

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
The Shakespeare Club



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"Women's groups have been influential in the physical and cultural growth of Pasadena from its earliest years. Literary and musical societies were founded as far back as the 1870s in the settlers' attempts to create a civilized and cultural setting for their frontier town. Other groups concerned themselves with the betterment of education, charitable endeavors, and business opportunities for women. Pasadena's attraction to wealthy winter visitors and later year-round residents was partly based on their perception that it was a relatively sophisticated young community and, symbiotically, their patronage and participation helped to make it so. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) is the oldest women's organization to have any longevity, its local chapter having been formed in 1883. It was followed by the Women's Reading Club of 1888, which later became the still-thriving Shakespeare Club."

-- United States Department of the Interior,
National Park Service, National Register of
Historic Places -- Edmund Blinn House (1905,
Prairie School Architecture) -- 160 N.
Oakland Avenue, Pasadena.

The beginning of The Shakespeare Club happened during a session of the Ladies Aid Society of the First Congregational Church, in June 1888, when Miss Claribel Thompson and Mrs. Lydia Nash privately talked over the matter of having a ladies' literary society or club, and agreed to start one. Accordingly,

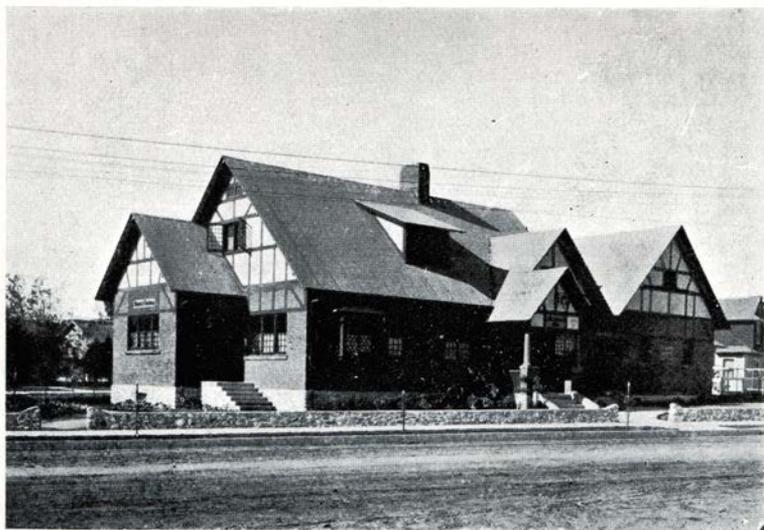
they set a meeting for the next week at Miss Thompson's home at 346 W. Palmetto Street. Other ladies had been invited, but only those two came. They, however, proceeded to formulate the plan for future meetings, and decided on Shakespeare as the first author to take up. At the next meeting there were three recruits -- Miss Ellen F. Thompson, Mrs. Ella Allen and Mrs. (Dr.) Page.

After this, attendance steadily increased; and on August 31, 1888, a formal organization was made, under the name of "Women's Reading Club," with twelve members. Miss Ellen Thompson, president; Mrs. Lydia Nash, vice-president; Mrs. Henry G. Bennett, secretary and treasurer. It was soon found that the initials, W.R.C., of the name adopted being used in the newspapers, were always mistaken for the well known "Woman's Relief Corps" secret order, and therefore in March 1889, the name "Shakespeare Club of Pasadena" was substituted. The meetings were held at members' homes, by appointment, until 1893, when the G.A.R. (Grand Army of the Republic) Hall was secured.

Their first year (1888-89) they had 13 members. Three years later, there were 26 members. By 1899-1900, 8 years later, they had 100 members. By 1929 the membership had grown to 1,334 members. It was said that "anybody who was anybody" was a member of The Shakespeare Club.

From its earliest days, the Club pursued a systematic study of the social and domestic life, architecture, literature, music and art works, industries, general history, etc., of different nations including our own. The mission of the Club was not only social, it was heavily geared towards the education and cultural exposure of its members. They were deeply interested in civic improvement and accomplished a number of amazing feats. Interest in civic improvements gradually gave way to more philanthropic pursuits.

Our first Clubhouse was built for the Club in 1896 by Susan Stickney, a founding member. It was located on a triangular plot of land at the corner of North Fair Oaks and Lincoln Avenues (which met at approximately where the 210 freeway now crosses Fair Oaks).



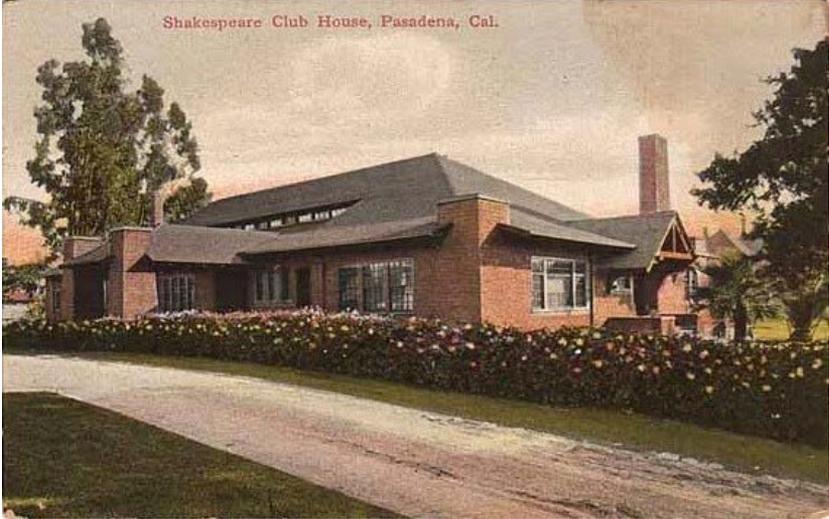
Home of the Shakespeare Club.



Our Assembly Room

Originally, they imposed limits on the number of members admitted, but they constantly revised that limit upwards until, in 1921, they removed all limits – that year their membership increased by 200.

Due to its fast-growing membership, a new Clubhouse was built on South Los Robles Avenue (close to where Cordova now crosses it).



... and soon after, in 1924 they built a large auditorium – William Shakespeare Hall with 600+ seats:



Below is an excerpt from the 1925-26 Roster/Program which describes many of the special features of these two buildings:

There are those of us who were members of Our Club when the life and plays of Shakespeare served as the inspiration to the intellectual life of the club. There are those of us who have joined since the club has adopted the liberal policy of the Federation and Shakespeare has become a "department." To both of these groups it is equally pleasant to recall the Shakespeare traditions under which this club was founded almost forty years ago.

The Great Hall. Only to pronounce the words and we are transported to the time of Elizabeth. No matter what affairs of public concern, domestic or international, we leave them at the doors of the great hall, and in a breath, step into the Elizabethan age.

This ceiling is derived, with a necessary variation, from an old mansion—Ockswells—in Berkshire near Windsor. Ockswells was built by Mr. John Morris, usher to the chamber of Henry VI. This great fireplace was copied from the mantel of Chawton House, built in 1588, an old Tudor gem of Hampshire county. The windows in our hall contain armorial motifs derived from English domestic windows of the Elizabethan period.

The Great Hall. Our visible heritage from the invisible. The evening comes. Draw the velvet curtains. Mayhap, in the minstrel's gallery a page appears:

"The Queen, sir,
Has sent you candles, now that the sun is down,
That you may see to work."

Performing was always a part of The Shakespeare Club. In the earliest days, plays were put on by members in the Drama Department, the Music Department, and/or the Shakespeare Department. Some examples are:

- Prize Winning Patriotic Play "Uncle Sam's Work Shop" by Louise Taylor Gerdine (1925)
- Old English Morality Play, "Every Man" (1926)
- A Christmas Play "*The Birds Christmas Carol*" (1926)
- "*Princess Kiku*" (1926)
- 'A Sinner Beloved,' by Phillips Endecott Osgood (1928)
- "Will Shakespeare" by Clemence Dane (1928)
- Presentation of Notable Scenes from Shakespeare's Plays (1928)

In the 1930s, full-length Shakespearean plays were staged in their beautiful new Great Hall on Los Robles, such as

- As You Like It
- A Comedy of Errors
- Macbeth

. . . and many more. All parts were played by members of The Shakespeare Club, even the men's parts.

In 1928, the Shakespeare Club Juniors was formed for members' daughters, nieces, and their friends. It was an immediate success and grew very fast, from 173 in 1928-29, its first year, to 270 only two years later. The Shakespeare Club Juniors were later renamed the "Shakespeare League" and were renown in the San Gabriel Valley for full-scale Broadway musicals presented each year as a benefit for selected charities. In 2010, the Shakespeare League was blended back into The Shakespeare Club enabling the full membership to continue to fund its philanthropies with performance productions. A listing

of shows presented over the past 40-plus years can be found on our Club's website: www.shakespeareclub.org.

In 1971 we were made aware that our Clubhouse on Los Robles needed retrofitting for earthquakes. Finances were such that it was decided to sell and move into our beautiful Villa here on South Grand Avenue. The Villa, known as the Everett House, has an illustrious history of its own. In the 1930s, it was built as the winter home and music conservatory of the late Mrs. Josephine P. Everett, noted art collector and important early patron of California Impressionist artists as well as a collector of books concerning women and women's history, 500 volumes of which were gifted to the Huntington Library in 1936 forming the core of its holdings in women's studies. She was also a charter member of the Hollywood Bowl Association and was a contributor to the Pasadena Playhouse and CalTech University. The Villa was designed by the well-known architectural firm Marston, Van Pelt & Maybury. Its large music room and art gallery were often the scene of musicals, with such outstanding artists as the London String Quartet, the Coleman Chamber Music Association and many young protégés who received their start here.

After Mrs. Everett's death, the Villa was used by the government in 1942 as a data computing area for spotting planes. Later the Jet Propulsion Laboratories converted it for research and development of classified and restricted information. In 1966, Mrs. Lily Crain, widow of Hal D. Crain, noted musician and Director of the Hollywood Boys Choir, purchased the property to use as a home and music conservatory. The Shakespeare Club acquired the property from Mrs. Crain in March 1972 and it has been our Clubhouse home ever since. Over the ensuing years, the membership has worked diligently to maintain its grandeur and continue its tradition of hosting local artists and musicians.

Sources:

Arcadia Tribune (Arcadia, California), October 29, 1972, p. 7
Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, California), July 13, 1937, p.
49

Pasadena City Directories (Ancestry.com)

Corsicana Daily Sun (Corsicana, Texas), February 2, 1938

The Huntington, Fall/Winter 2005

The California Impressionist Style in Perspective by Jean Stern
(Director of the Irvine Museum)

The Shakespeare Club Archives

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service,
National Register of Historic Places

<https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20071/lot/87/>

<http://artsalesindex.artinfo.com/auctions/Guy-Rose-4851036/Woman-sewing>