

Remarkable Women of Geneva Lake

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(1. picture of women from Black Point archives)

Introduction

We know so much about the men around Geneva Lake—the wealthy ones. On a Cruise Line tour the captain will talk about what these men did to make their fortunes, but what were the women doing all of this time? Admittedly it was the men who made the fortunes; in the 1880s women were rarely allowed into the field of finance and industry. But it turns out that many of them were doing a lot more than drinking tea on their porches and attending galas.

(2. picture of early Geneva Lake)

If we go back to when the native Americans were here—specifically the Potawatomie—the women did just about everything, except the hunting and fishing. They were the farmers. While their main village (the Royal Village) was in Fontana their collective farm was in Williams Bay. The women worked the farm in 2-week shifts. (Deb Soplanda)

(3. picture of the Kinzies)

Then in 1831 the Kinzie party came through on their way from Ft. Dearborn to Ft. Winnebago. It was Juliet Kinzie who wrote the first account of Geneva Lake in her book *Wau-bun, the Early Days in the Northwest*. (*Geneva Lake: Stories by the Shore*, p. 91)

One of the first white settlers was Catherine Van Slyke. She gave birth to the first white child in the area: a baby girl she named Geneva. And talk about a strong and resilient woman! (her husband was a notorious coward) In February of 1837 “. . . while she and her hired worker, Nathan Disbrow, were driving hogs from Illinois to the Wisconsin farm, a sudden, fearsome cold snap hit, forcing the two to abandon their herd of swine to find shelter. By the time they did, however, Disbrow’s feet were so badly frozen, it is said that Mrs. van Slyke was forced to amputate the toes on one foot with the only surgical instruments she had, namely a pair of scissors and a butcher knife.” (*Geneva Lake: Stories from the Shore*, p. 95.)

(4. picture of cheese)

Then there was Lavina Joy Williams and the year she made 800 pounds of cheese. How did she get them from Williams Bay to Lake Geneva? Canoe. . . probably paddled by one of her sons. (Deb Soplanda)

(5. picture of women protesting)

Keep in mind that most of the women I'll be mentioning made their mark before women got the right to vote in 1920. And for additional perspective: in the 1890s if there was a divorce the men got all the property and often the children.

What professions were open to women? If they were educated they could be teachers, secretaries or nurses. . . at least until they married. If not, they worked primarily in domestic service or factories.

Wealthy women were expected to do charitable work, maybe even a bit of social reform if it wasn't drastic. And most were satisfied to stop there—after all, their wealth depended on it. However, I will talk about the women who were the exception. They went beyond charitable work. They promoted unpopular causes, both political and social—many which could have affected their own status.

Mary Sturges

(6A. picture of Mary Sturges from "Remember the Ladies," p. 36, *At the Lake*, Spring 2012)

In 1894 Mary Sturges donated her cottage and the land for the library.

(6B. picture of cottage from *At the Lake*, Spring 2012) But when she went to the town council for money for the books (remember, the council was all men) they refused to give her anything. So Mary got together with a group of her women friends and they published a women's edition of the newspaper. With their profits they bought books. When she turned over her cottage and land it came with 2 stipulations. One was that the land always remain a park. The second was that the library board be made up of a majority of women. (Chris Brookes, Ginny Hall's library booklet)

Other accomplishments:

- She helped to found the Juvenile Protection Association in Illinois. This led to the first juvenile Court in the world.
- Locally she helped to establish the Episcopal church, the Lake Geneva Country Club and the YMCA. (Geneva Lake: Stories by the Shore)

Ethyl Sturges Dummer

(7A. **Snug Harbor**) This is Snug Harbor—where Mary Sturges and her family lived after moving out of the cottage that became the library.

(7B. **picture of Ethyl Sturges Dummer from “Remember the Ladies,” p. 36, *At the Lake*, Spring 2012, p. 37**) Ethyl was Mary Sturges’ daughter.

- recognized by leading sociologists as one of the most influential women of the 20th century
- for child labor reform.
- unwed mothers and prostitutes: wanted unwed mothers to keep babies and have the government help support them.
- early 1900s set up 2 successful pilot schools: believed in education based on experience
- In Chicago she worked with Jane Addams at Hull House, as so many women from here did.
- In 1908 she helped Jane Addams in the founding of what became known as the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration.
- (*Women Building Chicago 1790-1990* pp. 235-238, “Remember the Ladies, *At the Lake*, Spring 2012 and *Geneva Lake Reflections* p. 106)

Reinette Lester McCrea

(8. **picture of Blacktoft**)

- Reinette was a strong suffragette, taking to the campaign trail in 1910 for the women’s right to vote.
- Locally she helped form the Lake Geneva Garden Club

(*Geneva Lake: Stories by the Shore*, p. 32 and *Newport of the West* p. 27)

Frances Kinsley Hutchinson

(9. **picture of Frances Kinsley Hutchinson**)

She and her husband were avid gardeners. In a time of formal gardens, they believed in keeping things natural.

(10A. **picture of Wychwood**)

- They designed the gardens, retaining native vegetation. The house and buildings blended in with the surrounding woods.
- Women's clothing never used to have pockets (the men carried the money) and so she designed a gardening (apron?) with pockets.

(10B. picture of caption)

When her husband died she donated the 75 acre estate to the Univ. of Chicago as a wildlife refuge, study and retreat center. This came with a sizable endowment to care for the property for 25 years. (*Chicago Tribune* Jan. 18, 1933,

(11. picture of Wychwood) She wrote *Wychwood: the History of an Idea*

(*Geneva Lake: Stories by the Shore*, pp. 40-41 and *Wychwood: the History of an Idea and Geneva Lake*)

(12. picture of medals) As a gardener she was so highly thought of that an award is given each year in her name. Some of the recipients have included: Rachel Carson, Walt Disney, Lady Bird Johnson and Roger Tory Peterson.

Virginia Chapin

(13. postcard of Flowerside from George Williams College) Then there was Virginia Chapin who snuck out of her 2nd floor bedroom window to meet her beau, Francis Drake, in his canoe. All went well until she returned to a house that was all lit up with her parents waiting for her in the living room. You will be relieved to know that they married so after.

(interview with Harry Hartshone)

Florence Bartlett

(14. picture of House in the Woods, 1905-1906)

Florence was the youngest of the three daughters. She was an early supporter of Eleanor Club in Chicago and of their camp in Williams Bay.

(*Newport of the West* p. 60)

In the first half of the 20th century the wages for single working women were very low plus their job prospects were still limited. The Eleanor Club in Chicago provided these women with nice places to live. When it came to vacations women were also limited because of their income and that fact that they had to travel with a chaperone. And so, with the help of Florence Bartlett a camp on Geneva Lake was established.

Eleanor Camp 1912-1955

(15. postcard of Eleanor Camp pier) The camp had 2 office buildings, a recreation building and a dining hall—all of which blended in with the surrounding woods. The women stayed in tents. But take a look at the inside of one of their tents.

(16. picture of tent from Geneva Lake Museum)

notice the books, lamp, etc

(17. postcard of Camp Augustana)

While I'm talking about camps, I want to touch on the women behind the camps. With the exception of the 2 camps that were for working women I think it's safe to say that the managers were all men. But guess who did a lot of the work? This picture is of Camp Augustana. In about 1960 it became a year-round camp, but it was run almost solely by two families during the off-season. These two families (including the wives and children who were not paid) cooked the meals, cleaned up, washed the linens and made up the beds. And cleaned.

(interview with Grace Hanny)

Agnes Allerton

(18. picture of Folly)

- Agnes was Reinette's sister and so naturally she was a suffragette.
- In 1902 she founded a summer school for the children of the Irish immigrant (most who were working on the estates). At her school they learned cooking, sewing, canning . . .
- After the death of Reinette's husband in 1914 she took over the management of his interests. She proved to be an extraordinary business woman.
- Upon her death she donated Folly's entire household to Holiday Home.

(*Newport of the West*, p. 64 and *Americana American Historical Magazine*, 1921 on the internet)

Holiday Home

(19. postcard of Founder's Hall)

- serves economically-disadvantaged children.
- The idea for the camp is said to have started on board Mrs. Ayers steam yacht. In 1886 she and about 7 friends were cruising and talking about how wonderful it would be if the children who worked in the city (remember, there were no child labor laws) could have a respite in the fresh air for 2 weeks. With the help of their husbands and friends they started the camp the next year.
- It had the support of the whole lake community. People donated produce, talents and medical help as well as money.
- The women from Black Point were very involved in Holiday Home. “Miss Alma Seipp assisted by Elsa Madlener entertained . . . with pleasing violin solo after which they led their guests in a game of “beat the can.” (Holiday Home archives, *Geneva Lake: Stories from the Shore*, pp. 86-87 and interviews)

(20. picture of boy's week from Holiday Home archives)

This is from boy's week. You can see that in the back there are 2 boys on homemade crutches. Many of their campers were targeted because they had health problems.

(21. picture of girl's week from Williams Bay Historical Society)

(22. 3 pictures of girls playing)

How did the women enjoy the lake as they were growing up? Probably in a way similar to the girls at Elgin Club

“Elgin Club is full of girls, as wild and fresh as flowers of the field, who go about in Mother Hubbard dresses, strap slippers, blue stockings and straw hats. They fish from dawn till dusk, do their own bathing and rowing and will cut a worm in two or chop a minnow's head off with as much dispatch and as little concern as a cold-blooded juvenile with display.” (*Lake Geneva Herald*, August 16, 1884.)

Elizabeth Boyton Harbert

(23. picture of Elizabeth)

- She “typified the mainstream woman’s movement of the 1880s and 90s.”
- She helped found the American Woman’s Suffrage Association.
- She and Susan B. Anthony canvassed Wisconsin (where women got the vote in 1886) to encourage women to vote. Susan B. Anthony was her guest at the lake.
- At her home in Williams Bay she and her husband held intellectual conferences which were an outgrowth of the World’s Congress of Religions held in 1893 during the World’s Fair
- honorary doctorate from Ohio Wesleyan
- published 3 novels, several essays and articles, composed songs, edited 2 women’s publication (filled with essays), one of which she founded.

(“A Summary Biography of Elizabeth Boynton Harbert,” by John A. Frederick, 2012 from The Boynton-Harbert Society, EWHP Database and *Geneva Lake Reflections*, p. 114)

Camp Collie

(24. picture of pier at Conference Point Camp)

I mention this camp because it was here, in 1886, that women students decided to form their own organization, the National Association of Young Women's Christian Associations. (George Williams College archives and Smith College website: “Five College Archives and Manuscript Collection”)

Yerkes

(25. picture of Yerkes being built from Yerkes Observatory)

Many women worked at Yerkes. Rather than secretaries, they were called “computers” because they crunched the numbers/data that the astronomers collected.

- Edith Kellman: a computer who worked with 2 male astronomers who developed the star numbering system. Edith did the calculations
- Mary Calvert: 1905 an assistant and computer for her uncle, Edward Emerson Barnard. When he died in 1923 she became the curator of the Yerkes photographic plate collection and a high-level assistant.

(Williams Bay Historical Society)

Jobs

(26. picture of The postmistress from Williams Bay)

In addition to teachers and domestic staff, women around the lake held other jobs. This is the postmistress from Williams Bay delivering the mail at Yerkes. (Williams Bay Historical Society)

YMCA Camps

(27. picture of the dining hall)

This camp, since its beginnings in 1884, welcomed people of all races from all over the world. In 1884, that was a scandal.

When they moved to this location in 1887 the YWCA moved here too.

(28A. picture of 1926: Women's Building) Daily Bible study was held here, but men used the name of the building as an excuse to play golf instead. In 1937 they renamed the building after the first secretary to the YWCA, Mabel Cratty. Margaret Mead gave the devotions for the dedication.

(28B. picture of Eleanor Blakeslee) She was the first person to swim the length of the lake. It was a spur of the moment decision—she did it to attract the attention of a former boyfriend. While she failed to woo the boyfriend back, she succeeded with the swim. (as told by her daughter)

(numerous interviews, George Williams College archives)

Dr. Alice B. Stockham

(29. picture of Alice B. Stockham)

- 5th woman to graduate from medical school in U.S.
- Internationally famous obstetrician and gynecologist, educator, writer, publisher and social reformer, suffragist
- lectured against corsets
- denounced double standard about enjoying sex
- after trip to Sweden, return with idea of Shop Classes
- participated in the kindergarten movement
- 1883: Tokology: A Book for Every Woman (Information on physiology of human reproduction and practical advice on pregnancy, childbirth, the care of infants, the diseases of women and menopause)

45 printings; Tolstoy had it translated into Russian

(“The Excellent Becomes the Permanent” by Jane Addams, MacMillan Co. 1932, pp. 97-112 and *Women Building Chicago 1790-1990*, p. 851)

Vrilia Heights

(30. picture of Vrilia Heights)

- Est. a New Thought school called Vrilia Heights. Topics ranged from nature to childrearing to sex
 - Had to sell cuz of lawsuit for brochure “The Wedding Night”>
 - Society for the Suppression of Vice accused her of sending improper materials through the mail>
 - Clarence Darrow was her lawyer>
 - fined \$250, but banned her books—
 - Without that income she had to sell Vrilia
- neighbors were relieved because some of her women guests swam without stockings
- now Norman B. Barr Camp

Emma Ayers

(31. picture of Emma)

The Oaks

- thought to be primary force establishing Holiday Home
- an adventurer: she and her husband traveled extensively through Europe, Asia, the Middle East and Africa
- 1st non-native woman to enter the Grand Canyon on the Hance Trail
- Author of *A Motor Flight Through Algeria and Tunisia*
- Regularly swam across the lake until she was in her 70’s

(*Geneva Lake: Stories from the Shore* pp. 98-100)

Lake Geneva Yacht Club

(32. picture of Yacht Club at Cedar Point)

Their first building was on Cedar Point. When the lease ran out they eventually bought land on the south shore.

- story of Alma letting another boat take her right-of-way typifies some women's dilemma
- Jane Pagel: The daughter of a physician in Williams Bay. She became a world class sailor and ice boater to the astonishment of many men.

Black Point

(33. color picture of Black Point)

Yes, I'm going to throw in some Black Point history as it might relate to other wealthy women around the lake

(34. picture of black and white Black Point)

So go back a bit in time. The house was built in 1888 by German immigrants Conrad Seipp and his second wife, Catherina.

(35. picture of Catherine and Conrad)

- Conrad was a beer baron in Chicago.
- They had 5 surviving children: 4 girls and one boy
- Jan 1890, a year and a half after the house is built Conrad dies
- he leaves a large chunk of his fortune to charity which is indicative of the family through the generations

(36. picture of Catherina on the porch)

- Catherina sells the brewery
- she never remarries
- buys close to 100 acres, 2700 feet of lake shore, brings in Olof Benson for landscaping
- She dies in 1920, leaving much of her wealth to these institutions:

(37. list of charities)

(38A. picture of women's clothes)

- Our perception of elegance and leisure in Victorian times can be a bit warped. So, a break here to remind you of a few other facets of women's lives in the Victorian era.
- The styles might look elegant, but remember that under all of those clothes they are wearing corsets. (a short description of the dangers of corsets)
- Also, it might be 90 degrees out, but the women are covered from their necks down. And yes, they really adhered to that. In the Black Point archives there is a diary entry from Catherina's grandson that reads, "Today I saw Mary's ankles."

(38A picture of maid)

Considering the corset and the layers of petticoats, the maids uniform seems more inviting.

(39. picture of swimming costumes)

And on those sweltering days there was the option for the wealthy of Geneva Lake to swim, but even at the beach their costumes were ridiculously cumbersome.

Here is a quote from Lizzie Rumsey's diary, probably from the 1870s. She is writing about swimming with her brother, George.

Swimming was the event of the day, and it was a real expedition. We rowed from the village to the east shore of the lake at the foot of the hill, in front of what is now Mr. Young's house. Here we would fasten shawls about the trees to form a shelter for getting into our bathing suits, and I can assure you that they were suits, indeed. They were made of heavy blue flannel, bloomers fastened to a full waist with long sleeves, cuffs, and a turn-over collar around the neck, and a skirt which came well below the knees, all elaborately trimmed with white braid. We also wore stocking, well fastened with garters, so that by no chance could they come below the bloomers. Years later when I started to swim across the lake, with Brother George in a row boat as escort, I did take my skirt off before going into the water, but stockings could not come off until I was well away from the shore. (*Recollections of a Pioneer's Daughter* by Eliza Voluntine Rumsey, Christmas, 1936, the Castle Press, Pasadena, CA, p. 33)

Now for the domestic servants. Remember, this life of leisure on the lake never could have happened without all of the men and women that we rarely mention.

(40. picture of kitchen house)

This shows the kitchen house which was next to the big house. The second floor had sleeping quarters.

Think what it would take to run a 100 acre estate and a house with 13 bedrooms filled with people. For the sake of this talk I'll only look at some of the jobs that the women did.

(41A. picture of female staff)

- preparation, serving and clean-up of 3 formal meals a day
- laundry—all done by hand, of course
- house cleaning
- and the (41B picture of chamber pot) chamber pots,

(42. picture of Emma)

Emma was the oldest daughter.

- She was a pianist
- like the other women in the family she contributed to Holiday Home
- inherited the house (the only son had died)

(43. picture of Alma Seipp Hayes)

- played violin
- Alma broke a few barriers
- first woman in the family to go to college
 - her parents thought college unnecessary
 - she paid her own way
- worked in Puerto Rico as a teacher for a year

(44. picture of Alma Petersen)

I'm going to skip to Catherina's granddaughter, Alma Petersen. Her accomplishments were remarkable. In addition to raising 3 sons . . .

(45. list of accomplishments)

- name only a few, but include Holiday Home
- considered herself a suffragette

- most of her energies seemed directed to Hull House
- received their distinguished service medal

(46. picture of Hull House)

A brief description of Hull House will give you an idea of what Alma, and many Chicago women around the lake, were up to.

- co-founded in 1889 by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr
- innovative social, educational and artistic programs
- organizations led by women, formed for social reform, including settlement houses in working class and poor neighborhoods. To develop new roles for women
- to provide social and educational opportunities for working class people

Alma had inherited Black Point. She and her husband had 3 sons. It was the youngest son, Bill Petersen, who inherited the house

(47. picture of Bill)

William 1926-2012

At the age of 50 he married Jane Jordan Browne, a literary agent in Chicago.

(48. picture of Jane)

The two of them honored Alma's dream that Black Point would become a museum
struggle from 1995-2005

Rosalie Buckingham Selfridge

(49. picture of Rosalie Buckingham Selfridge)

nowadays we know her as Harry Selfridge's wife, but until she was 30 she was single and had a career
(*Newport of the West*, p. 195)

Rosalie Villas

(50. picture of buildings)

She was a land developer

- 1883 Rosalie Buckingham purchased 2 blocks on Harper Avenue
- first planned community in Hyde Park
- 42 villas and artist cottages
- homes looked over lagoon and prairie
- Rosalie Inn and Cafe

(Hyde Park Historical Society, info@hydeparkhistory.org; “Social Studies, Chicago City of Neighbors” at ecuip.lib.uchicago.edu/diglib/social/cityofneighborhoods/.../con_tour_m.html)

Mary Hawes Wilmarth

(51. picture of Mary)

after her husband died . .

- dedicated herself to her lifelong interest in social and feminist concerns
- Naturally she was a suffragette
- worked for child labor laws
- helped organize Holiday Home and the Lake Geneva Fresh Air Association
- she was an original trustee of Hull House in 1889
- In addition to that she was the first president of the women’s City Club in Chicago which advocated for women’s full participation in civic and community affairs.
- Columbian Exposition of 1893: she and others requested that women be represented > Board of Lady Managers. Wilmarth was in charge of education.
- She was a delegate at large from Illinois at the Progressive Party’s national convention in 1912

(*Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, Vol. 1; kimballunionarchives.com; *Newport of the West* p. 146)

Anna Wilmarth Ickes

(52. picture of Anna)

Mary's daughter

- supporter of Women's Trade Union League often provided bail for women who were striking
- assisted needy young people to finance their college educations
- She served in the Illinois State Senate, beginning in 1928
 - 7 committees including civil service, education, charities and corrections and industrial affairs
- 2nd marriage to Harold Ickes (secretary of the interior for FDR)
- When she moved to Washington D.C. she devoted her time to the culture, archaeology and welfare of native Americans

(Notable American Women, 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary, Vol. 1)

Celia Wallace

(53. picture of the Idaho Building)

She was nicknamed the Diamond Queen. She had many good intentions, but was a terrible business woman. She was too big-hearted and trusting. She died in poverty.

- She lived first in the Whiting House and then the Garrison Hotel. She bought the Idaho building at the Columbian Exposition
- Idaho Building was brought to the lake by Celia Wallace, the Diamond Queen. It was erected over in Buttons' Bay. Rumor was that orphaned boys would live there. Neither she nor orphaned boys ever moved in although street crews, artists and gypsies did. The house was reported to be haunted. When it was torn down the huge cedar logs were used for part of the municipal pier in Lake Geneva. *(Geneva Lake: Stories From the Shore, p. 136) (Newport of the West, p. 177-179)*

(54. picture of women/girls from the 1950s)

So what women have done in the past . . . and have yet to do, might be surprising especially given the circumstances. Hopefully not though. But look at your own family. Whether wealthy or poor, working as a financier and her maid, educated or not, the stories of individual women can be quite remarkable.