

Ellen Browning Scripps, her Life and Philanthropy

This talk was presented by Deborah Day to a luncheon of Ellen's Circle on October 18, 2000, in the Birch Aquarium at Scripps Board Room.

Today is Ellen Browning Scripps's birthday. She would have been 164 today. That makes her seem very remote from us. She lives in our memory now largely as a name on buildings: Scripps Hospital, Scripps College, Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

That is not what she would have wanted. Your group, Ellen's Circle, is an organization that honors her the way she would want to be remembered, by continuing her good work.

Today, I want to talk about Ellen Browning Scripps and her life as a philanthropist. But I want to begin by talking about her life, which was not an easy one.

Ellen Browning Scripps was born in London October 18, 1836, the daughter of an improvident bookbinder from an otherwise distinguished family of printers and intellectuals. Her father was twice widowed in England and emigrated with his six surviving children to Rushville, Illinois in 1844 where he established a farm. He married again and had five additional children. Ellen Browning Scripps helped raise her younger siblings.

The farm in Rushville, Illinois looks handsome and bucolic -- the farm is now a park in Rushville. But when the family lived there, it was small and crowded. Ellen Browning Scripps recalled that the upstairs consisted of two large rooms, the Girls' Room and the Boys' Room. She was fond of reading, and her father, the bookbinder, owned some valuable volumes. She kept the book she was reading under the mattress, where it would be out of the way of the young children who were likely to tear or lose things left unattended in the Girls' Room.

Miss Scripps taught school to save the money to attend Knox College. While there, she witnessed one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates which inspired an interest in politics and free speech. Her lifelong habit of giving began with volunteer work and charitable activities during the Civil War for the Freedman's Association.

Miss Scripps managed to save enough money from her meager salary to invest in the Detroit News, an innovative penny newspaper for workingmen started by her brother James Edmund Scripps (1835-1906). She joined James in Detroit when she was in her forties and began working on the paper as proofreader, copy editor, and writer. She had excellent accounting skills, and both of her brothers complimented her insightful readings of balance sheets. She wrote a front page column for women, "Matters and Things." She persuaded a reluctant James to take their young brother, Edward W. Scripps (1856-1926), into the business.

Miss Scripps invested in E.W. Scripps' newspapers when he left Detroit to establish his own newspaper chain, and she eventually owned substantial stock in his company.

Her private life revolved around the family. She lived with her brother James and other relatives. When a member of the family was ill, she nursed them. She was not squeemish. When her brother, E.W. Scripps, fell ill from too much work and drink, Ellen traveled throughout Europe and North Africa with him in 1881, and he recovered his health with her help.

She moved to San Diego, California with her brother E.W. Scripps and his family in 1891. She was then a woman of 60 with an independent fortune, and for the first time in her life, she established her own home in La Jolla, California in 1897 together with her sister Virginia Scripps (1852-1921).

In 1900, Ellen's bachelor brother, George Henry Scripps (1839-1900), died leaving her stock in the Cleveland Press. Ellen decided to use this legacy, amounting to some \$600,000, to honor her brother, a yachtsman with scientific interests. It was this money and her interest in science that led Ellen Browning Scripps to found the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Miss Scripps's principles were straightforward. She believed in education, free speech, women's suffrage, science, temperance, and world peace. She abhorred discrimination and privilege. Her public philanthropy was built on these principles. Miss Scripps treated her gifts in a very businesslike way. She disliked the word "philanthropist," and referred to her gifts as investments. She combined her interest in education and women's issues by funding Scripps College. She supported women's clubs because she felt that women needed a forum to discuss issues of public policy once they got the vote. She combined her interest in science and education by funding Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Her diaries are filled with careful notes about her philanthropy. She was not impulsive and she was not sentimental about giving. She picked a cause or institution she found deserving of her support, set the level of her gift, and stuck to her decision. In accordance with her wishes, no public record was kept of her gifts, so the entirety of her philanthropy will probably never be known.

If Miss Scripps had a flaw, it was her extreme selflessness. Her brother E.W. Scripps once said that she had been so poor in her youth that she was unable to feel rich. Her friend Mary Ritter called this her habit of "self immolation." Her friends once chided her for dining on a single potato on the cook's night out, and she replied, "No one needs less to eat than I." One hears in these remarks the motherless child of a large, impoverished family, who prefers not to be noticed.

One of the results of Miss Scripps's dislike of personal publicity is that she sometimes hid behind others to avoid notice. When she gave the \$600,000 to found this institution, she refused any thanks and attributed all credit to her dead brother George, whose money funded this gift. Her brother E.W. Scripps often pledged gifts in her name. She provided the money, but he got the public notice. This suited them both.

In her public philanthropy, Miss Scripps formed friendships and partnerships with other women. Two of these friends were women physicians, Dr. Mary Ritter, the wife of the first director of the Scripps institution of Oceanography, and Dr. Charlotte Baker, the wife of Fred Baker, the man who persuaded Ritter to establish his marine station in San Diego.

Let's take a moment to look at the lives of these two women.

Dr. Mary Bennett Ritter was born in Salinas, California in 1860. She was the daughter of a '49er and farmer. She was a Progressive Republican. She worked her way through Cooper Medical School (now Stanford) and had her own practice in Berkeley. At the age of thirty-one, she married William E. Ritter, a professor of zoology at the University of California. They had no children.

Mary Ritter served as the first de facto dean of women at Berkeley before she and her husband moved to La Jolla in 1909. She gave up her medical practice for his dream, a marine biological station in San Diego.

Her philanthropic interests included clean water and sanitation, science education, and women's suffrage. She lectured on social hygiene - the sex education of its day - to sailors and school girls in San Diego. She was a middle class woman, better able to donate time than money to the causes that interested her.

Dr. Charlotte Baker was born 1855 to a wealthy and privileged family from Newburyport, Massachusetts. She was an alumnae of Vassar College. She became an obstetrician and married a medical school classmate at the University of Michigan. She did her residency in a women's prison and developed a lifelong interest in prison reform and delinquency in girls. The Bakers had two children.

Politically active, she became the first woman president of the San Diego County Medical Society and headed the San Diego Civil Service Commission. She delivered over 1000 babies in San Diego. Her philanthropic interests included orphanages and new hospitals.

There is a generational difference here. Ellen Browning Scripps was more than twenty years older than Drs. Ritter and Baker. But they shared a common interest in education, women, and science, and all three women were active in the San Diego Women's Clubs.

Mary Ritter and Charlotte Baker were happy to supply Miss Scripps with information about the community and provided plenty of suggestions for community projects in need of investment. Miss Scripps found the two younger women excellent confederates. When Miss Scripps decided to build the La Jolla Woman's Club, she got Mary Ritter to supervise the construction. When Miss Scripps decided to fund a hospital, she discussed building needs and staff with Charlotte Baker.

Mary Ritter and Charlotte Baker or their well connected husbands could make quiet inquiries about a deserving student or the cost of hospital equipment without attracting public attention. This was often the research that preceeded a gift from Miss Scripps.

This relationship strengthened all three women. Miss Scripps had eyes in the community. Drs. Baker and Ritter gained the prestige of being known as friends of a wealthy philanthropist. Their respectable husbands and brothers often got the credit for their good works, and deflected criticism of their most progressive charities. In this way a great amount of good work was accomplished efficiently and quietly.

That work is still with us today. Miss Scripps founded and built Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and Scripps College. She was a founder of the Bishop's School and provided scholarships for students there. She built the La Jolla Woman's Club, the first La Jolla Library, and the Children's Pool. She purchased and donated Torrey Pines and other lands as public parks. She made significant gifts to the San Diego Zoo, the San Diego Museum of Natural History and the YMCA/YWCA. Her "investments" are paying dividends to us today.

Ellen's Circle carries on the spirit of her gifts. Ellen Browning Scripps was a great supporter of this Aquarium, she believed in the value of endowment funds, and she felt that this aquarium was an excellent tool for public education, especially of school children. It is a great pleasure to celebrate Miss Scripps's birthday here with you.