley Worth, a woman who would become its first president; they also accumulated a list of female friends to invite to join.

Formed in 1898, the club focused on teaching women skills through domestic science classes and literature class, as homemaking was the common occupation for women at the time. As time passed, the club expanded into supporting local and global community service initiatives by supplying milk for the children of Edgartown and organizing clothing drives and fundraising to alleviate the afflictions caused by World War II.

“Not for self, but for all,” became the club’s motto, as civic action and philanthropy became leading initiatives.

The Woman’s Club of M.V. is the oldest club in the Cape and Islands District. Though it still runs today, the way it functions has changed. “As women’s issues changed, so did the club,” the 2002–04 club president, Carolyn O’Daly, wrote in the club’s official document, “A Brief History of the Edgartown Woman’s Club.”

Though the club’s initiatives of social, literary, civic, and philanthropic betterment remain their objectives, the club looks more like a social gathering, where women can come together and listen to guest speakers, and enjoy one another’s company over lunch.

“The biggest thing [right now] is the socialization with the ladies; they get to see each other and talk to each other, and share what’s going on in their lives,” current president Marie Wise recently told *The Times*.

Member Sharon Pope continued, “We don’t want to meet each other on TikTok or Facebook. We want to meet in person ... [the club] keeps an influx of new women who are looking for socialization.”

Nonetheless, the club continues to support the Island, using its membership fees to contribute to local charities. They choose different charities to support annually.

Despite the club's transition to simpler services like funding through membership fees, food drives, and bake sales, the membership remains diverse in background and experience.

"I've always been in awe of some of these women [in the club], because the Island, essentially, has always been a place where there were very strong women. It evolved from the whaling captains, when they were gone for years. The women had to take care of everything, take care of the farm, do this, do that; it's a culture on-Island, and I think that's reflected in the Woman's Club," O'Daly explained.

She continued, "I've always enjoyed the women of the club. They're very interesting, a lot of them are very highly educated, and I've learned a lot from them."

Members include authors, activists, homemakers, artists, doctors, and more.

The Woman's Club 2020 president, Susan Shea, described meeting the members as "a whole adventure."

O'Daly addressed the club's current main issue — its declining demographic. "All the organizations on the Island are aging out," she said.

"Clubwoman's Commandments," a piece by O'Daly published in the Dukes County Intelligencer in 2008, reported, "Membership is down; from a high of 80 or more members, the club has 48 now."

The club celebrated its 125 years with a ceremony held at the Martha's Vineyard Museum on the 25th of March, featuring orations from club members. As the club approaches its next anniversary, club membership remains in the mid- to low 40s. The Woman's Club hopes to gain engagement as they complete this year and enter their 126th year in the next few months. Pope suggested a possible exchange that could incite interest in the club from younger women: "I'd love to have somebody come over and help me with my computer, and I can teach them how to cook."
