

Arcadia Woman's Club

The Early Years - Part One (1914 - 1931)

By Jack McCrea

In 1912 the first promotional organization to appear in Arcadia was a woman's club called the Cooperative Arcadians. This group of approximately 15 women began by sponsoring programs that increased interest in matters of social enjoyment, civic improvement and good works in the community. After several years the Cooperative Arcadians went out of existence, but it was these women that have been identified as the foundation of the Arcadia Woman's Club.

In May, 1914, Alice Billings invited several women to her home on South Santa Anita Drive for the express purpose of organizing a woman's club. After discussion the proposal for an Arcadia Woman's Club was approved and 12 names were placed on the roster as charter members. Many of the husbands of these women, including Alice Billings, were closely connected with Arcadia's municipal affairs. Dues were set at 25 cents a month and Alice Billings was elected as their first president. Interestingly, Anita Baldwin was given an honorary membership for her efforts on behalf of the welfare of military personnel in Arcadia at the Army's Ross Field Balloon School.

One of the organization's first efforts to promote Arcadia was to enter a float in the Tournament of Roses Parade. In his book, *Arcadia – City of the Santa Anita*, Gordon Eberly relates the story of how the new club approached the Arcadia City Council and requested \$200 to cover the cost of the float. Their request was approved, but Anita Baldwin also offered to fund the construction of the float. Her offer was accepted and the City Council's money was set aside for the float the following year. Anita Baldwin's impact in financing floats in the Rose Parade was notable in 1914, when she entered a float with a huge white peacock mounted in an oak tree. Some have said it was the most beautiful float in the first 25 years of the parade.

The library was also one of the organization's early civic projects. Mrs. Billings wished to establish a library in Arcadia and approached the County of Los Angeles library officials about establishing a branch library in Arcadia. The county approved the proposal and the new library opened in a small building at the south east corner of First Avenue and Indiana (Wheeler) Street. The post office was located in the same building. The Arcadia City Council paid the rental fee of \$10 a month. Gladys Roth was selected as the first Librarian. When the library outgrew this location, it moved into the McCoy Building on the south east corner of First Avenue and St. Joseph Street. The library's expenses, including housing, buying new books and hiring the librarian were paid by the Woman's Club. Olive Palmer also served as the librarian in the early years. To better serve the students of Arcadia, the library hours were set from 3:00 P.M. to 5:30 P.M.

In 1920 the Arcadia City Council placed a proposition on the ballot to establish its own city library. The ballot measure passed and the library was given a small room in the new city hall. Arcadia's first city librarian was Mrs. George Grimes. In 1925 the library moved again to a small house adjacent to the city hall and fire department. This older building had several small rooms and a bathroom, but not funds were available to modernize the building. Gordon Eberly notes in his book on Arcadia that since the fire department had not bathing facilities, the firemen would sometimes drop into the library to have a good bath. In 1930 the City constructed a new library at 25 North First Avenue.

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When the United States entered World War I, the Woman's Club became involved in the war effort. Red Cross supplies were obtained from Los Angeles and used for the soldiers stationed at the Balloon School at Ross Field. In one of the buildings at Ross Field a canteen was set up and dances were occasionally held at City Hall. Interestingly, it was the women from the Woman's Club who selected the dancing partners for the young men. Frequently, box suppers, coffee and other foods were served to the soldiers and their partners. The government may have furnished the money for these events, but it was the women who did all the work. There was no U.S.O. (United Services Organization) during the First World War, but during World War II it was the Woman's Club that housed the organization in Arcadia.

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The Early Years - Part Two (1914 - 1945)

This is the second segment of a two part article on the Arcadia Woman's Club written by Jack McCrea. The first article can be found above and tells the story of the club from 1912 to World War I. This last segment continues the story into the 1940s.

During the presidency of Constance Millard (1917 – 1918) the Woman's Club successfully lobbied for a cobble stone drinking fountain at the corner of Santa Anita and Lower Huntington Drive, which is now called Campus Drive. On the day the fountain was dedicated, picnic tables were set up on the center parkway of Santa Anita Blvd., also known as Double Drive, and a picnic dinner was opened to everyone. That evening the 40th Battalion Band from the Balloon School furnished music for the street dance. To make a better dance floor, many sacks of cornmeal were scattered on the paving.

The women next set their sights on improving a parcel of land just south of the Santa Fe tracks at Huntington Drive and Second Avenue. A city reservoir occupied the site and the Club wished to clean up the area for the residents of Arcadia. Additional trees were planted to conceal the reservoir, the grounds were cleaned and new shrubs were planted at the site. Later, the reservoir was moved to a location further north on Second Ave and a baseball diamond, tennis court and picnic tables were built. For several years the Woman's Club held a picnic after their last meeting of the year in this park.

The Club financed their activities with numerous fundraising events including card parties, luncheons, guest speakers, music programs, suppers, dances, flower shows and donations. Woman's Club member Emma Meade remembered one of their most successful fundraising projects. Since there were few locations for large gatherings in Arcadia, the women opened an ice cream and soft drink stand at the Balloon School on July 4, 1917. The Army put on an Air Circus Show with military maneuvers, captive balloons and even boxing matches. The Woman's Club made \$160; but it took many trips to local stores to purchase additional supplies of ice cream and soft drinks. Cones and soft drinks sold for five cents each.

In these first years the Club helped many local and national causes and provided a community Christmas tree for the children of the city. In 1918, the women made a World War I service flag containing 28 stars, representing Arcadians that participated in the war. The flag was prominently displayed in the newly completed City Hall.

The club's first meetings were held in members' homes or at the Presbyterian Church. They next moved into the McCoy Building on First Avenue. Then, in 1918, they were given a small room on the second floor of the City Hall known as the "Cloak Room." It wasn't very long before the city officials outgrew their facilities and needed the space upstairs in City Hall. The Woman's Club began fundraising events to build their own club house and had over \$1600 in their building fund by 1925. In that same year a committee was formed to locate possible building sites in Arcadia.

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The Early Years - Part Two (1914 - 1945) continued...

The Woman's Club had a busy year in 1939. Along with their many social, civic and philanthropic programs, they incorporated as a non-profit organization and later in the year purchased two lots on First Avenue for \$1800. Their own club house was to become a reality. In 1931 the building's first exterior sketches were submitted to the members. Two months later a final building plan was accepted and shortly after that, Mr. C.P. Cassady was selected as the contractor. The new facility was to be built on the club's new site at First Ave and Diamond Street. A six percent loan was arranged from Bank of America and the ground breaking ceremony was held on May 4, 1931. The dedication of the new club house at 324 South First Avenue was on July 30, 1931.

During World War II, the Woman's Club sold over \$3,750 in war bonds and the Red Cross had access to their club as a casualty center. The U.S.O. rented the club house in 1943 and would use the facility as a social club for servicemen. The foyer became a writing and reception room, the auditorium a dance hall and the solarium used as a game and cloak room. The club also sponsored a day room at Camp Santa Anita with furnishings provided by club members.

The list of accomplishments of the Arcadia Woman's Club was indeed impressive in these early years. They joined District and State Federations as well as the National Federation of Women's Clubs. Their club house was expanded. A main hall was built to accommodate 200 people and a fully equipped kitchen was added to the building. Their departments and committees were very active in many civic and charitable organizations including the Red Cross, March of Dimes and the Peach Blossom Festival. They also sponsored Boy and Girl Scout troops, supported school libraries, helped preserve natural resources and helped numerous other civic and charitable organizations in Arcadia. The Arcadia Historical Society and the First Junior San Gabriel Symphony Association can also be traced to the Arcadia Woman's Club.