

Molly Eloesser (Mrs. Arthur Eloesser)

1862 – 1931

In 1902, Molly Heynemann Eloesser could definitely be considered as one of the town's patrician ladies. Born June 1, 1862 in San Francisco, Molly was one of 12 children in a family of German-born parents. But such a large family did not suffer privations. Her father, Hermann Heynemann, was a successful merchant in the city, owner of a dry goods company that originally sold silk, linen, velvet, gloves, carpets and blankets. Later Arthur Eloesser, who had begun working for the Heynemann Company when he was 15 years old, became a partner in the company and focused their business on work wear. Arthur was the inventor and manufacturer of "Can't Bust 'Em" overalls, which became a serious competitor to the rival business of Levi Strauss. In 1880, Molly Heynemann married Arthur Eloesser. (In 1946, the Heynemann/Eloesser company was acquired by H.D. Lee Co, and Lee jeans continues to compete with Levis.)



Residents of San Francisco, Arthur and Molly Eloesser bought a large lot on Throckmorton Avenue at the 1890 auction. Barry Spitz's book says they summered at the nearby Monte Vista Hotel while engaging Harvey Klyce to build their summer home, which they christened "Alderbrook". Alderbrook was the second Mill Valley house built by Klyce. (Many of the town's early historic homes were built by Klyce). In the 1985 Review, Mill Valley historian Henry Boussy wrote, "The original entrance to the property was a curving drive from Eugene Street to what is now the rear of the house where a living room is located. At one end of this room a raised platform with large windows once provided a view of the mountain long since obscured by neighboring construction and the growth of the shrubbery." Barry Spitz adds, "An adjacent cottage built for Eloesser's daughter upon her marriage in 1918 is still in use. The home's former stables were torn down for still another residence."

Valuing the setting of her summer home, in 1902 Molly Eloesser joined with many of her neighbors to form a women's club so they might have a collective voice to counter the danger to the natural beauty and charm of the town being jeopardized by both tourism and development. However, our archives have yet to tell us very much about Molly's activities in The Outdoor Art Club. Records from 1880 to 1930 all list the Eloesser family's primary residences as being in San Francisco so perhaps that interfered with her taking on many OAC responsibilities. However, Molly's civic concerns are shown in a December 1907 San Francisco Call article headlined "Gifts Distributed by Benevolent Society, Old and Destitute German Poor Are Made Glad by Christmas Charity." Mrs. A. Eloesser was on the Board of the German Ladies Benevolent Society.

From 1881 to 1888, Molly and Arthur had four children: two sons, Leo and Herbert, and two daughters, Alice and Helen. The children went on to have enviable lives: The sons with successful careers and the daughters became prominent in society and often traveled.

Travels to Europe were a significant part of Molly Eloesser's life. Records show that she first went to Europe at age 4 with her parents on the ship Holsatia. In 1903 she and Arthur, along with daughters Alice and Helen, sailed for Europe on the north German Lloyd liner Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse. A San Francisco Call article in September of 1908 tells us much about the daughters' lives. "Miss Lydia Hopkins came up from Menlo Park a few days ago to be for a week the guest of Miss Helen Eloesser in Mill Valley. The two girls who are close friends have exchanged many such visits this year. Miss Eloesser and her sister, Miss Alice, will shortly leave California with their mother, Mrs. Arthur Eloesser, and spend several months on the continent. They were recently guests of honor at a farewell tea given them by their aunt, Miss Julia Heynemann, in her pretty studio on Presidio Avenue."

Herbert joined the family business and became a successful manufacturer of work wear like his father. Leo Eloesser, however, eclipsed all of his family members in terms of the depth and breadth of his renown. Leo was an eminent thoracic surgeon who received his medical degree from Heidelberg University. He served in the German Medical Corps of the German Army from 1912 to 1916, and then also served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps from 1918-1919. He was a professor of surgery at Stanford. In 1937-1938, he was a combat surgeon on the Loyalists side of the Spanish Civil War. In 1946-1949, he trained doctors for both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong in post-war China. But above all, Leo Eloesser is fondly remembered as the personal physician of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. They shared a close bond for almost 25 years with a long trail of correspondence that was chronicled in the 2005 book, Querido Doctorcito. Dr. Leo Eloesser was also a very close friend of Kahlo's husband, muralist Diego Rivera. In gratitude for his care and friendship, Frida Kahlo painted Leo's portrait.

Perhaps The Outdoor Art Club's history of Garden Tours was inspired by an event recorded in an August, 1921 article in the Mill Valley Record headlined "Garden Party Today, The Public is Invited to attend This Charming Fete. The beautiful and spacious grounds of Mrs. A. Eloesser, on Throckmorton Avenue, are to be opened this afternoon for the giving of a garden party. The garden itself, with its advantages of surrounding scenery, offers a rare opportunity for the giving of this function... This afternoon fete is given under the auspices of The Outdoor Art Club and the price of admission is 50c for adults, children 25c. The general public is invited to attend."

Molly Heynemann Eloesser died at age 69 on October 19, 1931. She is buried in the San Francisco Columbarium.

(Research on Molly Eloesser was provided by Lise Salmon.)

