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Cal Women's Crew: A sketch from the 60's

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## 150 Years of Women at Berkeley

# Cal Women's Crew: A sketch from the 60's

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BY CAROL SIMPSON SANOFF BA '69, MLS '79

*A few years ago a younger colleague asked me to write about my time on the Cal Women's Crew in the '60's. This is a modified version of that, as true as I can remember. Karl Drlica has researched and written about those early days in greater depth for his book "Bitten by the Bug," which should be made part of these archives.*

As a Cal freshman in the fall of 1965, I happened to see a small notice in the *Daily Cal* inviting women interested in rowing to come to a workout. I had been a general-purpose tomboy growing up; what I knew about rowing was that tall men did it. I went to the workout and found a small group of women running laps inside a gymnasium (it must have been raining that day) and a couple of not-especially-tall men directing them. They were Art Sachs, an optometry student who had rowed lightweight as an undergraduate at Cornell; and Karl Drlica, a graduate student in entomology (later molecular biology) who'd come down from Oregon State University where he rowed and his father was in charge of the crew program. They were intensely dedicated volunteers, and while they tried to get us intercollegiate sport status, the best the university would do was to let us be a sort-of club.

We rowed out of the Lake Merritt boathouse. There were high school boys and St. Mary's men and women from Mills College also rowing there. We were at the low end of the totem pole and had limited access to boats, three afternoons a week and early Saturday mornings. The days we couldn't row we ran around and beyond campus (to hoots and catcalls), up and down the bleachers at Memorial Stadium, rolled a coffee can filled with cement over a dowel to strengthen our wrists, and did modified pull-ups that were called "Dr. Licas." Some of the women had rowed previously but not competitively; most of us were entirely new to it. Art and Karl were, each in his own way, competitors, and serious about our training. They worked us like real athletes and brooked no complaints or absences. "There are only two reasons to miss a workout: you are dying, or someone in your family is dying."

***"the best the university would do was to let us be a sort-of club."***

Lake Merritt is an urban park and oddly shaped with one thousand-meter stretch; we did a lot of turning. Art coached from a single mostly, from a launch when he could get it, and from the shore sometimes (I remember him running a lot); Karl coached from his single.

We raced Mills (an established program with a woman coach) in the fall in a couple of fours and lost both races. We raced them again in the spring, and one of our boats beat theirs. (Headline in the *Daily Cal*: "Golden Bras Split.") During the week of spring break we did twice-a-day workouts, an immersive experience that cemented my love for rowing: row, eat, rest, repeat; lots of ice cream. We went to the

Western Sprints in Vallejo that year (or perhaps it was the following year), and Art invited the Cal men's crew to send four freshmen to race us on Lake Merritt. (Even though they had only rowed in eights, they stomped us. That cohort included Bob "Barge" Ellsberg, who to this day remains a devoted fan of Cal Women's Crew).

***"There are only two reasons to miss a workout: you are dying, or someone in your family is dying."***



Cal Women's Crew, 1967

Left to right: Chris R., Pat S., Sydney S., Ilene W., Carol S.



**Cal Women's Crew after practice**

Art was from Seattle and still had a girlfriend there who rowed for Lake Washington Rowing Association. We drove up in June for the first-ever Women's Rowing Nationals on Green Lake, with teams from Lake Washington, Green Lake, Philadelphia Girls' Rowing Association, Mills, and us. There were eights, fours, and pairs races, no heats necessary. By then our team had suffered attrition and didn't have eight oarswomen. We rowed in the four (coming in third of five), and Ilene Wagner and I were second of three in a pairs race.

I want to say a little about financial support at Cal. There was none. We were students, our coaches were graduate students, and no one had any extra money. Art's shoes were kept intact with duct tape; Karl drove his grandmother's '57 Chevy (not yet so cool). I'm not sure how we paid our dues to LMRC. Gas for coaches' cars to get us from campus to the boathouse and back was an expense. Sometimes late at night I would go with Art around to various university departments known to throw away computer punched cards, and we could forage scrap paper to sell by the pound. There was also a mortuary willing to pay a dollar a head to go on a tour, and we invited any acquaintances we could to join us.

I went home to southern California for the summer of 1966, found my way to the Long Beach Rowing Association boathouse (the old one from the 1932 Olympics at the very end of Marine Stadium), and rowed in a wherry whenever I could borrow the family car to get down there. There were men in the boathouse who seemed serious about rowing (and were observably tall). As it turned out, these were some of the best men scullers in the country (John Van Blom, John Nunn, and Tom McKibbin) and they made up  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Olympic sculling team in Mexico City in 1968. I think one of them must have shown me how to trolley the wherry down to the water and get the oars into the oarlocks, but I don't remember any sculling instruction or much notice given to me.

When I returned to Cal in the fall of 1966, I'd improved. Art and Karl continued to coach their now-seasoned oarswomen, and the university continued to ignore us. Lake Merritt was essentially Ed's club, and Art had to tussle with him for access to boats and rowing times on the lake. Mills continued to be our closest rival, and we also made a trip to Corvallis to race. Art put me into a singles race in Corvallis, and I was ragged but marginally stronger than the competition and the river current.

The 2nd women's nationals were on Lake Merritt in June of '67, with more events, teams, and rowers than the year before. The regatta was well-organized and even had a printed program. Cal Women's Crew raced again in the four and the pair, winning neither. Ilene graduated, and she and Karl got married the day after the nationals. They took up the coaching of Cal Women's Crew for the next two years, while she earned her teaching credential and Karl continued his graduate studies.

I spent my junior year at Leeds University in England and whilst there looked into rowing options. There was a group of collegiate men who took a long bus ride somewhere to get on the water, and I invited myself along. They found some kind of single for me to get into while they took out their boats. They were very nice and called me "the Yank," but there wasn't a place for me there and I didn't pursue it.



**Cal Women's Crew at Aquatic Park (1969)**

Bow: Alexis L., 2: unidentified, 3: Kathy D., Stroke: Carol S., Standing: Karl D.

The nationals in 1968 were held in Philadelphia, and Cal Women's Crew did not attend. When I came back for my senior year I was indecisive about continuing, but Ilene persuaded me. I mostly rowed a wherry while she coached the other women in a four. By then we were rowing on Aquatic Park by the freeway in Berkeley, about a thousand meters of water with a waterski jump in the middle. The nationals in 1969 were again on Green Lake, and Cal went and did not win. I had thought to hang up my oars after the regatta, but Janene Segle of LWRA, the winning eight that year, asked if I would stay in Seattle and train as a spare with them for the summer, aiming for the European Championships in Klagenfurt, Austria. Well, yes I would. Janene's family put me up; I worked in a motel and then a bar; and trained with them out of the University of Washington boathouse. Bill Erickson, the UW men's coach, had generously offered use of the university facilities and agreed to coach these women for the summer. I was their only spare and mostly sculled while they rowed. The Seattle rowing community, and especially Janene's parents, raised money for airfare. We flew to Philadelphia and joined a charter flight with the U. S. men's national team. There were weather-caused delays and a layover in Frankfurt, and then a dicey landing at the small airport in Klagenfurt that consumed the

entire runway and got the pilot a standing ovation. Klagenfurt is a charming village (women in dirndls!) on a large lake. We were housed in a very nice, very European hotel with the men. A couple of days before racing I was put into the boat; the coach apparently thought I was stronger than the woman I replaced, but it must have been a difficult decision. Along with other sweep and sculling events there were seven women's eights entered in the European championships, so there were heats. We came in last. For the final race they added a seventh lane for us. We were still last. One of the East German women from the gold-medal eight pulled me aside for a shirt swap; I guess she didn't know she was entitled to my shirt without the trade. I treasured that white onesie, still damp with the sweat of a European champion.

I took the long way home from Europe and was back again in southern California in the fall of 1969, enrolled in a computer training course. When I could I drove down to the newly-built Long Beach Rowing Association's boathouse and took out a wherry. One day in the early spring of 1970 a smallish redhead named Melinda Collis paddled up to the dock in her kayak and asked if I would teach her to row. We went out in a double, and she was good right away. As the spring went by, I thought we ought to go to the nationals (which were on Lake Merritt that year), so we did, as a lightweight double (another duo from LBRA had already entered the heavy double). Karen McCloskey had started rowing a wherry in Long Beach and entered the novice wherry race. Melinda and I were second, and after our race Peter Lippett came by in the officials' launch and told us we were "the prettiest double he had ever seen."

Rowing had been a terrific adventure, but I was a Cal graduate and it seemed about time to grow up and get a job. I returned to San Francisco to work as a computer programmer: steady income, cheap apartment on Russian Hill, riding a bicycle downtown to work and uphill again at the end of the day. The Long Beach women's sculling cohort took off. In 1971 Tom McKibbon coached Karen and recently-arrived Joan Lind in a double and took them to the nationals in Old Lyme, Connecticut; they drew a poor boat but came in a close second to Vesper Boat Club. They became the core of the LBRA women's sculling program.



**Long Beach Rowing Association (LBRA) 1972  
Quad**

Joan L., Karen M., Nancy D., Melinda C., Carol S.  
*Image Credit: Jane Dickerson Centers*



**Coxed quad, 1972, European regatta in  
Hannover, West Germany.**

Bow: Gail P., 2: Karen M., 3: Joan L., Stroke:  
Carol S., Cox: Jody M. (not shown)

In early 1972, at the behest of Melinda, I folded up my life in San Francisco and returned to Long Beach to train and make up a quad with Melinda, Karen, and Joan. We needed a coxswain, and not long before the nationals we recruited Nancy Doran, a girl we'd seen on the water many mornings at 6:00 a.m. in a small rowboat. The quad won at Nationals (again on Green Lake), Karen and Joan finally got their doubles victory, Jane Loomis won the novice wherry by more than a minute, and I closely edged out Gail Pierson of Cambridge Boat Club in the single (Joan had not been quite ready to step into the limelight). We trained through the summer, begged and scrounged for money, and with the help of many people including Sy Cromwell took our quad (with Gail filling in for Melinda, and Jodie McPhillips as coxswain) first to a club regatta in Hannover, West Germany (which we won!), and then to the Women's European Rowing Championships in Brandenburg, East Germany, where we were 2nd in the petit final (not last!).

I finally laid down my oars. The inclusion of women's rowing in the Olympics had been set for the Montreal games in 1976, and I was part of the first U.S. Olympic Women's Rowing Committee from '72-'76 with Peter Lippett, Gail Pearson, Sy Cromwell, Tom McKibbin, Ted Nash, and other stalwarts. There was a breathtaking surge in college and university programs fueled by Title IX funding. We considered how to select and support rowers, teams, and coaches. On a limited budget (but we had funding!) we sent teams to the European championships each year, and they were competitive. At Montreal the U.S. women's eight took the bronze medal, and Joan Lind took silver in the single. Athletes, pioneers, champions: so well rowed.