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FACULTY WIVES

THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSITY SECTION CLUB

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FROM THE EARLIEST STAGES of university planning, the importance of the relationship between the domestic and the academic has been recognized at Berkeley. Frederick Law Olmsted, writing in his 1866 *Report upon a Projected Improvement of the Estate of the College of California at Berkeley, near Oakland*, emphasized the importance of locating faculty homes near the campus. "Scholars, at least during the period of life in which character is most easily molded, should be surrounded by manifestations of refined domestic life, these being unquestionably the ripest and best fruits of civilization."¹ Little did he realize the number of bridges that would eventually be built by the faculty wives between the values of this domestic life and the Berkeley campus.

The role of women on the campus developed gradually. During its first year, the university had no women students. Decades would elapse before Lucy Sprague joined the administration in 1903 or Jessica Peixotto received a regular faculty appointment in 1904. But there were always faculty wives at Berkeley, serving the campus individually and collectively, easily qualifying as what might be called the university's first "support group." This bureaucratic term, the current official designation for the University Section Club, the faculty wives organization at Berkeley, would probably amuse the wives of 1869, but they would be very familiar with the idea.²

Since 1869, the contributions of the faculty wives to the Berkeley campus have evolved in many different directions, but three constants can be identified.³ First, with a few exceptions, the projects undertaken by the faculty wives have been done on their own initiative. Consistently, they have come forward as more than volunteers responding to someone else's call. They have identified problems, defined their own challenges and then marshalled the resources to solve them.

Secondly, the faculty wives have exercised leadership without authority. In his recent book, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ronald Heifetz of Harvard makes a useful distinction between authoritarian leadership, typically associated with male-dominated institutions, where people are given power to achieve specific goals, and leadership without authority, often exercised very effectively by women, where networking and adaptive skills are put to use.⁴ The Section Club is an excellent example of the latter. As Heifetz points out, the history that we find in books is usually associated with the world of authority. Not surprisingly, you will not find any discussion of the Section Club in histories of the University of California.



Section Club entry in City of Berkeley Centennial Parade, 1978. *Section Club Papers, University Archives.*

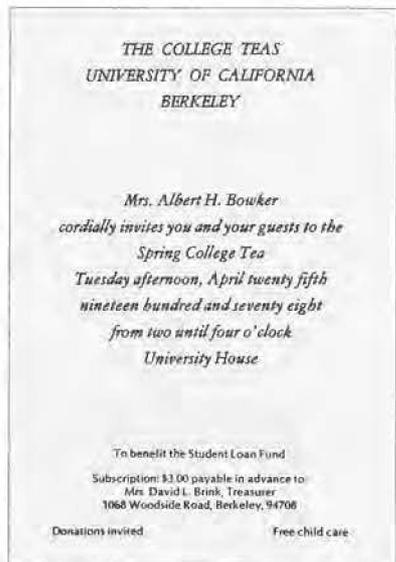
Thirdly, as a corollary to this leadership without authority, the contributions of the faculty wives have largely been invisible, not only to the general public but also to many people in the campus community. Unquantified, unexamined, often unacknowledged, the efforts of faculty wives have nonetheless been productive. They have given countless dinner parties that have encouraged true collegiality and friendship within the faculty as well as parties welcoming countless students to their homes. Addressing a myriad of specific needs, they have offered help to a constant stream of students. Through the University Section Club they have created an extraordinarily flexible and effective network that has given form to the idea of a campus community.

Compare, for example, the role of the faculty wives at Berkeley to the role of the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge with their traditional, male-dominated world of senior common rooms and high tables, the legacy of a clerical past. Both have created a very special culture, a particular ethos. Here, it is in large measure the wives who have given Berkeley its reputation for generous hospitality and openness, expressing so well the spirit of Berkeley as an institution that stands for all that is best in California. On the campus, as in their homes, the faculty wives have quietly extended this hospitality and service through the University Section Club to the students and general university community.

Five strong women, Theodosia Stewart, Carol Sibley, Kay Kerr, Carrie Grether, and Sylvia Elberg, on their own, without formal authority and with little public recognition, accomplished a great deal. They offer excellent examples of the kind of leadership among the faculty wives that has been important to the university and to the Section Club.

In its beginning, in 1927, the club was founded not by an experienced, senior faculty wife, but by a relatively new bride who had recently moved to Berkeley, Theodosia "Ted" Stewart. Before joining the Berkeley English department, her husband, the novelist George Stewart, had taught briefly at the University of Michigan where he had met and, in 1924, married the president's daughter. She visualized a club that would, according to the 1927 Constitution, "promote friendship and sociability" among women who were members of the faculty or wives of faculty members and would "stand ready to assist so far as possible any who are in need of friendly service, particularly in University circles."⁵ The club was modeled on a group that her mother had started in Ann Arbor. It would have a flexible structure, including as many "sections" or interest groups as the members would choose to launch, ranging from sports (tennis, swimming, walking) to language groups (French, Greek or German) to the arts (music, drama, sketching) and philanthropy.

There would also be club-wide social events, but their style would be much more informal than the College Teas, the only faculty wives' activity that existed when Ted Stewart arrived. The teas, held four times each year, had been started by Mrs. Benjamin Ide Wheeler in 1907, after the earthquake. They were very gracious but very formal occasions. For example, it was only in 1942, during World War II, that the ladies in the receiving line stopped wearing floor length tea gowns. The Section Club expressed a very different, active spirit, altruistic in its commitment to help students and their families, stimulating in its sharing of talents and enthusiasms, hospitable in its welcome to newcomers, extroverted in its efforts to build a community.



1978 Invitation to College Tea, Section Club Papers, University Archives.

The club flourished. The evolution of the sections often reads like a microcosm of American cultural history: Progressive Education for Mothers (1929), Peace Education (1939), Home Nursing (1942, the same year in which the German Section was disbanded), Russian (1967), Evening Scrabble (1975) and more recently, Financial Fitness. Today there are over twenty sections, a fairly typical number, each one meeting at least once a month or, in the case of Tennis, three times a week. Some are fairly small with twelve to twenty members; others like Music and Adventure have over 100. Each in its own way creates sustaining networks. The newly arrived cellist finds three friends for a string quartet. The tennis player finds a game. The community like a wonderful coral reef grows and grows, realizing Ted Stewart's vision of what Berkeley could be. Along with her career as a psychiatric social worker and field work consultant to the School of Social Welfare, Ted Stewart remained in touch with the club until her death in 1989.

At intervals even the friendly energy of the Section Club was overwhelmed, as in the years after World War II when the university grew exponentially and the number of new families to be absorbed increased dramatically. For example, in 1948, the Calling Committee which made personal visits to each newcomer was given 251 names, including twenty-three brides. This challenge was met with remarkable generosity by Carol Sibley. She and her husband Robert, the manager of the California Alumni Association, lived very near the campus at the corner of Ridge Road and LeRoy. In response to this extraordinary influx, Carol Sibley simply opened her home on the second Tuesday of each month for tea from three to five. All faculty wives were welcome to drop by, a standing invitation that continued for twelve years, from 1947 to 1959.

Three things about Carol Sibley are characteristic of leadership among the faculty wives: first, her generous, personal initiative, sustained by an open, dare I say, western faith that people are good and will function much better if they get to know one another; second, boundless energy; and third, the important role that she played in the city of Berkeley. She served on the school board during the process of integration in the '60s and launched the Dream for Berkeley program in the '70s. Hers was altruism in action.

At roughly the same time that Carol Sibley opened her home, Kay Kerr, the wife of a professor in the business school who would soon be the campus's first chancellor and later the university's president, helped to launch the Section Club's service to foreign students. Once again we are talking about the protean period after World War II when, among other changes, the campus saw a substantial increase in the number of foreign students. A well-known anecdote says it all. The Kerrs had hired an Egyptian post-doctoral student in botany to help them in their garden. After a year's fellowship in New York, he had hoped to continue at Berkeley, but even before he started his research, he had been called home. For political reasons, his funding had been cancelled. Before he left, he appeared with a stack of gifts for the Kerrs, the presents that he had brought from home for the friends by whom he had expected to be entertained during his years in America. No one had welcomed him. Kay Kerr's response was characteristic. In cooperation with International House, she and friends in the Section Club organized a Home Hospitality Committee, putting foreign students in touch with families from the faculty and the Berkeley community.

The program grew rapidly and evolved to include a subcommittee that offered help in the search for local housing, another operating an equipment loan center that still helps visitors to start up an apartment with pots and dishes and toasters, and traditional events like the annual Christmas party for the children of foreign students. In 1962-63 for example, 430 foreign students were placed with 330 host families; 254 were helped to find housing. Kay Kerr and her friends had inspired a remarkable outpouring of generosity that has continued to this day.



Lunch at annual "Beehive" fund-raiser, 1976. *Section Club Papers, University Archives.*

A fourth strong woman who provided the Section Club with leadership at a critical juncture was Carrie Grether, wife of the dean of the business school. An economist by training and the first woman to be a teaching assistant at Berkeley, she brought great elan to all she undertook. For example, when her husband became dean, she is said to have agreed to take on the entertaining that his position would entail if she could buy all the hats she wanted. For many years, virtually every Friday night there was a party. Her closet must have been full.⁶ Fortunately for the Section Club, she was president in 1956-57 when the club incorporated as a nonprofit organization, hoping to increase their fund-raising to aid students and for its own facilities.

This period marks a turning point for the Section Club. Prior to the late '50s, the contributions by the members had been largely practical rather than financial. In the '20s, the Philanthropy Section, soon renamed S.O.S. (for Services Offered Students), started making baby clothes for student families. In 1949, S.O.S. produced twenty-four full layettes. In the Depression the members worked with the Red Cross to make clothes for the unemployed, and during World War II, they sewed for Save the Children and collected clothes for France. If monetary grants were given, they were usually small and limited to helping students with modest emergencies. But as the size of the student body and the range of their needs grew, the Section Club wanted to be of help, and it was decided that such club-wide fund-raising would benefit from nonprofit status. Carrie Grether shepherded the club through this transition.

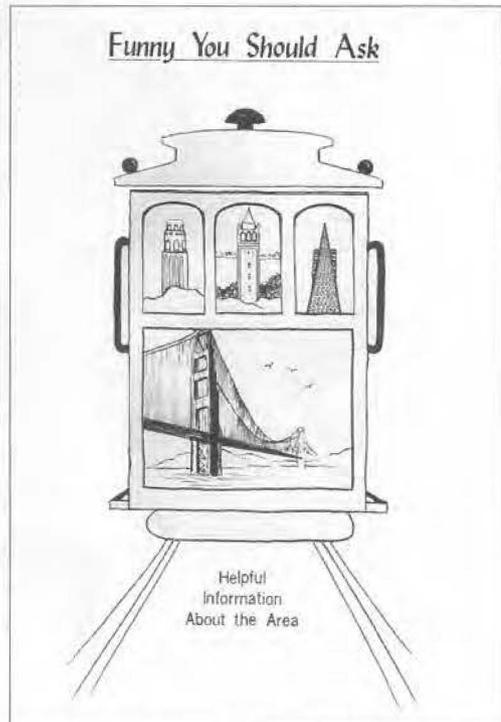
Coincidentally a godsend came out of the blue. At the board meeting on May 27, 1957, Kay Kerr announced the bequest of \$295,000 from the Haas family for a recreation center to be built behind the stadium for, among other things, "the use of women's groups on the campus such as faculty wives' organizations and the Dames Club" (the student wives' group). Carrie Grether was named as the faculty wives' representative to this Strawberry Canyon

project and, in this capacity, worked for several years with the architect while coordinating the Section Club's contributions such as furniture, shades, and various kinds of equipment. Unfortunately, the Haas Clubhouse did not remain a permanent home for the Section Club. Changing university priorities led to escalating fees and difficulties that gradually forced the club out. Leadership without authority can be frustrating at times.

On the other hand, club-wide fund-raising for student aid blossomed. A Ways and Means Committee was established in 1956 and initiated projects such as a theater benefit, a Fall Fashion Show, a Spring House and Garden Tour, dinner dances, and the collection of items for sale in a thrift shop. New resources could be poured into S.O.S., the Dames, the Foreign Student Committee, and a scholarship fund for students, originally administered by the dean of women. The leadership of Carrie Grether and her friends had produced a high-water mark in activity and membership, over 800, for example, in 1962.

A fifth important leader, dedicated particularly to helping the wives and children of Cal students, was Sylvia Elberg, the wife of Sanford "Sandy" Elberg, dean of the Graduate Division, 1961-78. For many years, Sylvia Elberg and a network of friends worked very closely with Albany Village, continuing the Section Club's long-standing commitment to "friendly service" for young university families. Practical and financial support took various forms: help for the Dames organization, the co-founding of the Albany Village Nursery School, and an emergency loan fund for families in the Village. She took a lead in all this. In 1966 the board minutes record her successful appeal to the board for scholarship funds that would make it possible for children of needy families to attend the nursery school. With Mollie Balamuth, she put together a large booklet, "Funny You Should Ask," containing useful information for student families about Berkeley and the Bay Area. Her help was warmly personal, quiet, loyal, and effective, the qualities that have made Berkeley a genuine university community rather than an academic factory.

What has happened to this tradition today in the era of working wives, when faculty families often cannot afford to buy a home in Berkeley, when traditional family and community structures are being sorely tested? Women who care deeply about helping the university are still coming forward. The current membership exceeds 500. The prospects for the continued vitality of the club are excellent.



Information booklet for student families, 1975.
Section Club Papers, University Archives.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Laura Wood Roper, *FLO, A Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 305.
- 2 Although faculty wives represent by far the majority of the Section Club's membership, it also includes women of the faculty, the administration, certain categories of staff and their spouses.
- 3 Many quotations and references in this paper come from the unpublished and uncataloged records of the University Section Club, University Archives, University of California, Berkeley. Because of the informal nature of the files, no precise citations can be given.
- 4 Ronald Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
- 5 University Section Club Constitution, 1927.
- 6 Conversation with Connie Holton, wife of a later dean of the business school and friend of Carrie Grether.



1913 Blue and Gold.

Theodora Kracaw Kroeber (1897-1979)

A graduate cum laude of the class of 1919, Theodora Kracaw was born in Telluride, Colorado. She received her master's degree in clinical psychology the following year. As a young widow with two sons, in 1926 she married Alfred L. Kroeber, professor of anthropology and director of the Museum of Anthropology then located on the San Francisco campus. Her first book, *The Inland Whale*, was published in 1957, followed by *Ishti in Two Worlds* in 1961, which was awarded a Commonwealth Club medal. In 1977, she was appointed by Governor Jerry Brown to be a regent of the University of California and served briefly, before her death in 1979.

Antonia Brico (? -1989)

A graduate of the class of 1923, Antonia Brico was born in Holland. At Berkeley she studied conducting under Paul Steindorff. With assistance from campus friends, including Dean of Women Lucy Stebbins, she continued her music studies in Berlin, where she conducted that city's Philharmonic Orchestra in 1930. During the 1932/33 season she conducted at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and later became director of the WPA Symphony. In 1935 she organized the New York Women's Symphony Orchestra. Three years later she resumed her formal studies at Mills College which granted her the D.M. degree. In later years, in addition to teaching conducting, opera, and piano, she conducted orchestras in Boise, Boulder, and Denver.

Katherine Towle (1898-1986)

A graduate of the class of 1920, Katherine Towle pursued a unique and diverse career. She served as the headmistress of a girls' school, worked as a senior editor, and obtained her master's degree in political science in 1935, also at Berkeley. In 1943 Towle had achieved the rank of colonel in the Marine Corps and become the first director of the Women's Marine Corps. When she retired from the Marine Corps in 1953, she returned to her alma mater to become dean of women. She remained in that position until 1962 when she became dean of students, a post she held until her retirement in 1965. Upon her retirement Dean Towle claimed that "One of the great joys and privileges of my life was that I should follow these two friends [Stebbins and Davidson] in my own appointment as fourth Dean of women....All of them have shared in common an abiding concern for the place of women on campus and in the broader community beyond."