

Yolo County Historical Society



Prez Says

Fall is upon us. The wind is blowing from the north, the nights are much colder, and the sun does not know whether to show itself or hide behind the clouds. Despite the weather, history seems to be happening in our county. I recently participated in an historical presentation in City Park on Sunday, November 9. It was a re-dedication of the historic **Valley Oak Tree** that was originally planted by the Woodland Shakespeare Club 104 years ago. What a privilege it was to be there and witness a reenactment of the original dedication based on an article in *The Mail of Woodland* on April 25, 1916.

I thought I would share with you the highlights of the dedication in this newsletter as well as some information about the club and what it has done for the city of Woodland.

There is also an article about the **NEW HISTORY MUSEUM** at the Yolo County Fairgrounds.

Have wonderful holidays.

As always,

History Rules

Kathy Harryman, President

What's so Important about Shakespeare Clubs?

*The article below is from an excerpt from the book **She Hath Been Reading Shakespeare** by Katherine Scheil. Published in 2012, the book traces the Shakespeare movement among women in the United States. As the local group is the oldest Shakespeare Club in California, I thought it would be interesting to share this overview – KH.*

In the late nineteenth century hundreds of clubs formed across the United States devoted to the reading of Shakespeare. From Pasadena, California, to the seaside town of Camden, Maine; from the isolated farm town of Ottumwa, Iowa, to Mobile, Alabama, on the Gulf coast, Americans were reading Shakespeare in astonishing numbers and in surprising places. Composed mainly of women, these clubs offered the opportunity for members not only to read and study Shakespeare but also to participate in public and civic activities outside the home. In *She Hath Been Reading*, Katherine West Scheil uncovers this hidden layer of intellectual activity that flourished in American society well into the twentieth century.

Shakespeare clubs were crucial for women's intellectual development because they provided a consistent intellectual stimulus (more so than was the case with most general women's clubs) and because women discovered a world of possibilities, both public and private, inspired by their reading of Shakespeare. Indeed, gathering to read and discuss Shakespeare often led women to actively improve their lot in life and make their society a better place. Many clubs took action on larger social issues such as women's suffrage, philanthropy, and civil rights. At the same time, these efforts served to embed Shakespeare into American culture as a marker for learning, self-improvement, civilization, and entertainment for a broad array of populations, varying in age, race, location, and social standing.

Based on extensive research in the archives of the Folger Shakespeare Library and in dozens of local archives and private collections across America, *She Hath Been Reading* shows the important role that literature can play in the lives of ordinary people. As testament to this fact, the book (available from Amazon) includes an appendix listing more than five hundred Shakespeare clubs across America.

Congratulations to Us! Our New History Museum

by Dino Gay Woodland Parlor 30 NSGW (Native Sons of the Golden West)

On November 12, 2020, the 40th District Agricultural Association (DAA) Board of Directors approved a proposal made by interested historical groups throughout the county to jointly use a former fair office building as a Yolo County Fair Museum. The action allows for the conversion of the space contingent upon an MOU, budget and anticipated plans (see circled security building on map below).

It will be a place to promote the history of the fair and the county – its Indigenous peoples, natural resources, agriculture, commerce, culture and youth programs. The groups interested in launching this venture are the Yolo County Historical Society (YCHS), Woodland Parlor 30 Native Sons of the Golden West (NSGW), Historical Society of Winters (Winters Museum), Woodland Opera House, Friends of the Yolo County Archives, Woodland Museum of Biblical Archaeology, West Sacramento Historical Society, Greater Capay Valley Historical Society, Friends of the 1883 Clarksburg Schoolhouse, Yolo County Fair Heritage Foundation, and Union Church of Dunnigan (Dunnigan Museum). Other historical groups in Yolo County are invited to participate.

The groups will work together to organize historical information, artifacts and display items that represent areas of interest and expertise in the spirit and traditions of the county fair ideal. The museum will complement the historic Spring Lake School (at the fairgrounds since 1950), the Spring Lake Fire Department (Station 2-1/2), the Blowers olive orchard and the historical site of the Blowers Ranch house. The museum is planned as a multipurpose facility – adaptable for regular exhibitions, school tours, meetings, lectures, events, agency briefings or as a classroom.



Shakespeare Oak Tree in City Park Rededicated with New Monument

On November 8, the Woodland Shakespeare Club (WSC) and the Woodland Tree Foundation rededicated the mature valley oak tree and concrete bench nestled under the shady comfort of the venerable tree located in City Park, corner of Cross and Cleveland streets. The Shakespeare Club donated the oak and bench to the people of Woodland over 100 years ago.

A new granite monument was unveiled to honor the historical event and the long-standing tree. The public was invited to attend the ceremony and celebrate Woodland cultural and arbor history and enjoy the fall beauty of the historic park.

The original dedication of the oak tree was held April 23, 1916, to celebrate the tercentennial anniversary of William Shakespeare's death. It was attended by the women of WSC, city officials, and a "generous outpouring of local residents." Sometime in the intervening years, the brass memorial plaque was stolen from the bench and, when replaced in 2007, was printed with an incorrect date. WSC and the Tree Foundation have corrected and replaced that plaque and installed the larger monument to further explain the sentiment behind the earlier dedication.



Many of the women of the Woodland Shakespeare Club also were active members of the Women's Improvement Club (WIC) whose purpose was the beautification and cultural growth of the City of Woodland. WIC was instrumental in the purchase of the park property, starting Arbor Day and raising funds for the Woodland Public Library.

With an assist from local businessman, Adelbert Deloss Porter, WIC secured the park site, still in a semi-natural state with several mature valley oak trees. They deeded the acreage to the City of Woodland in 1909 for purposes of developing Woodland's first public park with the stipulation that the oak trees be preserved. The oak trees are now Woodland historic landmarks.

As part of the November ceremony, women of the Woodland Shakespeare Club shared original words written and spoken by early members of the club as well as Shakespearean quotes. Members of the Tree Foundation read poems related to trees and parks.

A larger more elaborate dedication is planned for next fall in conjunction with Woodland's annual *Stroll through History*.

The monument was donated as a community service by Woodland contractor, Jim Richardson. Cache Creek Monuments crafted the historic marker, etched in black granite stone.





Oak Tree rededication: Pictured clockwise from the top – Dave Wilkinson and Patt Pavao, Carol Lapsley, Kathy Harryman and Judy Traig.

History of the Woodland Shakespeare Club

The following is from The Woodland Shakespeare Club, A History, provided to joining members.

The Woodland Shakespeare Club is the oldest women's literary club in California. The first record in the Shakespeare Club files is the "Studies for 1896-97." The first preserved Year Book is for 1901-1902. The file of Minutes begins with 1920; earlier ones have been lost. All these records are kept in a fireproof safe.

In the 1909-1910 Year Book, credit was given to Mrs. Ann Blake Ryder as the sole founder of the Shakespeare Club. Born in Manchester England, she immigrated to the United States. In 1874 she came to Woodland with The Rev. Bannfield, the pastor of the Congregational Church. She attended Hesperian College and then when the Bannfields left, she worked as a maid in the home of Dr. H.P. Merritt.

There were five ladies who formed the first literary reading group: Mrs. Ryder, Mrs. Ruth Armstrong, Mrs. Merritt, Mrs. Eugene Aram, and Mrs. Serelda Gilstrap Thomas. Mrs. Armstrong took the lead in bringing the group together. Mrs. Armstrong possessed a natural and genuine love for literature ... she was also a student of history. The group met in the home of Mrs. Armstrong during the first winter. Later the custom developed of meeting at the homes of the members. The formal organization took place on April 22, 1886, in the home of Mrs. Armstrong. The Club met once a month during seven months of the year. Each time a program, carefully prepared by several members, was presented before the other members of the club. Mrs. Thomas described her study "From the outset, Shakespeare was dynamic, inexhaustible, and worthwhile." The readings were presented with excited discussions.

These women were all different in their economic and social background. But they all loved literature and enjoyed the spirited discussions that occurred.

All the activity was part of the feminist movement as women emerged from the home. In addition to their literary studies, Shakespeare Club members, worked actively for women's suffrage, for the improvement of women and children, for prohibition, for town beautification, and for other civic matters...

On April 25, 1916, the *Mail of Woodland* published an article entitled "Clubwomen Dedicate Shakespeare Memorial".

In 1936, among the items placed in the cornerstone of the new City Hall of Woodland, was a copy of the Shakespeare Club Year Book, a symbol of the continuing influence of the Club in the community.

Mrs. Thomas in 1939 wrote, "It was a time when education in our Higher Institutions was new and not encouraged."

Mrs. C. W. Thomas Entertains Officers and Committee of Shakespeare Club

Mrs. Charles W. Thomas entertained at a 1 o'clock luncheon Wednesday, at her handsome city-country residence, which stands at the most advantageous point to receive the benefits of both town and farm life. It may be truthfully added that no home insibiles more of the best than the Thomas habitation.

However far Mrs. Thomas may pursue her studies, she can never learn more than she now knows of the role of hostess. Her guests yesterday were the officers and program committee of the Woodland Shakespeare Club; also Mrs. Blake-Ryder, a charter member and past president, and Mrs. J. T. Royles, past president and now an officer in the State Federation.

In the atmosphere of the cultured home, the company, which has been brought together because of the liking for the noblest in literature, passed happy moments, the only defect in which was their swiftness.

During the afternoon a conference was held by the committee on the work for next year.

More photos from the rededication - shown clockwise from the upper left:
Margaret Thordsen, Dave Wilkinson, Karen Shepard and Patt Pavao.



Shakespeare Club Today

The Shakespeare Club remains much the same as it did all those years ago.

Patt Pavao, long time member of the Shakespeare Club said in a recent article¹ published in the *Daily Democrat*, "The goal of the club is to study and learn while also honoring traditions that were established when the club first began to meet."

Membership in Woodland Shakespeare Club is limited to 50 members; prospective members are sponsored by members who have been active participants in the club for at least two years. There are only two occasions during the seven-meeting program year where members can invite outside guests: the January Tea and April Luncheon.

At the Luncheon, we celebrate Will's birthday with special marshmallow mints, homemade from a recipe passed down through generations and a special white cake with red sugar sprinkles and real pansies.

The club is still only open to women. Each member is expected to contribute to either to the yearly program or the group presentations. And one of the most important traditions in the club is that the member never says "no" to the president.

Some of the traditions have gone by the wayside. We no longer wear hats and gloves to the meetings. Nor do we call each other "Mrs. So and so" and we do not have to cross our legs at the ankles.

Despite the seemingly rigorous rules that hold the group together, our membership works hard to adjust to changing times yet safeguard important things that keep us focused on our goal to study, discuss and learn, as the founding mothers intended.

¹"Is the Woodland Shakespeare Club Your Cup of Tea?" by Karen Shepard, *Daily Democrat* 10/31/2019.

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