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Part II. Introduction to the History of Women's Rowing at Cal

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Introduction to the History of Women's Rowing at Cal

BY OLIVER O'REILLY



The University of California was chartered in March 1868 and admitted women in the Fall of 1870. The first woman to graduate, Rosa Scrivner, graduated with a degree in agriculture in 1874 from the Berkeley campus. The struggle to achieve the equality promised by the UC Regents' memorial resolution in October 3, 1870, admitting women to the university “on equal terms, in all respects, to young men,” pervaded the University for the majority of its history. The struggles faced by women’s rowing are a prime example. The triumphs achieved by women both on and off the water during and after their time at Cal are testimonies to their extraordinary talents, resilience, intelligence, athleticism, and persistence. With the celebration of 50 years of Title IX in 2022, a group of Cal Women's Crew Alumnae along with Cal alumni, coaches, faculty, staff, and students, were inspired to create a living archive for the History of Women’s Rowing at Cal. This effort was also part of the Celebration of 150 Years of Women at UC Berkeley. They found a history that can be divided into three phases. First, the “Women’s Boat Club” founded in 1900. Next, was a pre-Title IX women’s crew that raced in regattas on the West Coast with "Cal" on their uniforms even though they were not officially recognized by the University. Finally, the current Cal women’s rowing program that was officially sanctioned by the University in the 1970s and is now one of the premier collegiate women’s rowing programs in the United States. The earliest record of women’s rowing at Cal can be found in the campus’ yearbook: Blue and Gold. The 1901 yearbook describes the creation of the “Women’s Boat Club” in the Fall of 1900 under the auspices of the AWSUC. The boat club borrowed equipment from the men’s crew - then known as the “University Boat Club” - which had been founded in October 1875 and is the campus’ oldest sports club. The challenges faced by the women’s program were considerable: lack of equipment, funding, and a boat house.

A. W. S. U. C. Boat Club.

The Women's Boat Club was first organized last fall. It rented the equipment of the University Boat Club, and the members, few of whom had touched an oar before, devoted themselves to learning the elementary principles of rowing. The members numbered twenty-four, and they rowed two afternoons in a week.

During the second term, work was done on a different principle. All had learned to row a little, and, accordingly, regular training was commenced and crews organized. The Club is divided into two classes, those who wish to train for crews and those who wish simply to row for amusement. The latter are bound by no rules, and undergo no training. Mrs. Magee has undertaken the training of the crews, which, as laid out, is very systematic and thorough.

The first requisite for girls who aspire to the crews, is that they know how to swim. With this end in view, Mr. and Mrs. Magee have been going with a number of the girls every Saturday afternoon to Sutro Baths. A second requisite is good lung power. To gain this, the girls spend some time each week running over the hills to hare and hounds. Each girl on the crew is expected to take "Gym" work. The crews spend two hours a week rowing together, under Mrs. Magee's especial direction. It is hoped soon to arrange for meets with other institutions.

The greatest need of the Club is that of a boat-house and boats. The arrangement of renting from the University Boat Club is only temporary, and has proved unsatisfactory: the boats and house could be obtained only on two days of the week, and the hours conflicted with the college work of some who otherwise would have been among the most active members. The entertainments by the Associated Women Students have established the nucleus of a fund; but, unless some philanthropist is found willing to solve the difficulty, this form of sport among the women will be handicapped by the heavy expense involved.

Excerpt on the formation of the AWSUC Boat Club from the 1901 edition of the Blue and Gold.

Records about the women's rowing program in its early years are scant and it's not clear if the program survived the 1920s. Notable alumnae included Esto Broughton (1890-1956) who achieved fame as one of the first four women elected to the California State Assembly in 1918 when she was 29 years old. During her time at Cal, where she first graduated in 1915 before earning her law degree in 1916, she was a coxswain for the women's rowing team.

At some point prior to 1908, the women's rowing program found a home at Lake Merritt in Oakland and held their annual interclass races there. The boathouse at Lake Merritt that appears in the 1922 edition of the Blue and Gold and is now used by Lake Merritt Rowing Club (LMRC), was constructed in 1913, so it's not clear what facility the women used prior to 1913. We also note that the yearbook from 1922 mentions annual intercollegiate races with women's crews from Mills College. With an eye to a future rivalry with the University of Washington in Seattle (UW), a women's rowing program at UW was formed in 1900 and became the most popular women's sport at UW during the 1910s. The UW program had a marvelous champion in the distinguished rower Lucy Pocock.



Image of the boat house on Lake Merritt from the 1922 edition of the Blue and Gold.

The next era of women's rowing at Cal started in the 1960s. The era was initiated by two graduate students, Art Sachs and Karl Drlica, Jr. Word of their interest in coaching women at Cal spread by word-of-mouth and the help of a small article in the Daily Cal. Starting in 1965, the Cal students rowed out of the Lake Merritt boathouse as described in Carol Simpson Sano's article (See appendix Carol Simpson Sano, "Cal Women's Crew: A sketch from the 60's") and Karl Drlica's article (See appendix Karl Drlica, "Cal Women's Crew Pre-Title IX"). From 1967-69, they rowed at Aquatic Park out of the boathouse now occupied by the Berkeley Paddling and Rowing Club and were, as discussed in Karl Drlica's piece, instrumental in helping to construct the boathouse at Aquatic Park. This group trained and raced competitively as "Cal Women's Crew" at regattas organized by the National Women's Rowing Association (NWRA) in Corvallis, OR, Seattle, WA, and Oakland, CA, including the first National Women's Rowing Championship held in Seattle in 1966. The NWRA was formed in 1962 by LMRC and three other rowing clubs to give women rowers an opportunity to compete at the highest level. Despite the efforts of Art Sachs, the crew were not recognized by the Department of Physical Education at Cal nor supported by the University.



Image of Cal women rowing at Lake Merritt in the 1960s

The next phase in the history of women's rowing and one that led to the formation of an official program started in the 1970s following the passage of Title IX in 1972. As discussed in Peter Lippett's article (See appendix Peter Lippett, "The Establishment of Cal Women's Crew in 1974-1975"), the formation was enabled by a group of dedicated and passionate undergraduates supported by influential alumni, which included the head of the Women's Rowing Olympic Committee and Olympic gold medalists, and the head men's rowing coach, Steve Gladstone. Initially, they rowed at Aquatic Park but quickly outgrew the limitations of this body of water and, thanks to the support of alumni, they were able to create a new home at Briones Reservoir in Orinda. In 1993 a locker room and space for women's shells was made in the Ebright boathouse on the Oakland Estuary and the women's crew did train there. The move was facilitated by the men's head coach and Cal graduate, Mark Zembsch, who appreciated the implications of Title IX and believed that the men's rowing program would have a better chance of surviving at Cal if it worked together with the women's program. Following the construction of the T. Gary Rogers Rowing Center on the Oakland Estuary in the 2000s, a new boathouse was created for men and women to share. Today, Cal Women's Crew still predominantly rows out of the boathouse on the beautiful body of water at Briones.

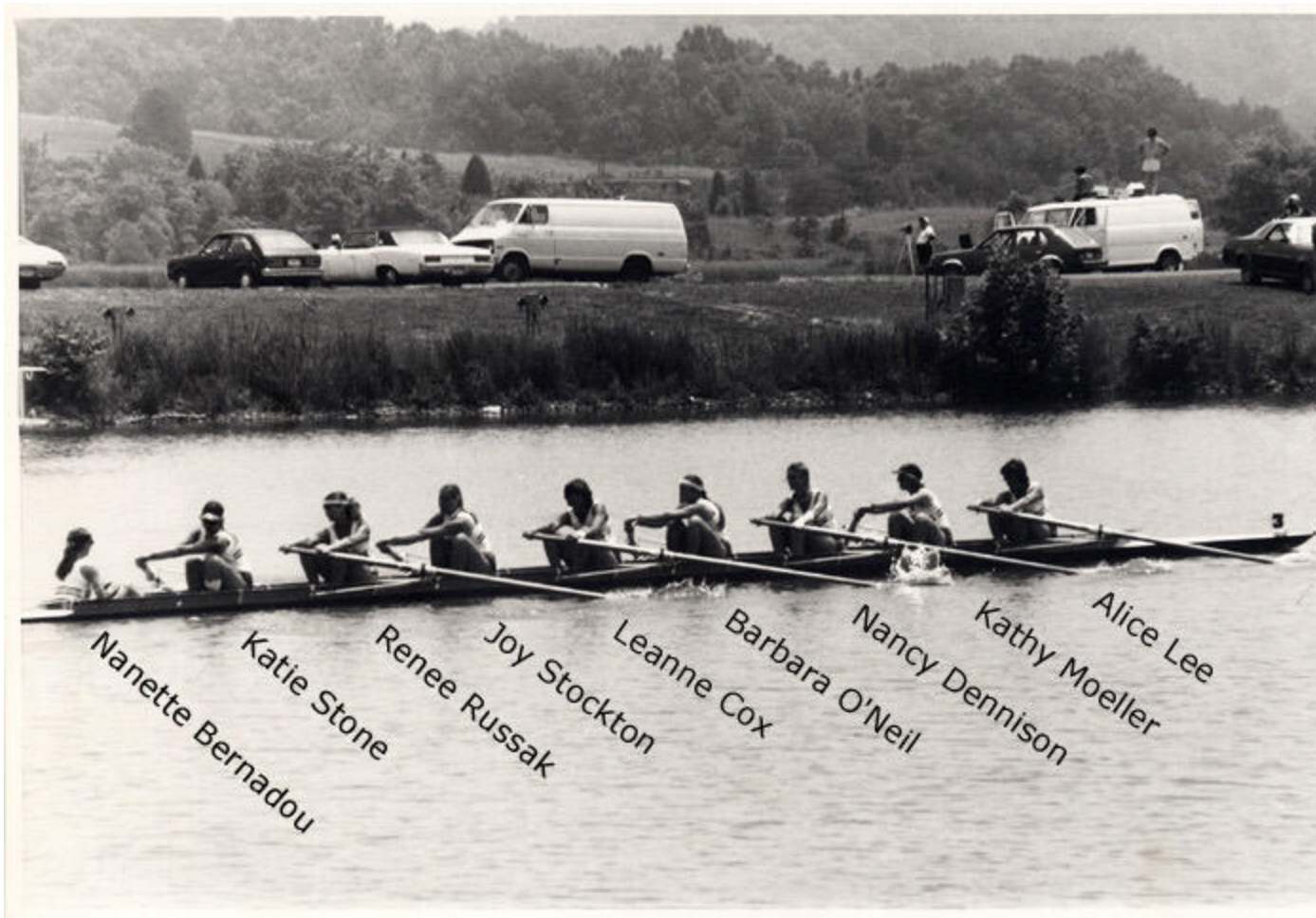


Photo of final strokes of the Cal women crossing the finish line to win the National Championship at Oak Ridge Tennessee in 1980. From left: Coxswain Nanette Bernadou, Stroke Katie Stone, 7 seat Renee Russak, 6 seat Joy Stockton, 5 seat Leanne Cox, 4 seat Barbara O'Neil, 3 seat Nancy Dennison, 2 seat Kathy Moeller, and bow seat Alice Lee.

The Cal Women's Crew program blossomed in the years following its official formation in the Fall of 1974. The crew competed in lightweight and open weight categories. Their timeline is a compendium of exceptional achievements. Crews started racing in the Spring of 1975, and a short five years later, the 1980 varsity eight crew won Cal's first women's national championship in Oakridge, Tennessee, beating a very strong Oregon State University crew at the end of a 1000 meter race. By the Fall of 1996 at the introduction of Women's Rowing as an NCAA sport, the open weight program was run separately from lightweight competitions. Cal women were also crowned national champions when they won the NCAA championship in 2005, 2006, 2016, and 2018. Both the men's and women's lightweight programs united as a club sport that remains active to this day. Cal women's and men's crews hold the distinction of being the only school (University squads) to win the women's and men's national championships in the same year twice (in 2006 and 2016). In 2022, women represented Cal for the first time at Henley Royal Regatta. Alumnae from the program have competed and medalled at the World Rowing Championships and the Olympics. This history project is compiling a record of the ever-growing accomplishments of Cal Women's Crew that we hope will inspire others who follow in their wake.



Photo of final strokes of Cal women crossing the finish line to win the NCAA Varsity 8 National Championship at Lake Natoma, Sacramento in 2005.