

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF
THE SUTTER CREEK WOMAN'S CLUB
1909 – 1990**

One Saturday evening, September 18, 1909, fourteen women gathered together to organize an "Improvement Club" for the town of Sutter Creek. According to the notes taken at this gathering, the purpose of the new club was "to improve the cemetery, schoolyard, streets, and to beautify the town in general." Because the group considered fourteen too small a number to justify organizing that very night, it was agreed to seek out more women to help and to set Thursday, September 28, as the date for the first official club meeting. At that time, even though only one new recruit swelled their numbers, the women persisted and so began the first woman's club in Sutter Creek.

The newly appointed secretary, Miss Lena B. Soracco, reported in a fine Spenserian hand: "Each individual seemed to realize her personal responsibility as a member of such an organization. Sincerity and determination marked the spirit of the discussions and finally it was moved and seconded and then unanimously carried that the club be organized to be known as the "Improvement Club of Sutter Creek."

A constitution and by-laws were adopted and a slate of officers elected with Mrs. C. Jarvis, one of the first organizers, made president. The club was to meet every 2nd and 4th Tuesday of a month. A little later one of these monthly meetings was set aside to be social, the business part to be left to the discretion of the president. So it came about that the club's purpose was enlarged to include socialization.

The second meeting, held in the Christian Sciences Reading Room, expanded the club's social horizon when it gave a reception for the Lodi Improvement Club, and it was from the proceeds of a "recent entertainment" that the club's first civic undertaking evolved with the donation of \$75 given to a Mr. Ball for the furnishing of his newly organized gym club.

The next year witnessed the fulfillment of the founder's desire to improve their community in both small and large ways. The sidewalk in front of Mr. Sickes' residence was fixed; the unsightly rubbish at the top of Sutter Hill was removed and the rubbish was cleared on Main Street for the July 4th parade; an "open pipe in front of Mrs. Tucker's residence" was brought to the attention of the authorities to abate the nuisance; trustees of the cemetery were pressed to improve the cemetery with a new fence and archway.

The largest effort went into campaigning for a county high school. The club distributed petitions favoring such a school to towns in the county and this helped to persuade the supervisors to put it to a vote on November 8, 1910. Consequently, the approved high school corner stone was laid in March of 1913, and the club was made responsible for its dedication ceremony by April 1914.

It is evident that education was an important issue on the women's minds for earlier in April of 1911 the club joined with the Jackson Improvement Club to secure a music teacher for their school children. When one was hired in March of 1912, the Sutter Creek Club was asked to augment the new teacher's salary by \$10 a month until the end of the school year. However, the club met this expense until the end of 1913. It was also during this time that the club inaugurated its policy in practice today of granting two yearly scholarships to deserving high school seniors.

To raise money for all their social, civic, and philanthropic work the women held candy sales, movie picture shows, dances, suppers, and fairs. Thus, they were able to give \$50 for electroliers for Main Street, to lend \$100 at 6% interest to the new high school and not forgetting the cemetery, to bear the cost of keeping it clean and to provide new headstones for the soldiers' graves.

In October, 1916, the club's name was officially changed to The Woman's Club of Sutter Creek." The meetings had slowly assumed a structure that was to be the format with few changes up to the present. Reading of a Collect began each meeting. An entertaining and informative program on special topics such as health, child welfare, or parental relations was either before or after refreshments or luncheons.

With the coming of World War I, work for the Red Cross interrupted the usual procedure. An American flag was donated to the club and it can be assumed that the flag salute was then added to the usual formalities. Christmas packages for the service men overseas and books for the YMCA at Camp Lewis were two of the wartime projects. Even though the club conserved food by doing away with refreshments at evening social for the duration of the war, they did not cancel a reception for all the grammar and high school teachers at the beginning of the school year. This was so well received that they were to continue it, even including teachers from Amador City, until 1955.

In the post war years, the service men were not forgotten. The club solicited the town's people to provide Christmas boxes for the crippled at the Marine Hospital and gave fifty such boxes on their own. On Arbor Day, 1921, they wished to give a tree in honor of the Sutter Creek men who had been in the service, but the City Trustees turned this offer down, desiring instead a flagpole and base costing approximately \$100. Consequently, the club backed this action and it became a community affair. However, undeterred, these determined women on their own planted two trees on the high school and grammar school grounds.

From its inception, the Sutter Creek Woman's Club had difficulty in getting a permanent clubroom. At first the meetings were held in public places or private homes. Later they would rent or lease whatever was available. But they were always at the mercy of change. In fact at one time they gave up their clubhouse, storing their furniture in the homes of various members and meeting wherever they could. Therefore, when in 1928 the Fire District of Sutter Creek purchased the livery stable and real property on Main Street from the Frederick

Rabb estate for \$3500 and requested the help of the club to pay for the construction of a community center (later to be called The Auditorium), they were glad to give the \$1,000 the club had saved as a building fund and whatever profits they could make from bake sales, raffles, bazaars, suppers and grand balls (one of the latter netted \$406.10) to help defray its cost.

So it was on February 14, 1928, the Sutter Creek Woman's Club signed an agreement with the Fireman giving the club possession of a room rent-free in the new building. Originally this room was to be on the first floor but before the building was completed, the Club decided instead to take an upstairs area over the auditorium with the stipulation that they would finish the work on this section and would build a private side entrance since the firemen had no money left to do so. This the club did, and although the building has changed hands, first when the firemen sold it to the Veterans Memorial District, and later when with that organization's dissolution, the City of Sutter Creek assumed responsibility for it, the Woman's Club has remained in possession of its quarters until 2005.

On June 4, 1973, a 50-year lease was signed by the Mayor, Frank W. Benjamin and City Clerk Robert Grover, stating the lease will extend to the year 2023. This made for a long-term occupation of our upstairs clubroom in the Sutter Creek Auditorium. Mrs. Anna White was the Club president that year.

Even before they enjoyed a permanent home, the Woman's Club was generous in allowing other community groups to use whatever facilities they had. Thus, in January 1920, after agitating for some time to have a branch of the County free library in Sutter Creek, they offered their clubroom for such a purpose and purchased the necessary shelving so that the first branch library was opened here in May 1920. A campaign was launched to stimulate public donations of books and the club took over its operation. In 1922, a custodian, Miss Kriesman, known as "our local librarian", was found to take the job for \$10 a month. It wasn't until 1924 that the County agreed to pay the salary for the branch's first assistant librarian.

During the depression years of the 30's, the Club, which had always been on the giving side of help for the needy, was even more concerned with individual hardships. For instance, it paid the rent for one family, worked with the supervisors in distributing the government supply of flour to needy families, sent food baskets to needy families, and yearly gave donations to a Christmas fund for disabled veterans.

At Christmas from the first time in December 1923 to the last of December 1942, the Sutter Creek Woman's Club was responsible in setting up the municipal Christmas tree and with the help of donations from the community, decorated it, played Santa Claus, and provide all the town's children with bags of candy.

They were also very generous with the use of their new room for the Red Cross first aid demonstrations, for the Campfire Girls social meetings during the summer, and for many others in need of space for special occasions. This type of care carried over into the 40's with the first example being the making of five dresses to be given to the needy and a number of hospital bedside bags for the British War Relief.

The early forties saw the women working with the Jackson Woman's Club at the Jackson clubhouse knitting for the Red Cross. At the same time they were concerned with keeping up the tennis courts they had built with the help of the community in 1933 for all the young people. The lot and nets had been donated by Mr. & Mrs. Downs and the work partially paid by donations from the grammar school teachers, the high school seniors, and the student body. But the upkeep was completely under the control of the Woman's Club and this commitment caused them considerable time and effort.

They were also involved in sponsoring a Boy Scout troop and in helping to raise funds for a Scout Hut. Of course, when America entered the war their work was geared to whatever would help bring about our victory. The county librarian involved the Club in the "Victory Book Drive" and many books were sent to different Army camps. Money was spent for war bonds and the Red Cross Relief Fund. "Comfort Kits", 190 at a time, were sent to men in service, and, instead of the annual Christmas tree since there were governmental restrictions on outdoor lighting, the Club raised money to send Christmas gifts and boxes to the Sutter Creek men in service.

Throughout 1943, boxes of homemade candy were sent to our men overseas. As the war progressed they were asked again to sponsor the Books for Soldiers drive by the acting county librarian, Frances Schultz, and did so willingly. Their support was given also to the War Chest Fund drives.

In 1959 the Club celebrated its 50th birthday with 52 members and guests present. They were still interested in "improving" and "beautifying" Sutter Creek and went on record again as they had in 1941 by letting the City Council know they opposed the use of trailers or trailer courts as residences within the City limits, and they demanded and were granted the removal of an objectionable sign on the City's parkway.

The Sutter Creek Woman's Club had always been interested in the activities of the town's young people. For 17 years it sponsored a Boy Scout Troop and supported several Brownie troops as well during that time. It was only in 1970 that the Club surrendered the administration of the Scout Hut to the veterans and finally to the City of Sutter Creek.

In 1967 they turned their attention to the older generation when they undertook to provide the refreshments and gifts for the monthly birthday party for the hospital's geriatric ward. This activity continued until 1990. In 1974 the Club members also helped serve at the Meals for Seniors one day a month until the dining hall at the Senior Services Center was made available in 1985.

Along with the care of people, the Club has a dedicated interest in environmental problems. This is shown in a program called Pennies for Pines. At each meeting pennies were collected on a voluntary basis from the membership and periodically turned over directly to rangers for reforestation. The exact date when this program began is uncertain, but it continues to the present time.

One of the Club's most interesting and unusual contributions toward improving their beloved town's image was the placing of an historical display, Council approved, directly in front of the old Auditorium. This display consists of an old gold ore car from the Oneto Ranch which Bill and Ermenia Larrigan donated to the Club and an equally antique fire pump, a contribution from the Fire Department. Thus Sutter Creek is kept aware of its past and visitors have a fascinating introduction to the Mother Lode.

It was in 1976 that the Woman's Club began what was to be its most ambitious undertaking since the Club's inception. It also proved to be the lengthiest. This was, of course, the restoration and preservation of the old Sutter Creek Grammar School --- a project dear to the hearts of many members who had spent their early years in the schoolhouse. The raising of donations from individuals and organizations and the applying for and receiving of grants as well as the actual physical renovations of the building took approximately ten years, with the final festive dedication taking place on August 9, 1986.

The Sutter Creek Woman's Club has constantly donated to worthwhile groups for their needs and projects. Here is a small sample of a few projects in more recent times:

- Earthquake relief for San Francisco
- Sutter Creek Fire Department's heart start machine (defibrillation unit)
- Extrication equipment for Amador Highway Patrolmen
- Ambulances for American Legion Post of the County
- Intensive care unit for Amador Hospital
- Senior Services Center
- Sutter City Park
- Monteverde Store restoration

This history ends with the beginning of the last decade in the 20th century. But the book hasn't closed on the continued good, indeed the outstanding work, of the "Improvement Club of Sutter Creek". A statement made by Mrs. Gertrude Clark at the Club's 50th Anniversary festivities is still true and will surely be repeated at the Club's Centennial celebration:

"If you believe in a purpose and fight for it, you will succeed."