

The Women's Club of Forest Hills
Historical Summary by Christine O'Brien Beydoun
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Records tell us our beloved club was founded in 1913 by a Mrs. T. Comerford Martin. No idea what her first name was! Records state that it had 31 members and two chapters - one philanthropy and the other current readings.

This was an important era for women.

At this time, women were not allowed to vote and were expected to be gentle and demure. Upper class women lived their lives by following the rules of etiquette and were married off and lower class women were seen as cheap labor. Around the country, change was happening — ten western states had voted to allow women to vote: Wyoming -1869; Colorado - 1893; Idaho and Utah - 1896; Washington - 1910; California - 1911; Arizona and Kansas and Oregon - 1912 and Alaska - 1913. The east coast was not yet on board.

What else was going on in 1913? Well 8,000 women marched on Washington, DC in the first national suffrage parade. March 3, 1913, was the day before President Woodrow Wilson's inauguration. It was the first large, organized march ever held in the capital for political purposes. It was a "march in a spirit of protest against the present political organization of society, from which women are excluded." While women had been fighting hard for suffrage for over 60 years, this marked the first major national event for the movement.

In 1917, after a massive campaign by the suffragists, New York voters passed an amendment to the New York State Constitution granting women full suffrage. New York was the first eastern state to do so and was a major victory for the suffrage movement. The early speakers and direction of the Club, it's involvement with the Long Island Federation of Women's Club, which lobbied and sent representative to Albany, all set the picture of the Club's early days. At the beginning, chapters met in the homes of Gardens residents - only the General meeting was held in larger venues. At times they met in the portable chapel of the Church in the Gardens, in the social room of the Church in the Gardens, and the ballroom of the Forest Hills Inn.

Eventually, there were four chapters: philanthropic, current events, music, and current readings, which met twice a month. The club took off! Early documents show membership in 1920 was over 250 members! In 1922, 350 members were reported! In 1923, 359 members were reported! In 1924, 360 members. Each new member's name appeared in the Forest Hills Gardens Bulletin, the Garden's newsletter — the Club was where you wanted to belong! The bulletins were started in September, 1915 and ended in 1925 and were a "must read" around the community and were the primary source of early community history — the Forest Hills Gardens Foundation (<https://foresthillsgardensfoundation.org/>), whose mission is to preserve the neighborhood's history, has all these on their website, and is the source of presentation.

The monthly general meeting speakers and philanthropic efforts were also published monthly in these bulletins — the Club's activities were publicized widely and those not involved felt left out. By becoming a member of both the NY State and Long Island Federations of Women's Clubs in 1915, our Forest Hills club elected delegates and alternates annually and they attended the federation conventions. The Federations mission were civic betterment and they adopted various resolutions like one to support the bill to give Congress the power to make child-labor laws; to support legislation to make the Eighteenth Amendment effective and to oppose the reappearance of Arbuckle as a motion picture actor! It sent letters to demand the removal of sign boards on Queens Boulevard and to abolish advertising on state lands in the

Adirondacks. There are records of our club sending delegates to the NYC Federation convention held at the Hotel Astor. The LI Federation of Women's Clubs held its convention at Hotel St. George.

Many of the early traditions are continued to this day. The Club banner we used at each Club general meeting and events was created in October, 1922 "to be hung at every meeting below the United States Flag." To this day, we still sing "Oh Say Can You See" before each meeting.

What was the cost of membership? While there is no record of early dues, in 1923, it is reported in the Bulletin (again for the whole community to see!) that dues were raised to \$4 from \$3 with a \$1 initiation fee. Applications needed the signature of at least one member; guests of a member could attend one meeting per year.

Homemaking was serious business during these times. The early days flower arrangement and general home management were deemed important skills and the Club became a member of Garden Clubs of New York State in 1939 and held floral and table setting competitions annually. This continued up through the 1980s.

Over the years, the club incorporated in 1948 and became a 501c3 organization. The Tree of Life was adopted as the Club Symbol in 1942 — the roots representing the firm foundation given from the past experience of our members and officers; the trunk stands for our current members while the branches represent our executive board, committees and chapters. The leaves symbolize our many meetings, parties, and philanthropies.

Philanthropy has always been a keystone of the organization. It held a song recital/dance party at the Hotel Pennsylvania to raise funds to help with the construction of the Community House in 1929. Members even made and sold soap to add to the CH fund. To support war efforts, members rolled bandages. Card playing has always been a constant over the past 100 years. Back in the beginning of our club, frequent card parties were held in private homes as fundraisers for the philanthropic efforts. \$5 for a table or \$1.25 per single ticket in 1920 was quite a bit of money, but it included prizes and refreshments! Once we moved into the CH, our annual philanthropic luncheon was solely a bridge game with refreshments. The last of the bridge tables were set up in the 1990s and our present format of philanthropic luncheons took over.

As mentioned, new members names and the happenings of the monthly General Meetings were noted in the Forest Hills Gardens Bulletin for distribution throughout the community. Of course, the names were usually "Mrs. John or William or Fred Something" — no mention of the women's first names anywhere! Even look at our plaque in Smith Hall of the past presidents and you will note that Kathryn Brand, in 2010, is the first female name on that plaque. For ever more, first names will be noted!

Early General Meeting programs almost always involved a soloist, pianist or violinist, and an outside speaker. Topics were mostly political in nature - remember WWI started in 1914 and ended in 1918). The Club always pulled some pretty powerful individuals and again, a summary of their talk would appear in the Bulletins. Here is a sampling of the general meeting programs which slowly deemphasized the political tilt:

1920 - President of the NYC Federation of Women's Clubs

1920 - League of Women Voters

1921 - Talk on "American Citizenship - not a motto, not a flag, not a symbol, but cooperative hard work on the part of us all"

1921 - "The Hopes of New China" given by a Chinese scholar (the Republic was born in 1911 and dynasty restored in 1917)

1921 - "Present Conditions in France" given by a member of the French High Commission to the United States
1921 - Talk on the "Regulation of Motion Pictures and their Moral Responsibilities"
1922 - Talk on "Glimpses of China and Japan"
1922 - "The Next War in Europe - Germany Plans War"
1923 - American Orientalist, scholar on the history of Babylonia and Assyria, was the speaker
1923 - Special agent for the National Child Labor Committee spoke about the proposed amendment to our national constitution to abolish child labor in this country — our Club gave a \$50 donation to the committee
On May 10, 1923, Lyman Beecher Stowe presided at the laying of the corner stone at the Community House as part of a Forest Hills Community Day.
1923 - Speaker's topic "The School and the Community" by chairman of National Education Association
1924 - African explorer and curator of mammals at the Museum of Natural History spoke, "In Brightest Africa"

In 1922, the focus shifted to more local issues and a Civic Committee is formed to work for a cleaner village. They subdivided FH into 5 zones and offered a prize for the best kept "district" in the Gardens and most productive and beautiful garden in the village. Emphasis was placed on the proper caring for ash barrels, garbage cans, and cleaning up of vacant lots. Early philanthropic efforts included supporting a Syrian family in Astoria whose husband/father was in hospital with tuberculosis. Almost \$200 was distributed among a number of "well-organized philanthropies", made and donated gingham bibs and babies' aprons for the Jamaica Day Nursery, donated clothing to the Nursery's rummage sales in addition to a \$50 scholarship for a Newtown High School student. In 1924, they paid the rent of for one month for a deserving woman in Jamaica. In 1923, it was announced that "the scholarship of the WC of FH of \$100, which is awarded annually to a deserving, promising pupil in some adjacent high school, is to be given to Hudson Kellogg, of Newtown High School". Hudson - a male!
At this time, in 1922, there were the same four chapters and now various committees as well: ways and means, house, reception, civic, membership, moving picture, library, yearbook, chorus, auditor, and calendar editor.

Believe it or not, in 1923, the Club started the inspection of food stores in the community and provided a seal of approval. It is noted that the owners showed initial opposition to the committee's inspection but that feeling was overcome. The seal read: "Inspected and Approved by the Food Stores Committee of the Women's Club" and was hung in the window of H. C. Bohack Co, Daniel Reeves, Inc, Carl Hohnhorst Delicatessen Store, Henry. S. Miller's Drug Store, Austin Court Market, Forest Hills Grocer, Forest Hills Market, and Sheffield Dairy Products Store that year. Possibly related, in 1929, the head of the Department of Health of NYC spoke on the work of their department. Additionally, female attorney with the State of NY spoke on the subject "What Have We a Right to Expect of the New Electorate?" (for reference, it was reported that only 8 million women voted in the 1916 elections; by 1929, she quoted 26 million had voted)

In 1924, a special edition of Forest Hills Bulletin was published on December 13th entitled "The History of Forest Hills from Days of Indians". In it, it described the Women's Club as a vital force, whose object it is to "form a center for social and mental culture, to encourage all movements for the betterment of society, and to promote generous public spirit in the community". It states that a long list of capable women have held offices in the club from the very beginning.

Like I mentioned, all this information was gleaned from the Forest Hills Gardens Foundation website, which I'd encourage you all to support, and is a literal rabbit hole of wonderful Forest Hills history that I'm sure you'd all enjoy. Check it out.

I'll end with the the opening paragraph, and prominent front page article, of a Forest Hills Bulletin from 1924 entitled, "**They're Feminine After All**":

"The Women's Club helps to keep the town clean, as the readers of these columns know. The goblins — the civic committee members and your conscience — will get you if you let your papers blow around or leave your ash can stand on the sidewalk after noon. The food store keepers know that the women have eagle eyes on them. The club is philanthropically inclined, as many "a person of disadvantage," sometimes known as the poor, would testify, and it shows a substantial interest in an adopted scholarship boy.

Among its members are many serious minds who review books before a large group who listen with interest. The club boosts the local library station and works against odds for the city's purchase of a library site and building.

But this does not tell the whole tale. You may not believe it, but the members care for stylish clothes! The secret is out! A style show is to be staged at the next meeting, and only those who go early will find seats, for every woman of the town, including all guests of the Inn, will be present at the meeting in the Inn drawing room next Monday afternoon!"