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THE EARLY PRYTANEANS

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IN APRIL 1900 the Order of the Golden Bear was created as an honor society exclusively for senior men who would serve the university in various ways and would act as a conduit of information to the new president of the university, Benjamin Ide Wheeler. Adele Lewis, a junior that fall, was the women's editor on the *Daily Californian*, a position that assured some coverage of women's campus activities and interests. In her oral history she recounts:



... the young men who were on the staff at the *Daily Cal* used to talk about Golden Bear quite a bit and how much they got out of it, so I thought, "Why couldn't we do that for the women?"



Adele Gerard Lewis.
1902 *Blue and Gold*.

The women were so scattered; if the President wanted to get hold of the women, he couldn't get all of them very well. We did have an Associated Women Students [organization], and Agnes Frisius was the president of that—she was the class of 1901. So after I got this idea, I went to talk to her about it and see what she thought. I felt that if we could take the women from the organizations they had, the different sororities and different groups of organized women—the Treble Clef and the other groups—and had one woman from each organization in this Prytanean, why then Dr. Wheeler, the President, would be able to work through this group to reach all of the women—or most of them.¹

When she talked to President Wheeler about such an organization, he strongly supported the idea, as did her friend, Agnes Frisius. The two young women then went to consult with Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter in her home. She was the women's physician and teacher of hygiene at the university and wife of Professor William Emerson Ritter, who founded in 1902 the university's marine station that became Scripps Institution of Oceanography by 1925 and grew into UC San Diego in 1959. At Berkeley Dr. Ritter was also the dean of women, in effect if not in fact. She relates:

I approved enthusiastically, realizing the need and value of such an organization. We three worked out a scheme and a tentative constitution. It was decided to invite all the heads of women's societies to meet in my home and become charter members of an unnamed infant organization. The naming of the infant was so difficult that it became humorous, and I imagine was somewhat of a nuisance to the Greek authorities who were consulted.²



Agnes Frisius. 1901
Blue and Gold.

Dr. Ritter recalls in 1913 the process of finding a name for the group (published in a

slim booklet, apparently the first report produced by the Prytanean Society):

Counsel was sought of the sages of our Alma Mater. Languages were culled over from ancient Chaldean to the present day dialects of the Indians of our own State. Not only was it desired to find a name with a satisfactory meaning, but it must be symbolic of the aims of the founders, it must be euphonic, not easily parodied, unlike anything else in college life, and one that would look well on pennant and pin. Finally after much discussion, trials of many suggested names, the word Prytanean, meaning "Council of the Chosen Ones" was unanimously decided upon.³

The students understood this to mean (as suggested to one of them by her Greek professor) that the members would be representative of all women in the university. The proposed thirty members were to be outstanding women students in good standing in the junior or senior classes, including the presidents of women's organizations including the AWS, YWCA, Choral Society, Art Association, and the Philomathean Council (a university debating society), and at least one member from each of the six sororities and two house clubs that existed at the time, and the Hearst Domestic Industry Society. In addition, honorary membership could be extended to women officially connected with the university, prominent alumnae, and other women who "have shown deep interest" in the university.⁴



1904 Blue and Gold.

In September 1900 those interested met at Dr. Ritter's home to organize the new society. Among the nineteen charter members, including Agnes and Adele (who was named temporary chairman and later elected president), were women from at least three sororities. By the second meeting in October the membership had increased to twenty-five. The group selected the name of Prytanean and adopted a constitution and by-laws for the new organization. The object of the society was to "unite representative women of the University of California, to advance the interest of the University and to quicken the best life among the women students."⁵ Monthly meetings followed thereafter in Dr. Ritter's home until the group grew too large. Another five members were added in February 1901 and eight more in May, four juniors and four sophomores.

Among the honorary charter members, besides Dr. Ritter, were Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Martin Kellogg, wives of current and former presidents of the university; wives of several members of the faculty; Mrs. Clinton Day, wife of a campus architect; Mrs. Warren Cheney '83 (see the article on Mrs. Cheney in this issue); Dr. Sarah Shuey '76 and M.D. in 1878, as well as recent doctoral degree recipients Milicent Shinn '80 (Ph.D. in 1898) and Jessica Peixotto '94 (Ph.D. in 1900); and prominent women in the community.⁶

In a conversation with President Wheeler, Adele Lewis had asked what "would be the best thing for us to take up in the beginning." Wheeler had been convinced of the value of a student infirmary while at Cornell University, and he told her that he was having a difficult time persuading the regents to institute a student fee to pay for infirmary services. "If we could do something to show them there was a need," he maintained, "it would not be so

difficult for them to be convinced . . . , and we could have the infirmary."⁷ The die was cast. During the spring term of 1901, Prytaneans devoted their time to raising money to start the infirmary. Among the goals were to hire a nurse, or to endow one or more rooms for sick students, and have a visiting nurse to go to the homes and boarding houses where sick students might need care. A committee was formed to work with a committee of the cadets for the purpose of giving a military ball. Half of the proceeds were to go to the hospital fund. A little over \$20 was realized.⁸ The next year was devoted to raising money for the hospital fund, with two major events: a fête in Coed Canyon (later Faculty Glade) that stimulated much interest in the need for an infirmary and netted about \$250 for the fund, and a theater party in the spring that added another \$200. Thus began the annual Prytanean tradition of holding an event to raise support for various good causes to aid the university.

The oral histories of these early Prytaneans provide a vivid picture of their lives as students and the lives they led after they left the university. They provide a great resource for future historians of the university, and are available in The Bancroft Library and the Prytanean Alumnae organization. Here are a few snippets before we return to the history of the Prytanean Society.

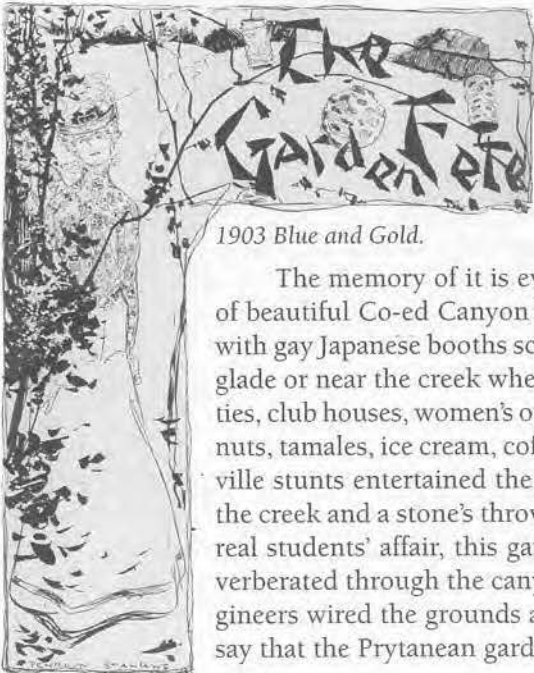
Following graduation, Adele Lewis '02 married in 1903. For ten years her energies were devoted to being a housewife. She then returned to the university to study botany, and became a research assistant to Professor Willis Linn Jepson. After several years in Berkeley she pursued graduate work at Washington University in St. Louis, receiving an M.A. in 1919, and a Ph.D. in 1923. She then taught at the college level for almost forty years: first, at Cornell, and then at a college in South Africa that allowed her to explore her particular interest in South African flora. Adele Lewis Grant also lectured in botany for twenty years at the University of Southern California. After retirement she taught part time for eight years at Pepperdine College. Her primary research was in systemic botany, or taxonomy; she also did research on the economic value of birds.



Romilda Paroni. 1903
Blue and Gold.

Another Prytanean, Romilda Paroni '03, studied medicine after graduating from Cal. She earned her M.D. in 1907 and did postgraduate work at Harvard Medical School in 1908. She practiced medicine in Berkeley and in 1911 was appointed Medical Examiner for Women at the university. She later married. Romilda Paroni Meads vividly describes the second autumn fête of 1902:

The memory of it is everlasting. Never can one forget the conversion of beautiful Co-ed Canyon into a veritable fairyland of lights and music—with gay Japanese booths scattered about under the oaks on the slope of the glade or near the creek where Mikado girls representing the various sororities, club houses, women's organizations—dispensed candies, pop-corn, peanuts, tamales, ice cream, coffee to generous patrons. Music, dancing, vaudeville stunts entertained the passing crowds from an improvised stage near the creek and a stone's throw from the present Faculty Club House. It was a real students' affair, this garden fete. Strokes of the students' hammers reverberated through the canyon in the daytime; student electricians and engineers wired the grounds and student power furnished the lights. All will say that the Prytanean garden fete was a never-to-be-forgotten event.⁹



1903 *Blue and Gold*.

Early Prytanean member Martha Rice Furlong '04 remembers going to President Wheeler with a committee to complain that there was no lunch room on campus, and the women had to eat their bag lunches in a corner of the restroom in old North Hall. "There was no riotous demonstration in those days," she recalled. "We dressed in our best, made a special appointment to see the prexy, and in a dignified manner presented our case. Result: petition granted."¹⁰ Contemporary Louise Ehrmann Titus '04 remembered the need for a restroom, a gathering place. This was supplied in Hearst Hall, which Mrs. Hearst had given to the university as a gymnasium, a place where women students could congregate and a place where they could gather for lunch. "It was a very great comfort to the women of the University in 1902" instead of the dark, dank basement of old North Hall. "The advance to cheerful, light restrooms and a reception room for women in Hearst Hall was a tremendous impetus to the activities of the women on the campus."¹¹

The generosity of Mrs. Hearst is mentioned by many of the early Prytaneans in their interviews for the oral history of the Prytanean Society. Katherine Layne Mitchell '01, a charter member, reminisced about her work with the University YWCA in West Berkeley and the Hearst Domestic Industry Society that

Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst had founded to teach the children down there—but West Berkeley was almost a slum. And she founded this place to have the little children taught the household arts . . . sewing and cooking and sweeping and cleaning. . . . I know we had a dinner there one night, and Mrs. Hearst came to it. And I made a meat loaf and the dessert was tapioca pudding. And Mrs. Hearst was such a gracious, lovely lady. When she was eating hers she said, "Tapioca pudding is one of my favorite desserts, and it's been so long since I've enjoyed it."¹²

Indeed, a gracious, lovely lady, and apparently one who provided as many opportunities as possible to get to know the students, both men and women. But students, then as now, often are too busy with their own lives to take advantage of such opportunities. Katherine was not. She related another encounter with Mrs. Hearst:

She had a tea and invited the senior class. And I was the only one out of it that went. . . . I sat there all afternoon. I kept offering to go and trying to go, and she kept telling me, "Stay, stay. I'm sure I'm finding out more than I probably would have been if the whole class had come." About the students and the University. And then she handed me this [indicating the photo of the great hall of the Hearst house].

This picture is of the reception hall in this house that she built for entertaining the students. And I sat right beside that table and she sat on the other side. And we simply talked all afternoon long. And then when I finally did tear myself away, she said, "I'd like you to have this picture where we've been talking," and she handed it to me. And I thought so much of it.¹³



Katherine Layne.
1901 *Blue and Gold*.

Mrs. Hearst was an honorary member of Prytanean and occasionally would attend their meetings, but many of the early Prytaneans remember her for the many things she did for individuals, from little things like providing yellow chrysanthemums to wear to football games if women were not going to the game with a beau or giving advice on hairdos, to bigger things like sending some graduates off to study, several to Europe.

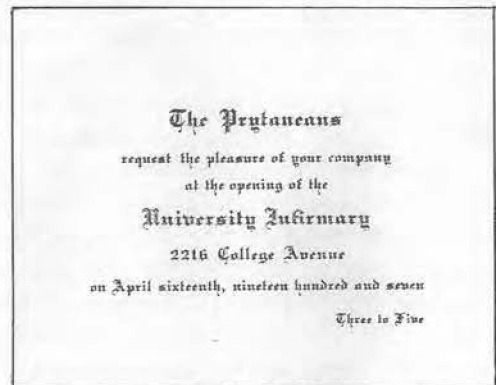


Reception hall of Mrs. Hearst's home in 1901. A similar picture was given to Katherine Layne Mitchell personally in 1901. *University Archives*.

The Prytaneans remained a contributor to student health services through the establishment of the University Infirmary (1907), to Cowell Hospital, and to the indispensable Student Health Services of today.

During its early years, the Prytanean Society had established itself as an organization of the leading women students of the university, so it is not surprising that they initiated or helped to initiate in its first decade many projects on the campus. Besides their fêtes held each year to raise funds for their various projects, they became involved in efforts to provide adequate housing for students, especially women students. In 1908 the first contribution was made to a dormitory fund, and in 1909 to the clubhouse loan fund, the purpose of which was to provide furnishings for the house clubs for students. These were projects that the Prytaneans continued for many decades. A book exchange was created in 1909-1910. Prytaneans were also involved in the initiation and the continued production of *Partheneia*, an open-air pageant of original writing, music and dance that celebrated young womanhood.

Financially, during the first twelve years of its existence, Prytanean raised nearly \$4,500 which they donated to various campus causes: primarily the infirmary (73 percent of the total), Senior Women's Hall (11 percent), dormitory fund (7 percent), loan fund (6 percent), aid to a tubercular student (2 percent), and *Partheneia* fund (1 percent).¹⁴



Invitation to opening of infirmary, April 16, 1907. *The Prytaneans*, 1970.



Three Prytaneans at
1914 fête.
The Prytaneans, 1970.

While several of the fund-raising events were very successful, some barely broke even, although the students usually found considerable satisfaction working on the event. Dean of Students Katherine Towle '20 and M.A. '25, once a chairman of a fête, related an amusing anecdote at a Prytanean Breakfast talk in 1964 about the early days of Prytanean when they tried to raise money for a tennis court for women. She recounted a tongue-in-cheek item she had come across in an early *Blue and Gold* about a singularly unsuccessful event that had a familiar ring to her: "The event was on the same afternoon as a football game. A select audience of 14 put in an appearance. The event was saved from being a purely artistic success when Mrs. Hearst sent a generous check."¹⁵

Occasionally the society has had an opportunity to aid in opening new fields of education to the women of the university. With modesty and justice the Prytaneans claim a role in fostering the development of the Department of Physical Education for Women, the Department of Home Economics, and the Department of Decorative Art. More recently, the Prytanean Society has been active in helping to establish the Center for the Continuing Education of Women. Their concern for education has been active since their early days: at the end of the list of activities reported for 1912-1913, Katharine Carlton '13 adds, "Last but not least is the furtherance of the Graduate School of Education. This is a thing we must all quietly work for, standing ready always to work whenever or wherever we are called upon."¹⁶

The early Prytanean alumnae kept in touch with each other, served as honorary members and some developed an informal group. In 1936 the Prytanean alumnae incorporated to form a formal alumnae organization, offering Prytanean graduates the opportunity to continue their service to the university. The impetus for creating the organization was in response to a request from the active Prytanean students to help them establish a much-needed cooperative rooming house for women. At a meeting in October 1936 the alumnae organization voted to open a house, leasing it in January 1937.¹⁷ Mary Bennett Ritter Hall on Prospect Street was managed by the Alumnae of the Prytanean Society from 1937 to 1966, when it was sold, the proceeds being invested in a trust fund.

Since 1967 the income from the trust has been allocated to many student and university projects. The Prytanean Alumnae have continued their service to Prytanean and the university by providing scholarships to undergraduate and graduate students, and since 1986 have provided an annual faculty award from the Prytanean Faculty Enrichment Fund. The award carries a \$10,000 prize in recognition of a junior woman faculty member's scholarly achievement, distinguished teaching, and success as a role model for students at the University of California. All of the past recipients have reported that the grant has been very useful in their research, and each has eventually become a member of the tenured faculty.

When Prytanean was established in 1900 it was the first organization of its kind for women in the United States. Early on, and since then, when approached to go national the members have maintained the original intent to remain a society only of the University of California. However, as new campuses of the university were established new chapters of Prytanean were created in 1926 at UCLA, in 1952 at UC Davis, in 1958 at UC Riverside, and in 1983 at UC San Diego. The members of Berkeley's Prytanean Society continue to be strong to this day, helping the university formally and informally, and still reflect the best of Berkeley's women. Thus over the past one hundred years have the Prytaneans, both old and new, continued to serve the University of California.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Prytaneans: An Oral History of The Prytanean Society, Its Members and Their University, 1901-1920* (Berkeley: The Prytanean Alumnae Incorporated, 1970), 27; copies of *The Prytaneans* are rare, one copy is in the Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
- 2 Mary Bennett Ritter, *More Than Gold in California 1849-1933* (Berkeley: The Professional Press, 1933), 215.
- 3 *The Prytanean, A Record Published Now and Then by the Prytanean Society of the University of California, 1912-13*, 15, University Archives, University of California, Berkeley.
- 4 *The Prytaneans*, "First Constitution of the Prytaneans," 5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 6 *The Prytaneans*, 3, 8; and *The Prytanean, 1912-13*, 21-22.
- 7 *The Prytaneans*, 28.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 47-48.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 288.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 144.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 135-136.



1903 Blue and Gold.

Jessica Blanche Peixotto (1864-1941)

Jessica Blanche Peixotto spent her entire professional career—a full half century—at Berkeley. A graduate of the class of 1894, she was awarded the Ph.D. in 1900, thereby becoming the second woman to earn that degree at Berkeley. Her original work was on social thought and socio-economic theories of social reform. President Benjamin Ide Wheeler offered her a position as lecturer in sociology. During World War I, she organized California's first training program for social work, providing special courses for Red Cross and home service workers. This soon developed

into a professional graduate curriculum in the Department of Economics, where the first credential in social work was awarded in 1918. Subsequently, she made major contributions to the analysis of poverty, child welfare, and budgeting. Her graduate seminar on the history of economic thought was well known in the 1920s. Peixotto was promoted to the rank of professor of social economics in 1918, the first woman so promoted at the university, at a time when economics was still emerging as a discipline distinct from the other social sciences. Peixotto was actively engaged in community welfare throughout her life. As executive chair of the Child Welfare Section of the Women's Committee of the Council of National Defense, she gathered information on the health of preschool children and proposed new programs for those in need of care. A member of the state Board of Charities and Corrections, she helped develop legislation to license midwives and to establish a women's reformatory. In all her work, she emphasized the need for detailed and accurate research as a basis for legislation. She served ably as chairman of the Department of Economics in 1921-22 (again, the first woman to serve in this post). She was appointed chairman of the Heller Committee for Research on Social Economics in 1923 and directed the activities of this prolific research committee until her retirement from active service in 1935. She was a tireless advocate of social work education. The university awarded Peixotto the degree of Doctor of Laws (h.c.) upon her retirement. She is characterized in the citation as "comrade among students, inspiring teacher, true lover of humanity."

