

Flora Darling Nichols

(Mrs. W. W. Davis)

1865 – 1951

SHE SET A STANDARD STILL EVIDENT TODAY

In the late 19th Century, American women had few rights or access to higher education. Without the vote, women's clubs were the most effective means for them to achieve a measure of equality with men. Gathering together, usually in one another's homes or local assembly halls, they organized classes in literature, history, art, economics and current events. They earnestly discussed books, held concerts, and entered into political discussions. Together they learned, expanded their worlds, and began influencing community relations and civic affairs.

Straightaway in August 1902, the women Laura Lyon White assembled set about electing officers of their new Club. We imagine that Laura, the OAC's catalyst, might have been nominated as President. But her primary residence was then still in San Francisco, and she was already an active member of other civic and conservation organizations. If nominated, she probably declined. Our archives do not reveal the names of the women who were nominated, only the results of that first election. Mrs. W.W. Davis was elected President of the newly organized Outdoor Art Club. We know two primary issues galvanized these women: environmental and civic concerns. The issue energizing Mrs. Davis, and many of her fellow OAC Club members, was to shape this emerging new town.

A few statistical facts about her are known from records found on the internet: Flora Darling Nichols was born in February of 1865 in Massachusetts, was twenty years old when in Boston she married Williston Wheeler Davis, and was long a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. In 1902, she was 37 years old, the married mother of four children, living in a home on Throckmorton Avenue. We can assume those 35 original OAC Founders saw in her a civic determination and strong leadership qualities because they elected her their first president, a job she held for two terms.

We know from recorded minutes of those first meetings, that Flora's agendas and her subsequent letters to Town Trustees contained among other civic concerns, "*the refuse can question*" as too much trash and litter was being left by those weekend hikers. Effectiveness of her missives can be presumed from the fact that in April of 1903, Town Trustees authorized "*the Club to place refuse boxes at their discretion.*" At the same time, Flora was one of three members appointed to "*look into the matter of the price of lots 4, 5, & 6 of the Lyon & Hoag tract*" for purchase as a site for a clubhouse. At the next meeting, the Board unanimously agreed to "*take*" those lots. This new women's club would no longer have to meet in local homes and halls, they would raise the necessary money and build their own clubhouse!

We were finally able to discover Flora's full voice in the first Annual Report published for OAC members in 1904. In her President's Message she writes focusing on "*the life of the Club as a whole, and also the position in which the Club finds itself at the close of its first period as related to the town in whose life it has chosen to be a factor ... essentially our constitution states that it is our desire and intention to be an influence for the highest good in everything that pertains to the town's welfare, for we are a Club organized for work mainly along civic lines.*"

Flora went on to describe how ladies diplomatically work with and influence the men who are the Town Trustees, writing in language so revealing of how women, who could not vote, nevertheless exerted their power: "*It should be understood by everyone that we are not here to do other people's work*

for them. The Town's affairs are very ably conducted by the body of gentlemen chosen for that purpose. The Town's ordinances cover nearly every point to be met clearly there. Our relationship to the Town Trustees is wholly the attitude of co-operation. To sustain them in their decisions, to bring to their attention minor details which escape their notice, to protest where town ordinances are not observed and to be an avenue through which individual complaints may reach them — in a word, to assist them in so far as we are able, to not only carry out the law to the last letter, but in becoming ourselves so imbued with the spirit lying in back of these laws that we shall by our very attitude enthuse others and thus create a public sentiment which may ever be depended upon to act for the greatest civic good and the highest civic standards.” . . .

Flora also wrote with psychological insight: “With the individual oftentimes to think is to act. But where many are involved, it takes time for all to become of one mind. Consequently, civic work does not always show immediate results; ideas that have shaped themselves this year may not come to full issue for many years. What seems to some to be so very plainly the thing to do now, to others time is required to convince them that they must act. And so we must let patience have its perfect work, knowing that if there are those among the townspeople who do not just at present see the need for this Club and its work, that by our work we shall no doubt easily prove to them our right to be here and to their friendship. Thus resting assured that the civic department has done its work well, let us look within at the very heart of the Club itself for the signs of progress and unity which should be evident.” . . .

Flora also wrote earnestly to fellow members on the benefits and responsibility of membership: “I think we all realize that if we put nothing into our home life we get nothing out, and the same holds good in Club life. Paying dues alone would soon make of the Club a dead thing run by a few. What is wanted to perfect the inner home life of the Club is your presence at the meetings, your word on every decision, your spirit which in unison with all others shall make of this Club what it must be, a living thing. In no other way can we ever hope to become a vital influence or hold the position we have so far made for ourselves. Let us all consider more earnestly our individual responsibility, especially in these first years when attendance at the meetings means so much.”

Over a hundred years ago, Flora Darling Nichols Davis' leadership shaped the work and direction of the Outdoor Art Club, and in turn the town of Mill Valley. Hearing her voice a century later reminds us of the work we still have to do. Flora died in Monterey, California at age 86 on July 20,



1951. In August of that same year in Mill Valley, the OAC Board voted to “to purchase a bird bath and statue of St. Francis of Assisi to be placed on the grounds in memory of our first president, Mrs. Williston Davis.” Nearly seventy years later, that same birdbath remains in our garden. Why in 1951 did the OAC leadership chose to honor her specifically with a statue of St. Francis suggests aspects of Flora Darling Nichols Davis we have yet to discover. Stay tuned.



In the next installment of the OSC Serial, **“The 35 Ladies Project”**, you will read about a woman whose energies were vital in those early OAC days, and who experienced a tragedy that will tug at your heart.