



50TH YEAR

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By the early 20th century, the Vineyard's status as a summer resort is assured, and Oak Bluffs is the center of it all. This band marches up Circuit Avenue past the intersection with Narragansett; Lake Avenue is in the distance. The post office (near the flagpole on the left) stands across the street from the Wigwam Department Store.

THE WATERING PLACE: PORTRAIT OF A SUMMER SEASON

*'Everybody come down and have a good time
when it's too warm to stay in the city,'
said the Herald. And they did.*

AND A FIRST-PERSON ACCOUNT:

When 'Sea Bathing' Turned to 'Swimming'

Plus: The Pagoda Tree ∞ The Edgartown Woman's Club

Clubwoman's Commandments: No. 5, Spare the King's English

And, Over the Years, Other Expectations As Edgartown Woman's Club Grew Up

by CAROLYN O'DALY

In the August 2007 Intelligencer, an article about the Triad Club of Oak Bluffs recounted how that women's organization grew and changed through its existence, 1908 to 1981. Here, Carolyn O'Daly records how the Woman's Club of Martha's Vineyard, founded in Edgartown 10 years before the Triad Club and still surviving, went through its own processes of change. —Ed.

In 1898, after enjoying the hospitality and mental stimulus of a Lynn's Woman's Club, I began to wonder why a similar club could not be organized in my home town — Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard.

My wonder and enthusiasm quickly developed into real intention to found such a club for study and improvement. Upon getting back to the Edgartown home, I turned to Mrs. Mary Wesley Worth for co-operation — a broad-minded woman of advanced thought. Mrs. Worth was intensely interested in my plan, ready at once to go side by side in the work of forming such a club.

A tentative list was made of those who, presumably, would be interested and friends were interviewed and called together. These, unanimously, ... with ready enthusiasm, at once fell in with the project.

Naturally, and graciously, Mrs. Worth urged that I become President, but I chose to decline for obvious reasons. Mrs. Worth was a much older woman, well-fitted to be such a leader — while I, on the other hand, especially wished to be free to conduct and develop the Class in Current Events and Literature — the development in which I was particularly interested in the Lynn Club. This I did, by the way, until I went away to teach.

All the necessary business having been transacted, the details of organizing a Woman's Club having been worked out — the Woman's Club of Edgartown became an organization and a factor in community life and thought.

Sara Joy Mayhew wrote those words in 1948 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Woman's Club.

Carolyn O'Daly is a Katama resident and a member of the Woman's Club.

The club gavel, still in use today, was fashioned by Manuel Swartz from a tree felled in Mrs. Fannie Deane's yard. The first program, hand printed in 1899, included 51 planned meetings and seven club receptions. The ladies (it may sound archaic, but the women of the club have always called themselves ladies, and do so to this day) were very busy indeed.

It began, as Mayhew describes, with an invitation to a Woman's Club meeting in Lynn. Afterward, Mayhew and her friend Mary Wesley Worth started a club of their own.

The Edgartown Woman's Club (alternately The Woman's Club) was organized in 1898. The oldest existing club in the Cape and Islands district, it joined the State Federation in 1924 and the General Federation in 1926. The original objectives as set down in the club constitution were "to broaden individual ideas, to develop latent power, to obtain a practical utility of general knowledge, and to encourage social intercourse."

To today's ears, those ideas may sound radical for a group of women at the end of the 19th century, but Martha's Vineyard, with its long history of whaling, was known for its strong, independent women.¹

When civic responsibility and philanthropy were added, the motto of the club became, "Not for self, but for all," and the club altered its purpose early on to include philanthropy as one of its goals.

With a focus on literature and literacy, the women's initial interest was the creation of a library and in 1902 a permanent library fund was formed. Money was raised by hosting benefits such as bridge parties, basketball games,² an "Old Folks Concert and Musical Entertainment," and fashion shows.

Outreach to the Community

It wasn't long before requests for support started pouring in to the club.

A Welfare Committee was formed and shoes, clothing, food, drugs and coal were distributed. In 1933, donations included 600 pieces of wearing apparel, 18 pairs of shoes and other necessities. Then, oddly, that committee was dropped in 1934 due to lack of need.

Another long-standing program supplied milk to undernourished children at the Edgartown School, and there was an annual stipend for the dental clinic at the school.

Others who benefited from the charitable works included the Martha's Vineyard Hospital, the Animal Rescue League, the Boy's Club, and Girl Scouts. In 1908 a rubbish can was donated to the town, "to be placed on one of the four corners of Main Street," and money was raised to help refurbish Town Hall.

¹ The charter members, besides Worth and Mayhew, were: Eliza A. Norton, secretary/treasurer; Maria T. Pease; Harriet Pease; Fannie A. Deane; Lavinia Coffin; Parnell Fisher; Julia Fisher; Abbie D. Pease; Dora L. Peakes; Harriet Morse; Sadie Pease; Caroline Schofield; Jennie C. Marchant

² I don't believe the women played.

Some donations went off-Island: The club contributed \$5 toward the purchase of a dog for the Byrd Expedition in 1933, and, the same year, sent money to the Federated Forest Fund.

What Was Expected of Them

In 1914 club members adopted The Clubwoman's Ten Commandments:

- I. Thou shalt have no other clubs before this one.
- II. Thou shalt not worship any false thing.
- III. Remember thy club engagement, especially the business meetings.
- IV. Honor thy club sisters.
- V. Thou shalt not murder the King's English.
- VI. Thou shalt do the best thou canst with thine own talents.
- VII. Thou shalt be prepared for roll call.
- VIII. Thou shalt not at the eleventh hour begin to hunt for material for thy paper.
- IX. Thou shalt not speak in meeting when thy sister has the floor.
- X. Thou shalt diligently keep these commandments that thy club shall be a delight, whose fame shall be spread to the uttermost parts of the town where thou dwellest.

The Woman's Club and the Want to Know Club survive today, but they had plenty of company during the early years of the 20th century, including the Triad Club of Oak Bluffs, the Acanthus Club of Vineyard Haven and the Woman's Community Club of Chilmark. These clubs shared their educational programs on a regular basis.

The 1916 minutes reported:

On October third fifteen members of the Woman's Club went to Vineyard Haven by automobile to attend the annual meeting and reception of the Want to Know Club. There they met the members of the Triad Club of Oak Bluffs and the Acanthus Club of Vineyard Haven, and were very enjoyably entertained by music and charades and a bountiful collation. Mrs. Hillman recited an original poem and gave a summary of the club work of the preceding six months.

In those days, the club had an ambitious agenda. Membership was limited to 50. The club met September through May, as it does today. There were originally four standing committees or departments: Current Events, Literature, Travel and Home Science, each of which met twice a month putting on various programs.

Along the way, Home Science morphed into Domestic Science and in 1933 became the Department of the American Home.³

3 By 1948, the 50th anniversary, the standing committees were: Youth Conservation, Drama, Art, Music, Social Welfare, Education, Legislation, Press and Custodian. By 1998, the 100th anniversary the standing committees were: Education, Conservation, Fine Arts, Home Life and Public Affairs.



From the Woman's Club scrapbook: founders Mary Wesley Worth and Sarah Joy Mayhew.

Caring for a home and family was of high priority for these women, and Domestic Science Class tackled such topics as salads and household hygiene. Discussions led by club members included "Does the modern youth play too much?" (1909), "a woman's idea of summer comfort," and "the vacuum cleaner and its practicability."⁴

In Literature Class, there was study of the classics, poetry and drama and musical presentations. Program titles: "The Character of Hamlet as Portrayed by Great Actors," "Historical Events During the Reign of Henry VIII," "Interpretations of Shakespeare's Heroines" and "Music in Shakespeare." Committee chairmen frequently picked a topic for an entire year's study. In 1911 a 21,000-line narrative poem by Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book*, was chosen, and 1922's topic was "The Modern American Poet."

Tourist Class was a way for women who were isolated on the Island to study history and geography and to travel vicariously through their friends. Sometimes one country was studied for an entire year (Holland, 1912; the U.S., 1922). Other years there were slide shows of members' travels: the ruins of ancient cities, the women of Damascus.

Changing with the Times

Over the years, departments and committees changed to reflect members' lives and interests. As the three original departments evolved, there were introduced committees on public health, art, child welfare, mothercraft, defense, legislation, social welfare, education, religion, drama, American citizenship, community service and international affairs,

4 Outside speakers, the custom today, were not introduced until the 1930s.

among many others. As women's issues changed, so did the club.

So did the by-laws.

Initially the club had a constitution. By-laws were added, and eventually all that was combined into one document.

Membership was limited and there was a waiting list until sometime around the 50th anniversary, when membership was increased to 100. Pastors' wives and teachers who were not members were included as permanent guests and could attend most of the meetings. Women who wished to join were sponsored by two members and voted on by the entire membership. From 1939 until 1975, the vote was accomplished by members dropping black and white balls into a voting box; three black balls and a candidate was turned away. It happened rarely, but at the Sept. 26, 1935, meeting, Alice R. Cleveland was rejected.⁵

The original constitution said that if a member were found, for whatever reason, unsuitable she could be dropped from the club by a two-thirds majority vote; that was eliminated in the revised by-laws. Originally there was no term limit for the presidency, and Abby Hillman, the second president, served for 25 years. Two-year term limits were set in 1933.

Dues have changed, been modified and raised over the years. In 1898 it was called a "club fee," and ran 75 cents for the year. By 1983 dues were \$5, and in 1999 they reached the current \$30, more than half of which goes to the State and General Federations for membership fees.⁶

The club's political activities began in 1902 with a letter drafted to Edgartown selectmen "entreating that some means may be used whereby our elms may be preserved." The Legislation Committee studied bills coming before the legislature and formed opinions then approved or opposed by the membership. In 1937 the club went on record as approving serological tests of pregnant women, backing the Massachusetts Birth Control League and protesting the closing of Mother's Health Centers. In 1939, Legislation Committee Chairman Marjorie W. Braley encouraged a "uniform traffic law — including laws for bicycle regulations — more of a problem every day." In the late '60s and early '70s the upheaval in the rest of the world did not pass go unnoticed. Local legislators' names and addresses appeared in the handbook with a line encouraging members to write them about political issues.

Major world events changed the club. The outbreak of World War I in-

⁵ One of the club's current life members, Norma Bridwell, found this process distasteful and did away with it during her presidency, donating the ballot box and its black and white balls to the Martha's Vineyard Museum. Sponsorship is now only a technicality.

⁶ The rest subsidizes the club's charitable works including two or three Red Stocking children at Christmas, and a \$1000 scholarship to a Martha's Vineyard Regional High School graduating senior in need.

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The Woman's Club was an early supporter of a town library. This receipt for eight books is in the scrap-book of the club.

spired members to forgo their socials and donate the money to the Red Cross. With the onset of World War II, clothing was collected for the "Bundles for Britain" program and members were encouraged to collect scrap metal and rubber. They purchased bonds to fund an ambulance plane and hospital train. They volunteered as plane spotters, air raid wardens and canteen workers.

Meetings were held in members' homes;⁷ there were as many as 40 events a year, counting meetings, classes, entertainments, socials and occasional field trips.

⁷ St. Andrew's Parish House became a permanent home in 1986.

Into the Modern Age

In the 1950s and '60s, musical programs, auctions and fashion shows were on the agenda.

Programs involving outside speakers were begun that have continued to the present day. Speakers have come from both on-Island and off: In the early days, Miriam Van Waters, superintendent of Framingham Reformatory for Women; Blanche Robinson, radio commentator; Chester Sweatt, superintendent of schools; Dr. Russell S. Hoxsie; Sidney N. Riggs; Henry Beetle Hough; Robert Carroll. Helen Lamb showed a film about the camp that would become Jabberwocky. The members still had an active interest in homemaking; Helen Grant gave a Singer sewing machine demonstration.

Then, over the years, the women have heard from Norman Bridwell on Clifford the Big Red Dog; Gus Ben David, when he was in charge of Felix Neck; Arthur Railton, former editor of this journal. Author Cynthia Riggs holds the record for visits, because she comes every time someone cancels.

The average age of the club's members has risen over the years, as women's lives have undergone so much change. Now many women work and don't have the luxury of attending daytime meetings. Membership is down; from a high of 80 or more members, the club has 48 now, about average for most clubs in the state. The women no longer actively fund-raise; charitable funds come through donations and dues. Club activities have settled back into being a social event; the handbook encourages members to "bring a sandwich and a friend."

Still, in spite of all the change, recent club presidents have links to the history of the organization: Eileen Robinson's mother, Lucretia Sibley, was the tenth president, and Peg Kelley's aunt, Laura Vincent, was the eighth.

In 2006, after many years of discussion, the Edgartown Woman's Club changed its name to the Woman's Club of Martha's Vineyard.