

A Piece of UC Berkeley Feminist History

UC BERKELEY WOMEN'S HISTORY TOLD THROUGH ARCHEOLOGY PROJECT

Preface by Barrie Thorne, Professor of Gender and Women's Studies

When I joined the UC Berkeley Women's Studies Department in 1995, it was located at 2241 College Avenue, a little grey house on the road between the law school and the school of business. We had faculty meetings in the former living room, with the big conference table squeezed next to the copy machine by the front window (during one stormy period, the roof began to leak, and water pelted onto the machine). Staff and faculty offices lined the bottom hallway; up the backstairs was a former bedroom with desks and chairs shared by faculty with joint appointments.

It was a little lonely in this outpost, which was hard for students to find, and Gender and Women's Studies folks were glad when we moved to Dwinelle Hall in 1997. But it turns out that during the four years when the department was located in the grey house, we were sharing a piece of campus feminist history. I learned about this connection in fall 2006 when I happened to pass by the house, saw that an archeological dig was in process on the side yard, and stopped to ask what was going on. Kim Christensen, overseeing the dig, introduced herself and told me that we were standing on a spot where a garage once stood, holding an auto that was driven in a 1911 pro-women's-suffrage parade in Berkeley.

Kim Christensen is completing the Designated Emphasis in Gender and Women's Studies, along with a Ph.D. in anthropology, specializing in archeology (UCB has the best feminist archeology program in the world!). I asked Kim to share some of the history of the little grey house. Women's Studies alumni, faculty, and students may be interested, as I was, to learn that we once worked and conversed in a house with ties to the history of women, and suffrage efforts, at UC Berkeley. (Note that we also met in rooms once visited by luminaries like Frank Lloyd Wright and Jack London!)

Article by Kim Christensen, Ph.D. candidate in Anthropology (with an emphasis on archeology); also completing the UCB Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality.

Archaeological investigations are currently ongoing around the former home of May and Warren Cheney on the southeast corner of campus. This now dilapidated property, slated for removal during development of this area of campus, has been used by the University for various programs and offices since the 1950s. Prior to the University's purchase of the property in 1939, however, this house contained a vibrant and bustling household, begun by May and Warren Cheney in 1885. Both were early Cal graduates (classes of 1883 and 1878, respectively), and were products of the hotly-contested practice of co-education.

Warren owned a real estate and insurance company in Berkeley, and wrote pieces for the *Overland Monthly and Sunset Magazine*, in addition to several published nonfiction books and novels. May owned and managed a teaching placement service in San Francisco for about a decade, which placed teaching graduates in public school positions throughout the state. Beginning in 1898 and continuing for forty years, May worked as Appointments Secretary for the University, certifying and placing Cal graduates in teaching positions throughout the state. Since about 80 percent of female students at the University sought to become teachers, May Cheney's efforts to standardize teaching certifications and placements had a profound effect on the professionalization, and elevation in status, of a predominantly female occupation. Moreover, May was intimately involved in efforts to improve the training and social experiences of female students. She was an honorary charter member of the Prytanean Society, an honor society for female Cal students formed in 1902 (which still exists today). She urged students to form a campus

chapter of the College Equal Suffrage League, and helped in the push for the creation of a School of Domestic Science at the University in order to open up more professional employment opportunities for women. As vice-president of the California chapter of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (precursor to the American Association of University Women), she was connected to a nationwide network of college-educated women seeking to improve social and employment conditions for female students and graduates.

The Cheney house itself functioned as both the family home where their four sons were raised, and as an informal ‘salon’ of sorts for writers, artists, and progressives. Luminaries such as Mary Hunter Austin, Frank Lloyd Wright and Jack London were friends of the family and visitors to the home. May was listed as one of the “well-known local women” who acted as vice presidents of an equal suffrage rally held at the local high school two nights before the 1911 vote which extended suffrage to California women, and the family car was used in the Berkeley equal suffrage auto parade which took place the following day.

Thus, we have gained a good sense of the family’s social and political involvements from the documentary record, although the family’s day-to-day life has proved more elusive. Archaeological study of the yard areas surrounding the house, in contrast, provides a window onto the daily practices of the household, and can illuminate how such social and political practices were wrapped up in daily life. This research puts the lie to the often-assumed practice of “separate spheres,” which dictated the strict separation of masculine and feminine domains, with the household functioning as the feminine, apolitical half. It also shows how the gender debate over co-education played out within the University setting, and how some women sought to work within the system to create more socially-recognized opportunities for women to advance within academia and outside employment.

Excavations are being undertaken with the aid of undergraduate students through the Undergraduate Research Apprenticeship Program (URAP), whereby students gain credit for participation in faculty research projects. Dr. Laurie Wilkie, of the Department of Anthropology and Archaeological Research Facility, and I have partnered to conduct this research, which is part of my dissertation. My research includes examining the daily practices of activism within the household, women’s history, feminist theory, and public and community-centered archaeology. Excavations are ongoing each Friday this semester (spring 2007), and any and all visitors are welcome to stop by the site, which is located at 2241 College Avenue, between Calvin Lab and the Archaeological Research Facility. The project blog can be accessed at <http://cheneyhouse.blogspot.com/>.



Cheney House



Unit 3 Excavation