

## Small Towne Short Stories

*Woman's Club of Orange by Alyssa Jordan*

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This historical fiction account was compiled with help from Orange County Historian Phil Brigandi, Woman's Club President Anna Fairchild, and Lizeth Ramirez, Archivist and Reference Librarian at the Orange Public Library & History Center.



It's difficult to imagine South Center Street without the charming Woman's Club of Orange among the other modern buildings.

I became curious as to how the tucked-away club began. The club was founded in 1915 by Susan Collins and held its first meeting at her home. Susan invited ten friends and asked each woman to bring ten other women. After that, the women held meetings at the homes of various members. They were also held in a school, in the Capitol Theatre, and in the Franzen building on North Glassell Street where, at one point, they leased the second floor.

All women were welcome so the club quickly grew and thus the need for a larger space. In 1922 a lot was purchased and the clubhouse finished constructing and furnishing the place in 1924 at a cost of approximately \$30k.

Luckily the members of the club were creative in their fundraising efforts. Each member donated five dollars and donated a penny for each inch of their waistslines.

The creative fundraising methods established the club as a philanthropic force raising money and goods for several organizations.

In the early days, they grew food for military families during World War II and knitted socks for veterans. Their clubhouse has also been provided to groups who

need the space like the Red Cross. Today they support groups like Patriots and Paws, a volunteer organization that furnishes homes for veterans. The group also gathers needy items like toiletries for Casa Teresa, which helps pregnant women facing difficult times.

When I spoke with Anna Fairchild, the current President of the club, she provided me with a timeline of upcoming events for 2017. One such event is the renowned flower show, which will take place in April and celebrate its 80<sup>th</sup> year. Another is a catered, four-course tea in March and, every September, no matter the year, the Woman's Club collects linens for a domestic women's shelter.

The club exists under an umbrella organization called The General Federation of Women's Clubs, which dates back to 1868 when Jane Cunningham Croly was denied admission to an all-male press club honoring Charles Dickens because of her gender. Because of this, she formed an organization of her own that expanded nation-wide. This bold move allowed groups of women to assert their independence.

When I spoke to Anna she explained that the members of The Women's Club of Orange have become something more than comrades. They have become family to one another.

Their clubhouse is living proof of the impact that women have had throughout the years, not to mention the larger place they have claimed within society. From protecting the original Orange Plaza fountain to creating bibs for a local convalescent home, The Woman's Club has become an immeasurable source of support and strength.

I didn't know any of this when I first visited the clubhouse. I had decided to make the trip with a clean slate so that I could focus on the physical details before tackling anything else. Immediately I noticed that the surrounding neighborhood felt quiet and welcoming.

Standing on the steps, I took in the slender palm trees swaying in the breeze, the Orange Public Library that stood across the street and, beyond that, the famous traffic circle. My eyes were drawn to the baby blue house located to the left of the clubhouse. I would come to learn that the surrounding neighborhood has not significantly changed in the last 100 years. This is largely because the clubhouse is close to the center of the city, which is designated as a historic district, allowing the area to maintain its "old town" feel.

When I finally stepped into the building, I thought about the generations of women that have walked through those same doors. I felt humbled, to say the least.

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The sun cast a milky ginger glow over the sky when Alex and her grandmother, Irene, arrived at The Woman's Club of Orange.

"It looks like a birthday cake, lit up like this," Alex murmured, eyeing the tan arches and golden color that washed the building from the abundance of outdoor lighting.

She thought it had a Spanish revival look to it, but when she'd said so in the car, her grandmother had sharply corrected her: "It's Mediterranean-style, dear. Believe it or not, the clubhouse is almost a hundred years old; it was constructed in the 1920's for around \$30,000, I believe."



The thought made her glance to the side, only to realize that her grandmother had fallen several steps behind.

When Alex turned around, she was surprised to see the swell of emotion on her grandmother's face. Irene gazed at the clubhouse with warmth and nostalgia; it was the kind of look usually reserved for old friends.

Alex tried to shake off a twinge of guilt. It had taken Irene a week to convince her to attend this holiday dinner.

"Grandma?" She prodded.

Irene blinked, then nodded. "Yes, dear. Let's go inside."

Alex obliged by helping her grandmother up the steps.

"Will members of The Women's Club be here tonight?" Alex asked as they made their way to the double doors. Now that she was here, she wanted to at least try to make an effort.

"Some might be, but this is a dinner for the Angels Guild. They rented the clubhouse for the evening," Irene said, her heels clicking sharply on the tile floor. "A few of us belong to both groups. Regardless, you'll meet plenty of enthusiasts."

Alex shot her grandmother a confused look, but she let it go.

In the car, Irene had explained that The Woman's Club had always been open to women of every age. Nowadays, it mainly consisted of middle-aged or elderly women. Some of them had joined the club in their youth and have maintained their membership through the years.

"You'll see other people your age. It's a dinner for mothers and daughters, as well as grandmothers and granddaughters," Irene had said, careful to include such information.

The grand entrance led directly to a large sitting room. Sturdy sofa chairs sat before a roaring fireplace surrounded by white bricks. Wreathes hung from almost every corner, sparkling with golden tulle and fake powdered snow.

Once Alex had agreed to attend, Irene sent her several pictures of the clubhouse. Though at first annoyed by her persistence, Alex had become intrigued when she took a closer look. One image had captured a costumed group as they stood atop the stage, sporting kimonos and large fans. Potted flowers bordered the stage, while black curtains with white trim hung above them.

Another photo featured a group of women in colorful dress, standing on what looked like the very same stage. Their hairstyles and bright, floral clothes made Alex think it was taken in the sixties or seventies. This time, the stage curtains were a pale, shimmering peach color.

She craned her neck to catch a glimpse of the main room. Her eyes touched on the heavily curtained stage—the first curtain now a light, olive-green, while the rest looked tan—and the dozens of tables adorned with ivory linens and folded red napkins.

Irene had led them to a circular table in the middle of the sitting room. A woman with frosted hair in a green, shimmering blouse stood before them, clipboard in hand. The table was covered in name cards.

Irene threw Alex a pointed look.

"Sorry," Alex murmured. "I'm Alex Forrester."

The woman scanned her clipboard. "I have a Miss Alexandra Forrester."

Irene beamed. Alex rolled her eyes.

Alex grew up in Irvine, a city-suburb within the heart of Orange County. She also went to college in Irvine. She was in her mid-twenties, and she *still* lived in Irvine. It was a nice place to live: safe and family-oriented but not particularly exciting.

When the woman produced two name cards for them, Alex barely resisted the urge to cross out Alexandra and write 'Alex' in her cramped scrawl.

They made their way into the main room. Almost immediately, people began to approach them. Alex quickly lost count of the various new faces.

When she gamely asked about The Woman's Club, two middle-aged women in matching red dresses happily told her more. In addition to its 200-plus members, Alex learned that the club was divided into various special interest groups. These groups met separately from the rest, and they focused on everything from the Book Review Section to the Drama Section, not to mention the Garden Section and the First Toastmasters.

"On the third Monday of every month, the entire club meets here for a general luncheon," one of the women said.

As she spoke, she looked at her friend, and the two naturally drifted into another conversation.

A little overwhelmed, Alex gratefully let her eyes wander. They lingered on the towering Christmas trees that stood on either side of the stage. Both had been decorated with ornaments and festive bells, the kind that matched the music merrily emanating from a set of speakers. A sprawling piano occupied the left corner of the stage.

Alex hoped someone would play it. She had felt lost ever since she finished college, more so than she would care to admit. The only thing she had always been sure of was her love for music.

A short, plump woman caught her interest when she smiled knowingly and said, "A little bird told me you're curious about the clubhouse's history. It's Alex, right?"

Alex nodded, relieved. She still felt overwhelmed, but something about this woman was different.

"My name is Ann. I've known your grandmother for years," she said, extending a gloved hand. Alex reached forward to shake it.

"This place really is quite magnificent," Ann said. "During World War II it offered lodging to soldiers."

"Wow, I didn't know that," Alex said, surprised.

"I didn't know until I met Irene. Apparently, soldiers were quartered in the clubhouse for five months. During that time, club members had to meet at other locations. Theaters, schools, parks. That sort of thing."

Alex looked thoughtful. "That's actually pretty cool."

Ann smiled again. "Isn't it? They've contributed to so many things. Things you wouldn't really think about—like the installation of streetlights in Orange. Imagine what it would be like without those..."

Eventually, Irene cut in and they took their seats. Alex gratefully did so; her heels were killing her.

At one point, after they had eaten, Irene surveyed the women in the room before her gaze returned to Alex. She visibly softened.

"Think of all the generations of women that have sat here before us," she said over her cup of tea. "You're sitting in history."

Alex smiled at the phrasing.

"The legacy of Susan Collins is everywhere in this clubhouse," Irene said, continuing her train of thought. "So is Florence Pixley's legacy, who was not only a charter member but the club's second president in 1916. Genevieve Brown, one of the first female marines, sat in this very room. Tita Smith, the current mayor of Orange, has also sat in this room."

Irene stirred her tea but kept her eyes on Alex. "I know this place, these luncheons, they probably seem outdated to you. I used to think that way, too."

"Really?" Alex asked.

"Yes, really. I was young once. I too was asked to attend countless luncheons or socials with my grandmother. I always evaded them."

She paused, still vigorously stirring her tea. The movements had become unsteady. "She died before I ever went to one."

Alex gently covered her grandmother's hand with her own; the stirring stopped.

Irene cleared her throat. "Let's go outside," she said, misty-eyed.

As it turned out, the clubhouse's land extended to a sizeable lot that housed a stunning redwood. Lights hung over them, attached to slim black poles at either end of the yard. It was simple yet elegant, much like the clubhouse itself.

To the right, a garden of roses bloomed. They painted the soil with shades of sunset: deep, rich reds, soft yellows, peachy-pinks, and glossy, lustrous pinks.

Alex leaned down to inhale their scent. She hadn't come across anything like The Woman's Club before.

She took one last look at the flowers before drifting toward an area dominated by beautifully crafted benches.

The red metal had been fashioned to portray birds with their young, framed by arching vines and twisting leaves. Another bench had a golden placard at its center. In the growing dark, Alex could barely make out the name, though she tried to mouth it silently.

Irene slowly walked over and eased onto the bench. Alex easily slid into place beside her.

They didn't speak for several moments. When Alex glanced at her grandmother, she caught her fondly watching the clubhouse, just as she had earlier that evening.

"You see," Irene finally said, inclining her head toward the clubhouse, and the women inside it. "These events aren't outdated. To me, they are timeless."

Alex took her grandmother's hand and squeezed it.

Someone had brought out the piano, after all; even in the yard, she could hear the muted sounds of a warm-up before the air swelled with music.

"Let's go inside," Alex said, smiling.

Alyssa Jordan is a freelance writer in Southern Orange County. She graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Chapman University, where she belonged to Sigma Tau Delta, a collegiate English honor society. She has previously been published in various literary magazines, such as *The Ampersand Review*, *Milk Sugar*, and *100 Word Story*. While her passion lies with fictional writing, Alyssa has also developed a passion for historic buildings in Orange County. Her great-grandfather, Jules Markel, built the first St. Anne's Church in Santa Ana. Her family also built Mater Dei High School, the Newport Beach Pier, and the Balboa Island wall.

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Image credit: Woman's Club building located at 121 South Center Street, Orange, California, 1940. Postcard image shows corner view of the Mediterranean revival building built in 1924 at a cost of \$24,000, which became the first home of the Woman's Club, formed by Mrs. Collins in 1915. An automobile is parked on Center Street in front of the building. Courtesy of the Orange Community Historical Society Collection, Orange Public Library, Orange, CA.

