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NORTH GABLES: A BOARDINGHOUSE WITH A HEART

Elizabeth Fine Ginsburg and Harriet Shapiro Rochlin

North Gables was a veritable labyrinth with hallways and staircases going off in all directions. I have no idea when it was built but it was obvious that electricity had been added sometime later . . . the house was heated with gas-fueled ceramic heaters, one in each room. The kitchen was spacious. On one side was a swinging door into the dining room and a six-burner, two-oven stove. Across the room was a cavernous galvanized iron sink. . . .

George Hodder, grandson and grandnephew of the proprietors.

IN LATE 1919, EDNA G. WHITE, an Illinois elementary school teacher, joined her sister, Eleanor “Nellie” White Bent (Mrs. Fred Bent) in Berkeley, California. There they established two boardinghouses for University of California students. The houses were situated back to back; one, North Gables, was at 2531 Ridge Road, the other faced on LeConte Avenue. Both were a short walk to North

Gate.¹ Edna ran the Ridge Road house for women, and Nellie and her husband, the LeConte house for men and women.²

In 1923 a huge fire swept through the north side of campus, destroying some 600 buildings,³ the LeConte house among them. Nellie, by then a widow, became co-proprietor of North Gables; Edna handled business matters; Nellie, supplies and cooking, with student help.⁴

From its inception, North Gables operated as a private cooperative,⁵ possibly the first of its kind for women in Berkeley.⁶ Room and board for residents was twenty-five dollars a month (thirty dollars in the 1940s), plus five hours work a week—cleaning, cooking, serving, dish washing, gardening, repairs, etc. About one-quarter of the thirty students worked an additional two hours a day and lived rent-free.

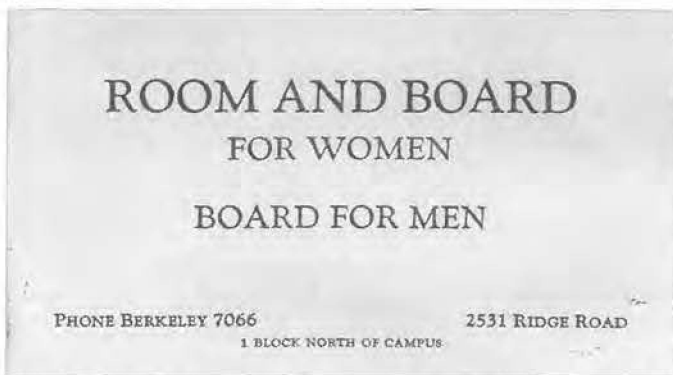
Two university affiliations gave the house a place among organized campus living groups.⁷ As a member of the Women’s Dormitory Association, North Gables sent representatives to its meetings, complied with its regulations—curfews, sign-outs, male visiting hours—and participated in



North Gables in the 1940s. *Courtesy of Polly Behrens Gallagher.*



Edna G. White and Nellie White Bent, proprietors of North Gables from 1923 to 1939. *Courtesy of Jane Hodder Heard.*



North Gables advertisement, ca. 1920. Note the phone number.

its activities. University Approved Housing also imposed its requirements: each house had to elect officers, hold regular meetings, pass room by room inspections for size, safety, cleanliness, and equipment,⁸ and meet standards of nutrition and sanitation for food service.⁹

“I thought the lady who came from the university was looking down her nose at this little North Gables,” recalled one house president, Norma Anderson Porter. “We

always passed inspection.”¹⁰

Throughout the Depression, North Gables operated at full capacity. Jane Hodder Heard remembers as a child “. . . these two ladies agonizing over lists of girls who had applied for a room . . . There were always more girls needing a place than there were spaces, and money being so very tight, they had to make every penny count.”¹¹

After Nellie’s death in July of 1939, Edna, despite failing vision and advancing arthritis, carried on alone for another decade. Those ten years proved especially taxing. During World War II, undergraduate male student enrollment declined, while undergraduate women student enrollment increased.¹² The armed forces absorbed a number of student residences, adding to the women’s housing shortage. Rationing, food stamps, blackouts, and wartime anxieties added to Miss White’s load.

During the war years, job opportunities for women burgeoned, and many North Gables maintained a full university schedule while working, some full-time.¹³ Even so, money remained a problem for most. In lieu of rent, Wanda Marrs Lewis ’47 did the downstairs house-



Graduating class of 1947 poses before parting. Top row: Frances Brown, Barbara Woods, Jean McIntyre, Irene Weissman, Harriet Shapiro, Kathy Nuckols. Bottom row: Jean Petersen, House-mother Edna G. White, Fern Kaiser. *Courtesy of Harriet Shapiro Rochlin.*

keeping, and remembered spending weeks making new curtains on an old sewing machine. “I’m very grateful to that lady, because I probably would not have gone to college otherwise,” Lewis said.¹⁴

As she was starting college, June Anderson Eagleton’s parents divorced, leaving her in financial need. “Miss White told me not to worry . . . For four months I didn’t pay anything, and I never paid her back . . .”¹⁵

In the post-war years, Miss White’s health was noticeably failing. In a 1947 letter thanking a former resident for a Mother’s Day gift, she wrote, “In January I began having trouble with my left knee . . . and the doctor said I was a mess of arthritis. Two and a half weeks at Frank’s (her sister) did a world of good . . .”¹⁶

Two girls—Wanda Marrs and Barbara Jordan—were taking turns sitting with an ailing Miss White the night she had a stroke. “We were just kids, and didn’t know what to do,” Wanda recalled.¹⁷ Soon after, in a letter to her mother, another resident wrote: “The house is sort of upset. Miss White’s not feeling well . . . Mom, they’re making ready to take her to a convalescent sanitarium.”¹⁸ She never recovered sufficiently to resume her duties, and North Gables soon ceased to operate as a cooperative boardinghouse for women students.

Edna G. White died on October 21, 1957, and is buried at Sunset View Cemetery in El Cerrito, California.¹⁹ As subsequent events will attest, she, North Gables, and the support she provided for hundreds of Berkeley women students would long be remembered.

The Edna G. White Memorial Scholarship

In 1994, four former residents—Fern Kaiser Libow, Beatrice Brownstone Frierman, Elizabeth Fine Ginsburg, and Harriet Shapiro Rochlin, all about seventy—met for lunch. The quartet talked about how Miss White and North Gables had made it possible for so many women who were self-supporting or of modest means to live on campus, participate in university activities, and get a fine college education. Before parting, the foursome had a mission: to honor Miss White’s legacy with a memorial scholarship for Cal women students of academic ability and financial need.

The Edna G. White Memorial Scholarship, to be administered by the UC Berkeley Foundation, was established in December of 1994, and the founders began a search for North Gables residents. Drawing on the Alumni Association Directory, *Blue and Gold* yearbooks, an article in the *California Monthly*, December 1994, and word of mouth, they located some thirty former housemates and organized the Friends of North Gables. Membership has since grown to fifty-two former North Gables. Additional support comes from Cal alumni and relatives of former residents and of Miss White.

On August 22, 1995, members of the Friends of North Gables—ages late sixties to mid-eighties—gathered at The Faculty Club for a reunion. A photograph of Miss White holding Clementine, her cat, a display of memorabilia, and twenty-two excited housemates, surprisingly recognizable despite white hair, wrinkles, and added poundage, evoked laughter and tears. A roving tape recorder captured memories of electrical failures, the food (“It . . . was nothing much, but we all stayed healthy”²⁰), Peeping Toms, endearing or eccentric



North Gables proprietor/housemother, Edna G. White and her cat, Clementine, summer 1948. Courtesy of George Hodder.



Founders of White Memorial Scholarship. Fern Kaiser Libow, Beatrice Brownstone Frierman, Elizabeth Fine Ginsburg and Harriet Shapiro Rochlin. The Rochlin residence, Los Angeles, 1995. *Courtesy of Jean McIntyre McMullin.*

housemates, after-hours lockouts. One theme dominated: Miss White's open-heartedness. Its expression took various forms.

Kathy Nuckols Lawson, of Tomales, recalled her arrival at North Gables: "I'm seventeen, I've got a scholarship, but I have no place to stay. 'Don't worry,' Miss White said. 'We'll make room.'"²¹ She was also accessible for those who needed help with personal problems. While frantically studying for finals, Helen Craig McCullough, a resident from 1936 to 1939, contracted the measles and was hospitalized. "I received a letter from my mother up in Mendocino County telling me to come home and rest. I hadn't a clue as to how my mother knew until I spoke to Miss White."²² Recalled pianist Bea Frierman, "Down and out, I worked for my room and board. I was especially grateful because Miss White let me practice, sometimes for hours on end."²³ And when Miss White needed help, she asked for it. "Just before Christmas one year, a water heater broke," Janice de Moor recollected. "You know how Miss White lived from month to month; there was no cash flow. At dinner that night she asked if anyone could pay their January rent in advance. . . . She got the water heater."²⁴

In 1996, Dennis McCarthy, a columnist for the *Daily News* in the San Fernando Valley, read a Friends of North Gables newsletter and then interviewed Elizabeth Ginsburg and Fern Libow. Wrote McCarthy, "Without that housing break, a Berkeley education would have been impossible for hundreds of slim-pursed women from 1932 to 1949—most of them the first women in their families to go to college. . . . Most of her girls (Miss White's) are pushing or past seventy, either



Harriet Shapiro and Elizabeth "Libby" Fine, friends since the sixth grade, coming out Sather Gate in 1946. *Courtesy of Harriet Shapiro Rochlin.*

retired or winding up careers that did themselves and their gender proud.”²⁵

The scholarship fund doubled its original goal by 1998 and promises continued growth. One member of the Friends has allocated a portion of her estate to the scholarship in an irrevocable trust. Others are contemplating similar actions.

In their responses, awardees of 1996 and 1997 appear to speak North Gablese. The first, a student majoring in molecular and cellular biology, wrote “Running around this huge, rat-maze daily, one tends to reject the idea that there are disinterested observers . . . who care what becomes of us. . . . Thank you for setting an example I should so like to follow.”²⁶

When asked what the scholarship meant to her, the second recipient, a major in chemical engineering, replied, “Without your generosity and support I would not be able to attend Berkeley. Your scholarship has also bolstered my self-esteem, in that, you think I’m good enough to be here. I cannot tell you how much this means to me or my family.”²⁷



North Gables, now an apartment house, 1995. *Courtesy of Genevieve Stricker Isaconas.*

ENDNOTES

- 1 Letter from Jane Hodder Heard, grandniece of Edna G. White and granddaughter of Nellie Bent, February 1996, to Friends of North Gables.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Steven Finacom, "Wading Through the Ashes of Scholarship and Literature," *Chronicle of the University of California*, 1:1 (Spring 1998), 88.
- 4 Heard letter.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Verne A. Stadtman, ed. *The Centennial Record of the University of California* (Berkeley: University of California Printing Department, 1967), 309-310. As early as 1915, a list of approved houses devoted to group living for men or women students was established. By 1924, the Committee on Living Accommodations functioned as the policy and standards committee on housing for the university.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Harriet Rochlin, "A Kitchen Aide Reflects," unpublished. "The food, if unexciting, was well-balanced, and head cook, Mary Ann Stroud, a social worker getting a master's degree, imposed strict standards of cleanliness. I learned more about cooking in that kitchen than in my mother's, and more about politics, philosophy, and female mores than in my classes."
- 10 Tape transcription of Friends of North Gables reunion, Berkeley, The Faculty Club, August 22, 1995.
- 11 Heard letter.
- 12 *Centennial Record*, 222.
- 13 Reunion tape transcription.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Letter from Edna G. White to Libby Fine, Memorial Day, 1947.
- 17 Reunion tape transcription.
- 18 Letter from Polly Behrens to her mother, February 27, 1949.
- 19 Death certificate, Contra Costa County.
- 20 Reunion tape transcription.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Dennis McCarthy, *Daily News*, January 11, 1996, 3.
- 26 Letter from first awardee to Friends of North Gables, January 8, 1997.
- 27 Scholarship Recipient Profile of second awardee to University of California, Berkeley, February 2, 1998.