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Mabel Symmes, a Cautiously Daring Designer

By Janet L. Gracyk

Mabel Symmes was forty-seven years old in 1922 when she prepared her first known design for the adjoining Blake estates, creating a sophisticated response for the twenty-two difficult acres in Kensington, California. She went on to work with prominent San Francisco Bay Area architects of the day. Symmes was an uncommon female landscape architect practicing in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1920s and 1930s. Most of her papers and drawings were destroyed after her death. Only a handful of her gardens have been located, with drawings for two landscapes coming to light in 2019, initiating a reconsideration of this woman's career.

Born in 1875 in San Francisco, Symmes enjoyed an upper middle-class upbringing. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of California in 1896. (She and Julia Morgan were sorority sisters; there is no evidence to date that they worked together or maintained a social connection.) A young Mabel assumed the life of a young woman with wealth and connections – attending to her interests and hobbies, hosting socials, travelling, and attending club meetings. During a stay in Redlands in 1908, possibly at a sanatorium for tuberculosis, she tried her hand at writing, publishing a short story called “They Mystery of Faith” which is a sly story about trust.ⁱ

Symmes' continued with her social duties, also teaching Sunday School classes, and attending talks. Her musical talents on the violin were on display in two 1913 events, both at Cloyne Court in Berkeley. One concert was in honor of the retiring consul of France and Symmes conducted the subsequent concert, as well as playing violin. (The diverse group of musicians included architect Ernest Coxhead on bells, and his older brother, Almeric, played the drum.)ⁱⁱ

Symmes made the unusual decision to return to the university to study landscape design in 1914.ⁱⁱⁱ She did not complete a second degree, which may have been due to WWI or possibly to ongoing effects of tuberculosis – during that time her sister Anita, in a letter to her husband, wrote that she despaired of Mabel ever feeling well again.^{iv}



Figure 1: Mabel Symmes Portrait, Blake Estate Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley.

Landscape architecture was still emerging as a profession when Symmes determined that she would be a designer of landscapes. The architectural, engineering, and structural aspects of landscape architecture were associated with male building professions. Women were considered wholly unsuited to the work, although maintenance of a home garden was acceptable. Despite these attitudes, a handful of women did achieve professional status during the last decade of the 1800s and going forward into the early 1900s. These women, almost exclusively from privileged backgrounds, learned their craft through a combination of classes and mentoring, usually receiving training from male professionals.

As noted by scholar Thaïsa Way, it was seen as gauche for women at that time to openly seek work, meaning that social connections played an especially important role in attaining design opportunities.^v It was unusual for a woman to maintain her design practice from an office and women worked out of their homes. They typically collaborated with a mentor and were often limited to the preparation of planting plans, rather than full sets of plans.

Mabel Symmes found her vocation later than most, meaning she had a short career, and she worked within the constraints of her social standing. Her known clients had a social connection to some aspect of her life. She prepared plan drawings and notes in her bedroom, and it is likely that she collaborated closely with the (male) architects with whom she worked.



Figure 2: At the Anson and Anita Blake garden Symmes employed a classical approach opposite the front of the house, capturing a small creek to create a grotto within a retaining wall. Twin stairs behind the wall provide access to the hill. A rectangular reflecting pool completes the scene. Undated photo. Anson and Anita Blake garden, Blake Estate Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley.

In addition to suffering from poor health, Symmes was quite shy, although warm and engaging with those whom she knew. Symmes writing style was lively and revealed a subtle sense of humor, as displayed in a series of articles describing the Blake estate landscape and its plants for the *Journal of the California Horticultural Society*.^{vi}

Gardens

Garden designs of the 1920s were heavily influenced by historic European styles. Symmes favored Italian garden styles, employing symmetry and restraint near the house with less formal expressions further from the main areas. Symmes also explored Spanish garden styles.

Symmes and her sister, Anita Day Blake, were influential in the study, introduction, and use of new plants for California, experimenting with native plants and drought tolerant plants. Symmes would apply these lessons to her designs.

- **Anson and Anita Day Blake garden; Edwin T. and Harriet Whitney Carson Blake garden, Rincon Rd, Kensington. Walter Bliss, of Bliss & Faville, architects, 1922.**

The two Blake families developed their property together, originally sharing an entry road, pathway system, and the informal parts of the 22-acre landscape. Following Edwin's death in 1949, the landscapes were separated. The Edwin and Harriet landscape was said to have a different character from the Anson and Anita landscape. Katherine D. Jones, who taught plant

materials and field work classes in the landscape architecture program at UC Berkeley, brought her students to the Edwin and Harriet Blake garden.^{vii} This garden was one of the three Symmes landscapes used as a teaching environment.

Symmes became closely associated with the Anson and Anita Blake property, living at the house and

working in the garden over the second half of her adult life. For some years, this garden was the only recognized example of her work. It remains the largest and best known. Anson and Anita made plans for their property to be donated to UC Berkeley after their deaths. Blake garden, now at 10.5 acres, is currently operated as a public garden and teaching garden by UC Berkeley. Several elements of the original garden remain, particularly the formal elements at the front of the house.



Figure 3: An expansive rose garden was part of the Edwin and Harriet Blake garden. Edwin and Harriet Blake Residence, Blake Estate Collection, Environmental Design Archives, UC Berkeley. Undated photo.

- **Marsh-Sperry gardens, Hawthorne Terrace, Berkeley. 1925; Henry H. Gutterson, architect.** Three different landscape experiences were designed for this project which was created for two families. A single sheet blueprint exists. Anchoring the back yard is a central and shared formal garden that provides a graceful transition between two private gardens. The larger private garden was informal with paths winding through a wooded area. The smaller private garden was formal and appears designed to be appreciated from the large windows of the house.
- **The Harry Una garden, Tamalpais Road, Berkeley. 1927; Walter Ratcliff, architect.** Sarah Unna, Harry's daughter, attended university at Berkeley and became a noted concert pianist. She lived in the house when she was in California and may have had a hand in the design of the gardens. Symmes explored a style developed in Muslim Spain, incorporating a tiled Spanish-Islamic fountain. The fountain and some of the original layout remain.
- **Harold Spens Black garden, Alvarado Road, Berkeley. 1909; Clarence A. Tantau was the architect for the 1927 remodel.** This garden was visited by students of the California School of Gardening for Women at Hayward.^{viii} It seems that little of the original garden remains.
- **Frances D. Olney garden, Claremont Blvd, Berkeley. 1928.** It is not known if any of the original garden remains.
- **The Charles W. Merrill garden, Camino Sobrante, Orinda. 1939; Walter Ratcliff, architect.** Symmes prepared several pages of detail drawings for this property. Symmes used stone walls in the front yard to create access, with paths placed among the native trees. The back of the house provides views and here Symmes terraced the hilly site,

providing formal viewing areas near the house and less formal arrangements away from the house. Some walls and paths remain.

- An additional garden may have been designed for Mary McLean Olney (1873-1965) on Belrose Avenue, in Berkeley. On Symmes' death, Olney sent a condolence letter to Mabel's sister, Anita, writing, "I bless Mabel always, surrounded as I am by her beautiful work."^{ix}

Symmes chose a career that was unusual for a woman of her time and social standing; this despite ongoing health challenges and an unassuming nature. People of wealth chose her to design their landscapes and she worked with prominent Bay Area architects of the day. The results of Symmes' Blake estates designs in 1922, her first known landscapes, display a level of knowledge and sophistication unexpected for a novice landscape architect, suggesting the possibility that other landscapes, still unknown, preceded it. The drawings for the Merrill garden include construction details and grading plans, indicating that her abilities extended beyond planting plans. Mabel Symmes died in 1962 in Kensington. Her papers were destroyed, and her accomplishments quickly receded from memory. More Symmes landscapes may come to light, further illuminating the life and skills of this talented woman.

Janet L. Gracyk is a landscape architect living in the Bay Area. She received a master's degree in landscape architecture from the University of California, Berkeley, in 2001. While at Berkeley she began to seek stories behind the creation of landscapes, whether at the scale of a garden or a town, going on to author reports and studies on several historic landscapes. Her investigation into the life and career of Mabel Symmes grew out of meeting the owner of the Marsh-Sperry landscape in 2018.

ⁱ Symmes, Mabel, "The Mystery of Faith," *The Scrap Book*, v5 #1, (New York: Frank A. Munsey Co., 1908), 72-77. Google books; accessed Mar 1, 2020.

ⁱⁱ "Musical at Cloyne Court," Berkeley Daily Gazette, Feb. 3, 1913, NewspaperArchive.com, accessed May 1, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Riess, Suzanne, ed., *Blake Estate Oral History Project: Oral History Transcript, 1986-1987*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1988), 273.

^{iv} Blake, Anita D., "Anita Day Blake Letter to Anson Blake, May 14, 1914." Blake records are at the Bancroft Library.

^v Way, Thaisa. *Unbounded Practice: Women and Landscape Architecture in the Early Twentieth Century*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

^{vi} Symmes, Mabel, "Adelante," *Journal of the California Horticultural Society*. A series of six articles about plants in the Blake garden appeared between 1945 and 1947.

^{vii} Jones, Katherine D., "Landscape Gardening 113 B, Friday, April 16/26. Trip to Mrs. Ed. Blakes, Berkeley." Records at the Bancroft Library.

viii Smith, Laura Mercado, "The California School of Gardening for Women: A History," *California Horticultural Journal*, Oct. 1970, 132-4.

ix Olney, Mary McLean, *Mary McLean Olney letter to Anita Blake*, Feb. 5, 1962. Record at the Bancroft Library.

Sources for further reading:

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Note: Landscape historian Marlea Graham generously shared her own research on Symmes.