

History of The Woman's Club of Claremont

“Service” is a fundamental tenet of many community groups in Claremont, but none more so than the Woman’s Club of Claremont, this year celebrating the 100th year anniversary of its founding in 1919. In fact, without exaggeration it can be said that the Woman’s Club of Claremont was one of the most important institutions in the town’s history for fostering that value in our town. For over a century, now, it has been **the** community group of Claremont.

The Woman’s Club origins are rooted in service. During World War I a handful of Claremont women gathered to do their part for the war effort, knitting socks, rolling bandages, and providing other necessities for the American Red Cross. After the end of the war they realized they missed the companionship and the service work, and so in April 1919 was born “The Get-Together Club”, a name suggested by Mrs. Fred Hill, who became the Club’s first president, and Mrs. H.C. Gower.

The Club quickly grew from ten members in 1919 to over thirty by 1924 when the group decided to join the General Federation of Woman’s Clubs, a community service organization founded during the Progressive Era of the 1890s, a time when many middle class women, some college-educated, had few outlets for their interests in community and civic engagement since their right to the vote had not yet been recognized and so they were not able to run for elected office. The Woman’s Club’s commitment to those interests is apparent in their first projects which included donating 500 lbs. of lemons and oranges to the Sawtelle Veterans’ Home, which was a hospital for disabled veterans, as well as other hospitals throughout the region, used clothing to Goodwill Industries, and hand-made dolls to the Children’s Hospital.

Since 1919 through to the present, the Club continued to fulfill that commitment, raising and donating literally hundreds of thousands of dollars to local, regional, national, and international philanthropic organizations including:

- the Pomona Hospital (now Pomona Valley Medical Center)
- the Claremont Chamber of Commerce Building Fund (1930)
- the Village tree planting campaign (1930)
- Claremont Family Services
- Claremont Well Baby Clinic
- Teen Challenge
- Claremont YMCA/YWCA
- Claremont Girl Scouts’ Campership Fund
- Casa Colina (the founder, Frances Eleanor Smith, was a member of the Club)
- Pomona Valley Workshop
- Service Center for Independent Living
- South Hills Center
- Recording for the Blind
- Tri-City Mental Health
- the David and Margaret Home
- the McKinley Home for Boys, San Dimas (now the McKinley Children’s Center)
- the LeRoy Haynes Boys Home

- Crippled Children's Society
- Shoes That Fit
- Barlow Sanitarium, Echo Park (now the Barlow Respiratory Hospital)
- the Sherman Institute, Riverside (now the Sherman Indian High School)
- the American Cancer Society
- During the Great Depression the women decided to enlarge the kitchen of their clubhouse as a way of providing work for the needy.

The Woman's Club also donated countless hours to hands-on volunteer projects, for example:

- making quilts for the needy
- sewing clothing for girls at the David and Margaret Home
- recordings for the blind
- World War II activities including selling war bonds, providing food for the USO in Pomona and opening their clubhouse for use as a Red Cross canteen
- Pomona Valley Hospital Auxiliary
- Village Venture
- Volunteer Vital English
- City of Hope
- Red Cross Blood Drives
- House of Ruth
- St. Vincent de Paul Society
- Salvation Army
- McCabe Rest Home
- Pilgrim Festival
- Meals on Wheels
- the Blaisdell Senior Center
- sending holiday cards to active-duty service members through "Operation Christmas Card"

The Club's original goals were "Philanthropy, Civic Pride, and Literature"; the last evolved into education. In fulfillment of the last two the Woman's Club of Claremont

- supported the building of a library in town with the help of a donation of land from Club member Helen Renwick;
- helped with a town beautification project in the early 1960s by starting a public park two blocks long adjacent to the railroad tracks (now the Dog Park);
- participated in the town's bicentennial activities in 1976, including serving cookies and drinks at Thatcher Hall and winning first prize in the car section of the bicentennial parade;
- volunteered at the town wading pool two days each week
- consistently supported students by providing scholarships for several graduating seniors of Claremont High School, scholarship for girls at Sherman Indian High School, use of their clubhouse for Claremont High School dances, and donating books to needy children;

- provided magazine subscriptions for inmates at local prisons, as well as the Sherman Indian High School, and schools far away from Claremont, including in Hawai'i.

The Woman's Club of Claremont was also committed to nurturing in future generations the ideals that inspired them. In 1933 the club authorized the formation of a Junior Woman's Club, open to women between the ages of 16 and 35. Then, in 1977, the Juniores were established for girls of junior high school age. Indeed their efforts were successful. Not only did the Junior Woman's Club become the preeminent service group in town but, along with the League of Women Voters, was a training ground for future city leaders. Each of these groups helped the senior Woman's Club of Claremont and took on their own projects too. For instance, the Juniors organized a city-wide parade for Claremont's returning prisoner of war at the end of the Vietnam War. Club records indicate that in 1985 alone the Juniores volunteered for the Cystic Fibrosis Society, the citywide Spring Festival, the town's 4th of July celebration, Village Venture, support for senior citizens in Claremont, the Special Olympics at Cal Poly, made a donations of \$75 to the House of Ruth, \$50 to the City of Hope, \$50 to the American Red Cross- Columbian Disaster Relief Fund, and \$25 to the Ronald McDonald House.

Then there is the matter of the clubhouse on Twelfth Street. As membership grew during the early years of the 1920s, club members were forced with a choice of limiting membership or finding another place to meet, other than the homes of members. The first choice, restricting membership, was never really an option since, from the start, the club decided that "Any woman of moral standing shall be eligible to membership in the Club. No neighborhood or numerical limits [are] set." Sarah Bixby Smith, founder of Scripps College, happened to own a parcel of land on Twelfth Street with a greenhouse on it. She and the owners of the building were willing to let the Woman's Club buy it and so they did. After renovations the clubhouse served as place of sistership and pride for its members, as it does today, and became a location for community events, including high school dances; meetings of other local, regional, and national organizations—including the California Federation of Woman's Clubs; as well as baby showers, card parties, birthday parties, and weddings. Today the clubhouse is also home to a church and Claremont Ballroom Dancing, a monthly ballroom tea dance.

From its formation in 1919, 100 years ago, the Women's Club of Claremont grew from a handful of women to well over 200 members in the mid-20th century. As opportunities opened for woman in various sectors of the labor force in the latter decades of the 20th century, membership declined to the point that the club ended their membership in the General Federation of Woman's Clubs. At one point they even debated selling the clubhouse. However, they persisted! Today the Woman's Club of Claremont is on the upswing once again with 50 women gathering at the clubhouse on Twelfth Street for lunch, entertainment, sistership, and philanthropy the second Wednesday of each month. Special events, such as Bunco for Breast Cancer, bring out over 80 members. The Club is still committed to philanthropy and education, in particular, donating money every year to many of the same charitable organizations they have long supported, such as the American Cancer Society, and Claremont's students in the form of sports equipment and scholarships.

Claremont would never have been the same without the Woman's Club of Claremont.