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## “THE WANT MOST KEENLY FELT”

### UNIVERSITY YWCA, THE EARLY YEARS

*Dorothy Thelen Clemens*

IT WAS IN THE EARLY WEEKS of 1889 that a number of undergraduate women met in Professor Howison’s North Hall office. There they talked of university life, and lacks, for themselves and the other women students—forty-three in total—on Berkeley’s still-raw campus. It was a desire for “helpful spiritual and social relations” that had drawn these seventeen women together. They decided that Bible study was “the line of work which will satisfy the want most keenly felt.”<sup>1</sup> From this need and their organizational skills the University YWCA was born on March 10, 1889.

Following its founding, the fledgling YWCA used the “Ladies Room” of North Hall as headquarters. Remembered as a room where one could take refuge to study or eat, there were “couches where you could lie down if you wanted...comfortable chairs...lockers for rent for a small fee..., quite a gathering place for the co-eds and very much used.”<sup>2</sup>

For nearly forty years Bible study and missionary concerns remained the focus of programming in the YWCA; together with the student YMCA, elaborate schedules of these courses were organized. Leaders came from faculty and Berkeley churches, as well as students well-trained for that role. Social times together were very much a part of YW life as



University of California women enjoying the seascape at the 1907 YWCA student conference, Capitola, California. *Courtesy of University YWCA Archives.*

well, as the student body swelled to 805 undergraduates in 1895, of whom 250 were women.

By that date, the "Ladies Room" was memory. In January 1893, Stiles Hall, a gift from Mrs. Ann Stiles, was dedicated to "the religious and social uses of the university without distinction of creed."<sup>3</sup> The YM and YW were central occupants, along with a number of other student groups, of the new building at Allston Way and Dana Street; the upstairs auditorium was even used as a university lecture hall for a good many years. There was a "cozy corner"—a home for the young ladies over which they had exclusive control.

Extending the warmth and richness of their YW experience to new students was the next step. Within months of the March 1889 founding the young ladies joined their YM classmates to give a reception to new students. This joint reception immediately took its place as part of the university's August calendar, along with separate welcoming events given by each association. For, although the YW members felt quite secure, they also wanted to make it clear that the "Young Women's Christian Association is independent of the Young Men's in all matters of administration."<sup>4</sup>

A variety of student services was initiated by the Christian associations. For years YW women met trains arriving in Berkeley, escorting new students to Stiles Hall, where baggage could be left while the search for housing began. Even more significant was the list of "Private Board and Lodgings for Ladies or Gentlemen" maintained at Stiles Hall in those pre-Housing Bureau days. Similarly, the faculty-initiated "Student Aid Society," established to help students find part-time jobs, came to Stiles in 1898. Assistance both with housing and employment became a significant part of Edith Brownsill's responsibilities when she became the YW's general secretary in 1899.

Just as the Christian associations worked to ease student life on campus, they also began to look for an opportunity to take their enthusiasm for service into the wider community. During the 1894-95 year a boys' club was organized in West Berkeley; the next year girls' clubs were added. By 1898-99 the YW had "for its immediate object the establishment of a college Settlement in West Berkeley. It rents a house on Fifth and University Avenue, supported by private subscription and maintains three clubs of girls. Through personal friendship the students seek to inspire the girls with a loftier womanhood and a deeper spiritual life. We have a firm footing and our chief needs are funds and workers."<sup>5</sup>

By August 1897 a remarkable gathering of energetic, talented, willing, and faithful women had coalesced at Stiles Hall. These undergraduate women added organizational sophistication to their predecessors' energy and "Christian Purpose." Moreover, a "critical mass" of women now claimed the university as their own. In 1895-96, 39 percent of undergraduates were women; in 1900-01 that number had soared to 951 women, 46 percent. Although this percentage remained the highpoint until the days of World War I, absolute numbers of women continued to increase.<sup>6</sup> Over the next few years, a student cabinet would be added to officers and committees; the advisory board was established in 1902. In 1909, under leadership of Dr. Edith Brownsill, (M.D. '04), the alumnae were formally organized. The undergraduate women had employed Mary Bently as their first full-time general secretary in 1902. The students continued full financial responsibility for both this position and the program, aided, it is true, by loyal alumnae until 1909, when the advisory board assumed the major fund-raising job; student fund drives continued to occupy many weeks on students' calendars into the early 1960s.

It may not have been called "leadership training" or "mentoring" in those early days, but development of leadership and organizational skills have always been central to YWCA philosophy. In the earliest years of the Berkeley YWCA, inspiration came from traveling YWCA college secretaries and by undergraduate attendance at regional YWCA conferences. From a slender beginning at Mills College and Inverness, the YW Pacific Coast Conferences

at Capitola, initially organized to a large extent by University of California women and warmly supported financially by Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, had grown to 400 attendees by 1911. The Capitola Hotel was wonderful, but had limitations of space and scheduling. In 1912, Mrs. Hearst invited the entire conference to meet at her Pleasanton home, "Hacienda," supplying everything from tents to rubber boots. Meanwhile, several national YW secretaries were exploring the Monterey peninsula with representatives of the Pacific Improvement Company. In 1913, the company deeded thirty acres to the YWCA. Again, Mrs. Hearst's generosity helped make things happen by providing backing for the YWCA's construction needs at Asilomar. For more than forty years, Asilomar would be a beloved experience and place for generations of YWCA members and many other youth groups as well. In 1956 Asilomar was sold to the state of California. Today's visitor to these sandy shores will remember the YWCA through the very name "Asilomar," coined by a Stanford YW student, as well as through the much admired buildings designed by Julia Morgan, architect for numerous YWCAs throughout the West.



Executive secretary Lillie Margaret Sherman on the front porch of the YWCA Cottage, early 1930s. *University YWCA Archives.*

For the Berkeley YWCA, post-Asilomar days of 1913 ushered in a decades-long, creative period as Miss Lillie Margaret Sherman '09, climbed those Stiles Hall stairs as general secretary. She brought "her wonderful, friendly spirit, her contagious sense of humor, her sympathetic understanding and selfless devotion to the YWCA."<sup>7</sup> The YW began that university year with a bang: a two-day open house for freshman women, 1500 program brochures sent out, a day-long rally, lots of committee work. Classes were offered in Bible study, mission study, social service work. Undergirding all were the personal relationships with Lillie Margaret, along with the inspiration she drew from her Christian core and transmitted to all.

The freshman breakfast was an introduction to a new form of programming; first freshman groups and soon an entire class commission system developed as one of the principal program streams. The girls elected their own officers and assisted in planning their meetings. Each commission was, in effect, a well-organized YWCA mini-group.

Meanwhile, as World War I came closer to engulfing America, emphases within the YWCA changed. Quite purposefully, in 1915, the associations had brought together the "Council of Churches and Christian Associations for the University of California," and with that the impressive schedule of religious education classes passed into the work of local churches. Lillie Margaret continued with a few Bible classes, one of which laid out the welcome mat especially for Asian girls. Missionary classes evolved into area studies and language tables. Student vice-president Ella Barrows began a small foreign student group. In 1919 Henrietta Thompson was called to the new position of secretary of the YW's "Foreign Foyer." In those pre-International House days the Foyer provided a center of social and organiza-

tional life for both students new to this country and for second- and third- generation minority students as well.

When America entered World War I, the campus went on full wartime alert. The university administration planned numerous rallies, and offered campus facilities to the War Department. The girls knit; they knit in class, in meetings, and knitting even became a class for YW freshman women. Results of the knitting may have been somewhat dubious, but the regents' offer of space sent the YWCA for the first time off-campus, to a tiny "shack" a block away. The YW returned to Stiles briefly, but by then the women were watching construction of their new home at the corner of Allston Way and Union Street. Designed by Julia Morgan and partially financed by the National YWCA, the Cottage was inspired by the "hostess houses" built by the National YWCA for families of the military. Berkeley's building was simple and hospitable and met the dreams of those peripatetic YW women for "fireplaces and wicker furniture—a fire, chatty groups of girls, chintz, Japanese lanterns, greens and flowers."<sup>8</sup>

People, program, place—a set of constructs with which to follow the YWCA through the next decades. We will trace briefly the social history that unfolds, as reflected in YW programs; programs which also included those wants "most keenly felt": friendship, leadership development, inspiration, and group life.

The National YWCA supported the Foreign Foyer secretary until 1924. Then, after some discussion as to how best to continue this fine program, the advisory board and cabinet "voted to include the work of other countries as a part of our own YWCA and from this time on to try to think of ourselves in a new way—not as an American YWCA and a foreign students Foyer as separate organizations but as a thoroughgoing international Student Association."<sup>9</sup> "Foreign student" now became "international student." The wonderfully festive International Banquet continued well into the sixties; international-related programs remain a strong component of YW program. At the same time that YWCA vision was expanding internationally, it also focused closer to home with recognition that some form of group life should be offered to the Negro women who were beginning to enroll at the university. The YW's cafeteria "The Golden Lantern" offered a friendly spot for coffee and donuts and a place to chat, remembered Ida Jackson '22. The Foreign Foyer had invited both black and Asian-born American women to join that group. By the mid-twenties staff and students were thinking of more creative ways to include Negro women in YW activities. Following the group-based YW philosophy, the students themselves were asked; they discussed and decided that what was needed were interracial groups that would take their place within the regular organization of YWCA student life; these groups would also come to provide a pathway into other YWCA program areas.

During the 1920s the Girl Reserves, the National YWCA program for teen-age girls, grew in Berkeley from a few college women volunteering to lead a few Berkeley High School groups, to a separate department within the YW, with staff members employed to work with both junior and senior high school girls and their college leaders. Interestingly, just as the Foreign Foyer program had led the way for the University YW out of Stiles into the Cottage, so would the Girl Reserve program become the nucleus of the Berkeley Community YWCA when it grew out of the Cottage in 1940.

Community Service Department work continued, as it had since the days of the West Berkeley Settlement project, always attracting a corps of loyal students. As is reflected in some oral histories of the Prytanean Society (a women students' association), preoccupation of the twenties was with child welfare and community organizations, and YW women spent both term-time and summers as volunteers at settlement houses and day nurseries.<sup>10</sup>

Lillie Margaret summed up the twenties: "We have been breaking down barriers between race and race and nation and nation...We have answered the call of community centers...the life in this building has seen the birth and growth of a live Girl Reserve Department...We have become a part of the Community Chest of Berkeley...We are a community agency as well as a University one."<sup>11</sup>



YWCA advisory board member Mrs. Peddar serves tea and cookies to students at the "Nosebag Club," part of the YWCA's offerings during the depression years of the 1930s. *University YWCA Archives.*

The thirties brought, first of all, the Depression; economic stresses hit students as well as workers. The "Clothes Closet" was inaugurated by the international student group; profits went into the international students' loan fund. A delightful development of those harried years was the "Nosebag Club." Board members and an intrepid group of friends provided tea, cookies, and warmth of spirit to coeds who brought their lunches from home and found a cheerful spot in which to eat and visit.

By the mid-1930s an awareness of the blunt housing discrimination facing some students in the campus area became a very great concern of the YW and YM. In 1937 the YW circulated a petition against racial discrimination in campus boarding houses, asking students to pledge themselves not to seek housing accommodations at places where students of all races were not accepted. In 1938 a joint YM-YW "Race Relations" group was formed, staffed by YM General Secretary Harry Kingman. The YM-YW "Race Relations" group continued its learning, discussion, and action well into the fifties. By then the university housing office had been established; the Associated Students and Ys worked together on the Fair Bear Housing campaign.

Beginning in 1931 student radical groups were active in the campus area. Their political and ideological protests against American society were vocal and stirred up reaction (particularly from the broader community), and interest (primarily from the students). Out of campus efforts to deal with the situation came Rule 17 which limited the use of univer-

sity facilities for political expression; out of the YW's concern for freedom of assembly came a rethinking of rental policies and procedures. Thus the Ys became centers of hospitality to off-campus groups and their ideas. Providing this open platform, always within guidelines of the rental policy, at times brought pressures and upsets with community officials and funding agencies as well as with campus administration. It was touchy, well into the sixties, to provide leftist groups and campus "radicals" with a platform. In 1946, for example, both Lillie Margaret Sherman of the YW and Harry Kingman of the YM were called to testify before the "Tenney Committee."<sup>12</sup>

In March 1939 there were many gala gatherings in the welcoming rooms of the Cottage as the YWCA celebrated its golden jubilee. Within broad continuities of program and ways of work, change was also present. That was apparent when, in 1941, Lillie Margaret resigned the general secretary position to be succeeded by her friend and YWCA Associate Secretary Leila Anderson, who had staffed the International Department since 1936. Lillie Margaret became staff for the Community Service Department. Declaration of war in December 1941 expanded not only YW offerings such as Red Cross classes and a community defense group but also emphases; students volunteering in community groups received special training in work with children in times of stress.

Executive Order 9066 struck deeply into the YW; there were Japanese women in programs and on the advisory board. YW students found an active role at the Berkeley First Congregational Church's "registration and assembly point" when Berkeley's Japanese American residents were interned in October and November 1942. First Congregational Church's Sunday school and the YW combined to organize child care as parents went through agonizing paperwork and long periods of waiting for whatever came next.



In 1947 YWCA women celebrated Christmas at the "Twice Ten-Penny" supper in the YWCA auditorium. *University YWCA Archives.*



Women students of the 1940s display the Community Chest red feather flag on the steps of the YWCA Cottage. The Julia Morgan-designed Cottage at the corner of Allston Way and Union Street was home to the student YWCA from 1920 to 1958. *University YWCA Archives*.

The campus went onto a year-round class schedule, with the confusing result that there could be two YW “annual dinners” within only a few months of each other. Service men arrived, and the Saturday night “Cal Canteens” were opened. Scarcity of farm laborers created an emergency and Harvest Work camps were born. Asilomar was leased to the federal government, so “Asilomar” was held elsewhere for the duration. Wartime found a campus of women; from 11,180 men in pre-war days there were only 4,274 in 1944-45. This was not the way they would have chosen, but it was a time of opportunities for women. “Almost all activities of student life were sustained in one form or another. When male leadership was unavailable, women students bravely took over...To their surprise and disappointment, men returning to the campus found things operating very well, thank you, and coeds have not at any time since relinquished their right to hold any job for which they are qualified.”<sup>13</sup>

Postwar days found program offerings continuing strong. Groups concerned with economics, public affairs and political issues met regularly. These years also saw a noticeable increase in men around the Cottage, as married couples ate together in the Golden Lantern or enjoyed “Nosebag” teas. Packing parties began, mailing clothing to Europe. Housing was found and made ready for returning Japanese. Student displaced persons were aided.

In 1947 Leila Anderson was called to become the National YWCA's student secretary. Lillie Margaret Sherman resumed her former position on an interim basis. In 1949 Anne Kern became executive director, a position she had also held at the UCLA YWCA. Anne, with her welcoming smile and encouraging support remained at the YW until 1972, and guided



program and people not only into expanded areas of work but also, in 1959, into a new home. One of the many strengths Anne Kern brought to the Cottage was an established and warm working relationship with the staff at Stiles Hall, gained from meetings of regional YM-YW staff. Policies and ways of work did differ between the two Ys, and constant coordination on staff and student levels was required. However, the women agreed, their objectives were more similar than different and some programs were infinitely stronger for being planned and presented jointly. The Model Senate and "You and the Twentieth Century," and especially Cal 1A, nurtured leadership and cooperation between the two associations.

Cal 1A began modestly, with a post-football game supper program at the Cottage, as the two associations reincarnated their joint freshman orientation program of old Stiles Hall days. By 1952 this new orientation program was firmly established and had grown to a three-day conference at Camp Tolowa in the Santa Cruz mountains. New and transfer students joined Y and faculty leaders for volleyball, songs, talks, and small discussion groups. Cal 1A went full steam through autumn 1960. With the inception of the university's dorm-based orientation program came many searching discussions before the associations concluded that organization of large-scale freshman orientation had best join the list of Y programs that over the decades have been "walked across the street" into the hands of university administration.

Part of the campus legacy of World War II returned with the Korean War. As in the '40s it was not unusual in the '50s to have YW members marry mid-term as their servicemen fiancés received overseas orders. Additionally, on campus a significant number of men and women were balancing studies, marriage, and money. In 1949 a group called "Planning for Marriage" had started. In 1950 the program expanded to include the subject of women in professions, and in 1953 "The Role of Women" was added to the schedule.

Constantly present and yet always responding to new situations was the Community Service Department which still continues semester in, semester out, to attract volunteers. Students of the fifties were much interested in community welfare activities; some students had a profession in mind but students also held a strong conviction that such interest and participation were part of responsible community membership. The department offered many training and skills classes to the students, and also played a valuable role in interpreting student volunteer strengths and scheduling difficulties to local agencies.

In the early part of this decade the university loyalty oath controversy affected the student cabinet deeply. After much discussion a series of letters was sent to the regents, campus administrators and California government officials. It is easy to forget, four decades later, that such an action by students was considered by many tantamount to supporting communism. The Social Concerns committee continued to work on housing discrimination issues. Quiet in comparison to student generations yet to come these women of the fifties may have been, but they were determined to know what was happening, to get facts and understanding, as they planned for the time when they would walk through Julia Morgan's glass doors into life beyond classes.

In the background of student programming, the advisory board was preparing and raising funds for the inevitable move and new building mandated by the university's expansion needs. The move, first to temporary quarters in a huge old building east of the YW's new lot at the corner of Bancroft Way and Bowditch, took place in May 1958. But first came the groundbreaking. There was a phalanx of spades and spaders, including Mrs. J. T. Richards who, in 1889, was one of the seventeen women who had brought the University YWCA into being.

The new YWCA building, designed by Joseph Esherick, was dedicated on March 22, 1959. Program and wicker furniture moved from Cottage to "Barn" and finally into the new

building, with continuity from the past and excitement and challenge looking into the future. Little could the women imagine, as students, staff, board, and friends joined in singing the university hymn that March day, what the coming decades would hold. Looking back forty years later, predictive value can be wrung from one board member’s comment about the “great and resounding” noise of the auditorium. For that first year in the new building would usher in the “sound and fury” of the sixties—and campus life would never be the same again.

## ENDNOTES

The material in this article is drawn from the centennial history of the University YWCA, *Standing Ground and Starting Point*, by Dorothy Thelen Clemens, published by the University YWCA in 1990. The abbreviation “YWA” refers to materials in the YWCA archives, 2600 Bancroft Way, Berkeley.

- 1 *1889 Blue and Gold*, 15 (1888).
- 2 Mary McLean Olney, “Oakland, Berkeley and the University of California: 1880-1895,” Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1962, 126.
- 3 William Carey Jones, *Illustrated History of the University of California* (San Francisco: Frank H. Dukessmith, 1895), 306.
- 4 *1895-1896 Student Handbook*, 7. YWA.
- 5 *1898-1899 Student Handbook*. YWA.
- 6 Verne A. Stadtman, ed. *The Centennial Record of the University of California* (Berkeley: University of California Printing Department, 1967), 212-225.
- 7 Mrs. Frank Scott, “Farewell to the Cottage,” April 25, 1958. Typescript does not carry Mrs. Scott’s name; attribution is based on thanks expressed to Mrs. Scott in YWCA student newspaper, *The Clarion*, for doing the farewell history. YWA.
- 8 *YWCA Association Record*, November 25, 1918. YWA.
- 9 *YWCA Annual Report 1923-1924*. YWA.
- 10 *The Twenties: Remembrances of A Decade. Prytanean Oral History*, Vol. 2, 1921-30 (Berkeley: Prytanean Alumnae, Inc., 1977).
- 11 Lillie Margaret Sherman, “Fifteen years in a student association,” General Secretary’s report for 1928. YWA.
- 12 Lillie Margaret Sherman quoted in the *Berkeley Daily Gazette*, September 25, 1946. Formal name for the “Tenny Committee” was the California Legislative Investigating Committee on Un-American Activities.
- 13 Verne A. Stadtman, *The University of California 1868–1968* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970), 315.