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Excelling in the 'Women's Particular Sphere' of Residential Design

By Marlea A. Graham



Willa Clair Cloys, 1915. University of California at Berkeley 1916
Blue & Gold yearbook (1915): 298.

Willa Clair Cloys was born in Armourdale, Kansas on 1 November 1889 and raised in Kansas City, Missouri. An only child, she contracted scarlet fever at about age 10, losing both memory and motor skills. A long convalescence led to her delayed graduation from Benton Grammar School at the age of 17. Her interest in landscape architecture began during this recovery period, when childhood friend Sidney Herbert Hare “introduced her to the T-square and the triangle as a possible amusement.” Hare went on to practice landscape architecture with his father’s firm. Subsequently Willa chose to attend the Manual Training High School where she learned basic freehand and mechanical drawing skills. Fellow Kansas City native Eda Sutermeister (1878-1928), who, along with Beatrix Jones Farrand, became one of the earliest women landscape architects to practice professionally in the U.S., was first employed by George E. Kessler, and later by Hare & Hare. It is likely she served Willa as another role model.

Her blue collar background left Willa without the benefit of Farrand’s financial and social support networks. Instead she learned early on to utilize the power of women’s organizations, initially by winning a partial scholarship to the University of Missouri from the State Federation of Women’s Clubs in 1911. (At that time only the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Lowethorpe School of Landscape Architecture were admitting women for landscape training.) Financial or physical setbacks may have led Willa to delay her advanced schooling until January 1913, when she gained admittance to the newly formed Division of Landscape Gardening and Floriculture at the University of California at Berkeley. There she received a thorough grounding in horticulture from botanist Katherine Jones, a broad knowledge of landscape styles from Assistant Professor Ralph Tallant Stevens, and the advice to concentrate on residential work as “the woman’s particular sphere” from Professor John W. Gregg. Willa accepted this advice and made residential work her *niche*. She completed the program at Berkeley within three years and was the first woman graduate to actively practice the profession. Continuing with postgraduate work at Berkeley, she found several small jobs through university colleagues and friends, preferring to practice independently rather than try for an apprenticeship with an established firm.

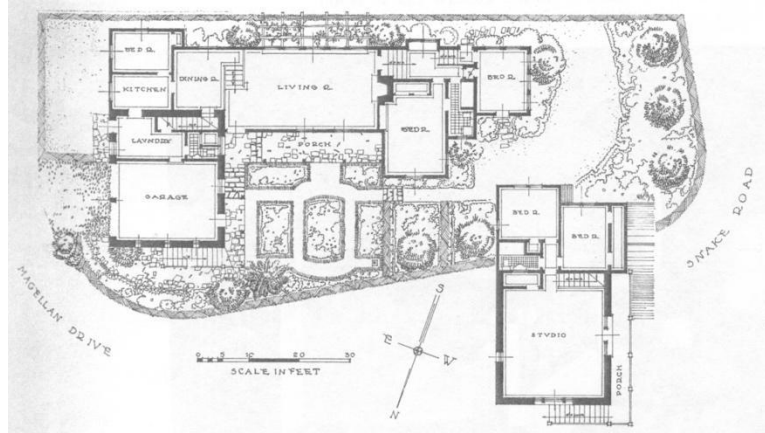
The United States’ entry into World War I quickly reduced the supply of commissions. There are indications that Willa may have survived this period by working in the Woman’s Land Army. In 1920 she

accepted a position as draftsman for a classmate's firm, Horace Cotton & Company in San Francisco, but a year later she had re-established her private practice, using the garden and civic club lecture circuits both to teach the tenets of landscape design and to garner women clients. She became an active member of the Garden Club of Alameda County, later serving as a director. Her club meeting presentation of "Character Study in Trees" was published in a journal of the American Institute of Architecture. A local newspaper soon reported that "Many Berkeley homes of prominence owe the beauty of their gardens to Miss Cloys' planning," and listed four commissions: the Walter Hays Memorial School in Palo Alto, the Berkeley Baptist School of Divinity, a small apartment building on the Stanford University campus and a private residence in Berkeley.

By 1926 she had met and married Robert Morris Carmack, another U.C. Berkeley student. Willa enrolled in Professor Paul Valenti's two-month-long Summer School and Tour of Instruction for American Students in Italy. This became the couples' honeymoon trip. The focus was on architecture but included visits to many notable Italian gardens. Willa brought along a copy of Mrs. Aubrey Le Blond's popular travel guide, *The Old Gardens of Italy: How to Visit Them*, making marginal notations about the gardens she saw. An additional two weeks were spent independently in France before the Carmacks returned to Berkeley and formed their design/build Landscape Company. As the 1920s economic boom expanded, Willa was more than ready to supply the new demand for Italian-style gardens. Affiliation with the Christian Science church brought her most widely publicized commission-- an Italian landscape for the 18-acre Garfield D. Merner estate 'Villa Delizia' in Hillsborough. This, in turn, led to a commission for the Los Gatos property of Charles Erskine Scott Wood and his partner, noted poet and suffragist Sara Bard Field, who shared "a sort of mania to prove that California was the American Italy." In 1928 Willa's association with Geraldine Knight Scott began. "Willa I liked enormously, and I believe that Willa and I could have formed a partnership that might have lasted..." but she disliked Robert Carmack and, though Scott worked for and with Willa on more than one occasion and remained a lifelong friend, no partnership ensued.



Mixed borders at Villa Delizia, estate of Garfield D. Merner, Hillsborough. *Architect and Engineer* 89, no. 3 (June 1927) and *Pacific Coast Architect* 31, no. 6 (June 1927).



Landscape plan for Willa Carmack's first home in the Oakland hills. *Architect and Engineer*, 96, no. 1 (January 1929).

With the advent of the Great Depression, Willa moved her family across the bay to Redwood City. In 1931 she received the commission for the 15-acre Gustave M. Lachman estate in Hillsborough. There is evidence that her Landscape Company was also accepting commissions to install other architects' designs during this period, most notably the Norman B. Livermore estate at Ross (James Frederick Dawson/Olmsted Brothers) and the Stanley Hiller estate in the Oakland/Berkeley hills (architect John Knox Ballentine). Robert Carmack became editor/publisher of a small monthly magazine, *The Peninsulan*, and used this vehicle to advertise the landscape business. One 1934 ad boasted of "Over eight years of successful garden building...and satisfied clients in the six Bay counties."

As the Depression deepened, Willa continued to survive without Works Progress Administration or other government assistance by expanding her gardening connections throughout the San Francisco Bay Area. When college classmate Howard Gilkey instituted the annual Spring Garden Show at Oakland in 1930, Willa accepted a stint as show judge which continued over the next thirty years. In 1933 she became a charter member of the California Horticultural Society, contributing articles to their journal from 1946-1962, and was in the forefront of the first movement advocating the use of native plants in California gardens. When the California School of Gardening for Women relocated from Hayward to the Stanford University campus in 1936, Willa taught classes in landscape design there and at the local junior college. In 1937 she received the commission for the Felton Gables subdivision in Atherton/Menlo Park and noted that she was "steadily increasing practice between San Jose, Atherton, Palo Alto, Hillsborough and San Francisco." Moving to San Carlos she became active in the Civic Garden Club. During WWII she was involved with the local victory garden food production program and in 1944 she became a founding member of California's Association of Landscape Architects. She continued to work the lecture circuit, listing herself as a speaker in the California Garden Clubs, Inc., journal. In 1947, the San Francisco publication *Architect & Engineer* noted that Willa "is busy with a number of interesting gardens in Atherton, Belmont, Redwood City, Los Altos and Hillsborough" and in 1948, the same journal listed the names and locations of five private clients. Brief notations found in the family papers indicated eight more clients' commissions extending from 1948 through 1951. Though Willa's granddaughters recall her working right up to the end of her life, little publicity was given to these later commissions, the last known mentioned in 1959. In 1964, Willa received the Dr. Emmett Rixford Award from the California Horticultural Society. Elsa Uppman Knoll, former director of the California School of Gardening and

garden editor at *Sunset* magazine wrote of Willa that "One finds examples of her work, both residential and commercial, throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and on the Peninsula," and mentioned her "strong sympathy for plants and their importance in garden design." Willa died on 22 April 1968. While portions of her two most important commissioned properties have since been partially subdivided, the houses and the trees planted around them have survived. Though it was subsequently subdivided, Merner estate has been documented for the National Register of Historic Places.

Client file cards, photographs and a few sketches as well as Willa's copy of *The Old Gardens of Italy: How to Visit Them* are held by her descendents.

Publications:

Cloys, Willa Clair. "Character Study in Trees." *Building Review* 22, no. 4 (October 1922): 46-47, 51. Lays out the principles of landscape gardening as Willa understood and employed them.

Carmack, Willa Cloys. "The Use of Trees in Gardens and Home Grounds." *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Western Chapter, National Shade Tree Conference at Berkeley, California* (June 1947): 301-304. Demonstrates the author's belief in the importance of trees in the landscape and how they can best be utilized in private gardens.

____. "Trees Suitable for Home Grounds." *Journal of the California Horticultural Society* 13, no. 2 (January 1952): 16-19.

____. "Ecology as a Basis for Harmonious Plant Grouping." *Journal of the California Horticultural Society* 16, no. 4 (October 1955): 128-133. Willa found the then relatively new concept of "ecological geography" a useful means of determining appropriate plant groupings in her garden designs.

Note: Many thanks to the granddaughters of Willa Carmack, who generously provided access to all still existing private papers, photographs, etc.

Marlea A. Graham is a founding member of the California Garden & Landscape History Society, volunteering as editor of their quarterly journal, Eden, for twelve years, and continues to contribute occasional articles to that publication. Her love for California garden history and the research it entails was a late development which began when she was also serving as editor and writer for the Heritage Roses Group newsletter. She earned her BA in Psychology and a teaching credential from Cal State Hayward, and served as a dispatcher and firefighter in the Oakland Fire Department for 20 years.