



Historic Clubhouse: Penny Canario, current president of the We & Our Neighbors Club, stands on the corner of Los Gatos-Almaden Road and Union Avenue in front of the clubhouse, which is on the National Register of Historic Places. The group is the oldest continuously run women's club in Santa Clara County.

Lasting Foundation

We & Our Neighbors celebrates 115 years

By LISA NEVES WOLDT

The year was 1892, and the women living in the Santa Clara Valley were mostly wives of farmers and ranchers. Their world consisted of taking care of their families and helping on the ranch.

One of these women, the wife of John Cilker, also believed it was important for women to have their own social outlet.

One afternoon Anne Jane Lipsett Cilker invited 15 women from neighboring farms and ranches to her home on Cilker Lane, now known as Blossom Hill Road. The home was situated on a 174-acre ranch and fruit orchard a few miles northeast of present-day Los Gatos.

The invitation was the birth of We & Our Neighbors, the oldest continuously run women's club in Santa Clara County. Its foundation was as fertile as the soil in the valley, and 115 years later the club is celebrating another birthday.

Cilker's granddaughter Marion Cilker says her grandmother organized the women's club "to do some good as a community and use their minds."

Members took turns offering their homes for meetings until a clubhouse was constructed on the corner of Union Avenue and Los Gatos-Almaden Road in 1910. The modest Craftsman-style bungalow was recognized as a San Jose City Historic Landmark in 1992.

Members continue to meet at the clubhouse on the third Saturday of every month except July and August, as tradition dictates.

"That's when the fruit ripens," Cilker says.

Cilker ancestors came to California to mine gold and were early settlers in the Cambrian/Los Gatos area.

Back then, Cilker says families used a horse and buggy to get from one ranch to another, and children played with prune boxes and dressed up in empty burlap sacks. There were no house keys because doors locked from the inside.

At club meetings, Cilker says, ladies would bring homemade pies and cakes, often exchanging recipes. Refreshments were served on china donated to the club, and Betty Crocker coupons were collected to purchase silverware.

Member Jean Slaght, a descendent of Sophia La Montagne, says many farming and ranching families became wealthy through hard work. The women in these families established the club to better their lives and

Women's Club

Continued from page 1

the lives of others in the community.

The club's goals are the same today as they were then: to promote social, cultural and philanthropic activities.

The club was active in many ways, including the collection of supplies for war efforts. The women accepted donations of blankets, books and food during the Spanish-American War, and they amassed needed materials for rebuilding after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.

As the club's activities grew, the women soon realized they needed a building to support their efforts.

The clubhouse was built on land sold to the club by La Montagne for one gold dollar. Building materials were purchased with \$2,650 donated by the club's first president, Maria Schofield. The building is included on the National Register of Historic Places and is Landmark No. 97 in the city of San Jose.

Walls of History

The clubhouse became the social center of the community. Current club president Penny Canario says back then the new clubhouse was "a big frog in a small pond," because there were no other places suitable for community gatherings.

Canario, a 15-year member, has served as president since 2002. This is her second term; she also served from 1996 through 1998.

Between 1950 and 1960, the club had a record-high 60 members. Since then the numbers have declined, and to help offset mounting maintenance expenses, the club has rented out its meetinghouse for parties, meetings and receptions. Local Boy and Girl Scout troops have used the building on a regular basis. Religious services have been held inside when parishioners were waiting for their church to be built. It was used as classroom for special-education students. The building has even been rented for an Irish dance class.

Cilker says the acoustics and intimate setting make it perfect for music recitals.

There are, however two important rules. "No smoking and no hard liquor," she says.

In addition to operating as a women's club, the building served at one time as a post office and became the first lending library in the Union School District.

Librarian Arone Francis Howe ran the circulation desk for 10 years. Her daughter, Charlotte Taylor of Oakland, is a club member and incoming co-president, who shares duties with member Carolyn Newt.

Slaight remembers going to the club as a girl with her mother, grandmother and aunt. "We treasure that clubhouse, and want to keep it going," she says. Her mother, Genevieve Jordan, was the club's historian.

The brick-red clubhouse is roughly 2,000 square feet and consists of a foyer, a large bathroom, a standard-size kitchen and anteroom, and an open public area. There is a stage that anchors one end of the room, which can be partitioned in half, and a stone fireplace at the opposite end.

The warm wood paneling on the walls and hardwood floors create a homey feeling. Canario estimates the ceiling height at about 18 feet, and says the building's handyman often uses an old orchard ladder to change the light bulbs.

Electricity was installed in 1921, a year after women won the right to vote. In 1996,

Women's Club

Continued from page 1

the roof and gutters were replaced, which Canario says probably saved the building from serious water damage. New double-paned windows, identical to the originals, were installed last summer. The old windows are currently stacked on the stage and may be recycled into frames for historic photos or documents.

Canario says the arbor posts flanking the club's wide front entrance were replaced years ago, courtesy of an Eagle Scout project. A prolific flowering vine, Banksia, a thornless yellow rose that covers the arbor every year, is believed to be an original plant.

Last year the city paid the club a substantial amount of money for sidewalk easement rights in front of the building.

The money will be used to keep the clubhouse in good repair. Future improvements include an upgrade to the back porch and stairs, inside and outside stonework, and possibly an updated heating system. The club also plans to seek a local historical architect to maintain the building's authenticity.

Thirty-year member Esther Jakel has served as club secretary and is the club's incoming corresponding secretary. Jakel joined at the suggestion of a friend because she is interested in history.

"It's an important part of my life," she says. "I think the club is a symbol of what this part of the state was like in the late 1880s. It's important to maintain that and make it a center for the community."

Looking Ahead

In 1921, We & Our Neighbors was recognized by the California Federation of Women's Clubs, a division of the nationwide General Federation of Women's Clubs based in Washington, D.C. A framed copy of the CFWC's logo and motto, "Strength United is Stronger," is kept at the clubhouse.

The women's club would like to add to its ranks and is seeking new members. Meetings held on the third Saturday of every month, 1 p.m.-3 p.m. are open to visitors. Those interested are welcome to visit with club members and enjoy refreshments. Club meeting programs are designed to inform, educate and entertain.

Freddy Howell from the Wild Bird Center of Los Gatos is scheduled to speak at the April meeting.

In lieu of a May meeting, the club will host a table at the Celebrate Cambrian festival at the Camden Community Center on May 19. Past president Linda Newman is preparing a display of the We and Our Neighbors club and its history. The clubhouse has tentatively planned an open house art show by Union and Dartmouth Middle School students for May 19.

The last meeting before the summer break will be an installation meeting and potluck lunch in June. Peggy Conaway from the Los Gatos Library, author of a book on the historic railroads of Los Gatos, will be the guest speaker.

Canario says the welcome mat is always out.

"We are always open to having women join us who share our purpose and enthusiasm," she says.

We & Our Neighbors is located at 15480 Union Ave. For more information, call 408.267.8175.



Past and Present: Penny Canario, current president of the We & Our Neighbors Club, poses with a photograph of the club's first president, Maria Schofield.

Founders: Below, on the left is a photograph of Maria Schofield, president of the We & Our Neighbors Club for its first 25 years. Building materials for the clubhouse were purchased with \$2,650 donated by Schofield, and the meeting place was built in 1910. Women like Sophia La Montague (right) established the club to better their lives and the lives of others in the community.

Photographs by Zach Beecher



Happy Birthday: We & Our Neighbors Club president Penny Canario shows off the collection of historic photographs and memorabilia related the club, which is celebrating its 115th anniversary.