

An Historical Essay on Community at Scripps In honor of Mary Carol Isaacs, October 5, 2008

Deborah Day

Scripps Institution of Oceanography Archives

30 October 2008

The Scripps Institution of Oceanography began as a summer laboratory in La Jolla, California and moved to a large piece of land on La Jolla shores in 1909, quite remote from the village. There, the scientists built a colony that included laboratories and small residential cottages. California was once full of such bungalow outposts— one finds similar compounds in agricultural plantations, military bases, beach camps and spiritual retreats up and down the state built at that time.

Cottage construction at Scripps began at the shoreline in 1913 and eventually ended with a crescent of cottages built in 1915 on a bluff overlooking the pier. The cottages were built by Mexican laborers working under the supervision of local carpenters. The funds were provided by E.W. Scripps who saw the cottages not only as staff housing, but also as short term rentals to academic types on holiday which he hoped would supplement the income for the fledgling institution. E.W. Scripps even wrote an essay about his new community, “An Odd Place: A new town where high thinking and modest living is to be the rule.” His principles were simple. All residences were to be very modest but each was to have an ocean view and all were to be owned by the institution. They were furnished in Spartan style with iron bedsteads, gas lighting, wooden stoves, institutional china, glassware and cooking utensils. There was to be a community club house that doubled as a school and central laundry. No fine homes were allowed. The residents would be professors and retired professional, literary, and other quiet people with moderate incomes and an interest in science. The institution would operate a bus to the village. The community would be named Ellentown.

This vision was, in the words of Dr. Francis Sumner, an unrealized dream. The cottages failed as an income source but succeeded as an endless headache for the first three directors who had to endure constant complaints from the residents together with the endless expense of keeping the cottages in repair. Percy Barnhart, the aquarist resident in Cottage No. 8, recalled bitterly in his memoirs that the democratic spirit had palled by 1920 when the institution made a distinction in salary between faculty and staff. This was quickly reflected in the social order on campus, which divided into three neighborhoods. The smallest, cheapest and least popular cottages were so close to the beach that sand blew in daily. Those cottages were quickly left to be rented to graduate students. The middling ranks of employees, mechanics, technicians, librarians, and the unmarried settled into the row of cottages fronting the road to La Jolla. That

left the largest and most expensive one- and two-bedroom cottages, the ones constructed on the bluff, to faculty families and distinguished visitors.

Even residents of the bluff cottages had challenges in getting along. They had no privacy. The mail was all addressed to P.O. Box 109, La Jolla. Groceries and milk were delivered to the main laboratory, not to houses. Grocery bills and wood for stoves were paid for by the institution which kept monthly tabs for each householder. In 1914, there was only one telephone on campus, located outside the director's office. The institution ran as a sort of collective, and everybody knew each other's business. Those with the progressive spirit of temperance opposed younger men who were said to secretly brew beer. The lively children of the younger faculty annoyed the quiet residents. In truth, the cottages were so close together that nothing but the very strictest forbearance made any community possible.

It was the faculty wives who created a community from this camp. First among them was Mary Bennett Ritter, the physician wife of the director of the institution. She intended to uplift the tone of the little community by any and all means. She diagnosed illnesses, including a case of amoebic dysentery and kept a good eye on the drains and public health, an interest carried on in the next generation by microbiologist Claude ZoBell. Dr. Ritter planted a vegetable garden and encouraged cottage gardens to try to control the dust. She was fond of amusements and organized evenings of entertainment at the community house that included play readings and community sings. *The Importance of Being Ernest* was the first of many performances held there. Scientists visiting the institution were pressed into giving lectures. There were puppet shows for the children, and music played on an old phonograph. Dr. Ritter was the first of the community builders among the wives.

Other women took more direct action. Margaret Sumner, wife of Dr. Francis Sumner, had three young children. The only amusement on campus for children was swimming on the beach, but Mrs. Sumner could not swim and feared the strong surf. She organized the mothers to take turns watching the youngest children while the older children were taught to swim. The children were encouraged to collect, identify and display the shells they found on the beach. Mrs. Crandall, who lived in Cottage No. 24, organized beach picnics and made gallons of clam chowder served hot with crackers. On Remembrance Day, later Memorial Day, there was an annual community hike up Mt. Soledad. The women organized a Red Cross chapter during World War I, and sewed for the soldiers at the community house. Ruth Barnhart began a little outdoor school for the young children and for all the children on days the roads were impassable. The Mexican laborers working on the roads heard about this, and asked permission to send their children, and this school ran for a while, teaching mathematics, drawing and English.

Not surprisingly, the wealthy residents of La Jolla called Scripps the Bug House and took a dim view of its residents. There was a misunderstanding that the scientists were living on the charity of Mr. E.W. Scripps. That enhanced community identity, as did adversity. Winter rains created mud so thick it often closed the roads, and sometimes burst the water pipes that supplied the cottages. One or two babies were born in the cottages when it was impossible to get to town. There were floods, gas leaks, mudslides, and a brush fire so dangerous that everyone spent a night together in the concrete laboratory in 1914. Tramps frequented the road, and women were often left alone for weeks with the scientists at sea or away at distant conferences. The residents were a diverse group. During World War I, hysterics remarked upon the number of Germanic names among the scientists; one poor soul saw the watchman's swinging light at the end of the pier and concluded that the scientists were signaling German boats off the coast. It took quite a bit of town and gown diplomacy to smooth relations between the colony and the village.

Things improved greatly by the time the second director, Thomas Wayland Vaughan arrived in 1923. Mrs. Vaughan gave teas and required formal dress, which was quite an innovation in the colony. Dr. Vaughan planted extensive gardens that eventually reduced the summer dust. Roads became the subject of terrible disputes between local real estate interests and the residents, but at least they were paved. Miss Tillie Genter, the director's secretary, took over the colony books and resolved community disputes with unimpeachable accounting. A tennis court was built and became the focus of social activities; there were summer baseball games on the lawn. Hedges increased residential privacy. Electricity and phone service was extended to the cottages during the Vaughan years. Some graduate students started an evening poker game in the library and used the overdue fine money as chips. Cottage residents, formerly concerned about isolation, began to complain of traffic and environmental degradation as the once empty fields of La Jolla were subdivided and paved. The scientists at the Institution convened a conservation society and wrote letters to the press and circulated petitions and earned the everlasting enmity of city boosters, some of whom confused the terms "conservationist" and "communist."

The politics of the community were interesting, but like religion was rarely openly discussed. The Ritters and many others of the founding generation were progressive republicans, in favor of temperance and women's suffrage, against ignorance and the saloons. This shifted significantly during the Depression. Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a popular though not universal beloved candidate, and one or two people distributed campaign literature for Upton Sinclair as candidate for Governor with his End Poverty in California (EPIC) program. The community was lukewarm on politics, but a hotbed of science. One cause that excited the residents was evolution. While ethical philosophies varied on campus, the community was appalled by the Scopes Trial and universally in favor of teaching Darwin in schools. The

scientists and their families were also in favor of animal experimentation, or perhaps it is more accurate to say against the anti-vivisectionists. They were supportive of inoculation and other public health initiatives. Dr. Mary Ritter visited the schools and military bases before the First World War lecturing on Social Hygiene, in other words speaking publicly on sex education. Dr. Francis Sumner took that a step further by participating in the Sixth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference of 1925. The Sumner Club was established just after Dr. Sumner's death to enhance discussions of scientific subjects with a town and gown membership.

The redoubtable Mom Sumner was still resident on campus to greet a new generation of brides who arrived just in time for the Depression. One of these was Ellen Revelle, who settled with her husband Roger Revelle in Cottage No. 24. Ellen recalled dancing with a La Jolla anesthesiologist who almost missed a step when he learned that she lived at the Institution. The staff was asked to take voluntary reductions in salary, building maintenance funds were severely cut, and job cuts threatened. But for the unwavering support of E.W. Scripps' heir, Robert Paine Scripps and his wife, the Institution might have foundered.

In 1936 Harald Sverdrup, a distinguished Norwegian arctic scientist and oceanographer, became director. His return to Norway was delayed by the war. The staff expanded with WPA workers and war refugees including a Polish meteorologist, an Austrian oceanographer, and several Chinese marine biologists. The unsettled times were felt in the cottages, with an increase in short term rentals and family quarrels. As the war approached, Coast Guard and later Army families rented cottages, and some friction resulted. The college educated faculty wives did not mix well with the less educated military brides. Petitions circulated about the poor condition of the cottages. A 90 mm coast artillery gun and searchlight were installed overlooking the beach, which was now patrolled by soldiers with guard dogs.

The war actually improved morale. Civil Defense classes were organized and air raid wardens were appointed. Once again a Red Cross chapter was established, and dances were held at the Community House and reciprocated at Camp Callan. Mom Sumner was chastened by the commandant of the camp for feeding sentries on duty. Dean ZoBell and others of the children corrupted the guard dogs with affection. A lot of the faculty wives suddenly became military wives as their husbands went on active service, and the sons of the older faculty enlisted. Young officers suddenly appeared for classes on military oceanography and meteorology. And a whole new group of people, engineers and their families, arrived from Berkeley to confer on beach landings. Mary Carol Isaacs first visited Scripps during this period. A mysterious group that Mom Sumner called the "atom bomb people" showed up for conferences with Director Sverdrup. During the war, many wives found themselves alone with children in cottages now darkened and with food and transport limited by rationing.

Once again, the wives organized. Beach picnics now featured grunion and abalone caught and cooked on the beach. The wood steamers in the Machine Shop were used off hours to steam potatoes for potato salad, which was served in airplane bubbles, the canopy bubbles off bombers constructed at Convair, at beach picnics during the war. The picnics included University of California Division of War Research (UCDWR) personnel as well as Scripps staff and the military residents and visitors to campus. One of the UCDWR employees was Sam Hinton, who brought his guitar to the beach picnics and started a tradition of folk singing at Scripps. With the young men gone, the older scientists taught their daughters to assist them in the laboratory. Faculty wives did indeed roll bandages, knit socks and sew for sailors and soldiers. Some studied nursing. Some got jobs and security clearances, once the university lifted the nepotism rules that prevented married spouses from working in the same department.

During the war there were housing shortages and the cottages were completely filled. It was so hard to find any place to live that some Scripps employees and students camped semi permanently in trailers and other temporary shelters on the site that is now the Birch Aquarium. The University tried without success to eliminate what they saw as a public health and public relations nuisance.

In 1946 a group of young wives organized as “Old Wives” to meet socially monthly, and in 1952 this group became the nucleus for Oceanids, an organization of Scripps women formed to foster social affairs and provide a means for new students and personnel to meet one another. When UCSD was founded, membership was extended to all university women. Oceanids fostered interest groups who supported theater and literature, collected furniture for graduate students, and met for foreign language conversation. Wives organized nature walks, camping trips, gardening clubs. One group of women wanted more. This group included Mary Carol Isaacs, Helen Raitt and Klari Eckart. Klari, wife of physicist and Scripps Director Carl Eckart, went to Washington to request funding from President Eisenhower’s new People to People program which supported personal contacts across borders in the interest of world peace. The grant led to cultural exchanges of scholars with Mexico and fostered a relationship between Scripps and the young marine biological stations of Baja California.

Mary Carol Isaacs was the wife of John Isaacs, who headed two groups at Scripps, the Institute for Marine Research (IMR) and the Marine Life Research Group (MLR). Mary Carol knew every member of her husband’s staff, and their spouses, and their children. Throughout her life, if you wanted to find someone from these groups, you called Mary Carol, not campus personnel.

After the war, La Jolla grew out to the campus. Roger Revelle encouraged the faculty to buy houses and become an integrated part of the San Diego community. Some did, but La Jolla real estate was prohibitively expensive for many, and so a movement began to purchase the land for

Scripps Estates Associates (SEA) a subdivision just for university families. That plan prospered, and the university decided to close the resident cottages in 1959. The last resident moved out of the cottages reluctantly in 1964.

The dispersal of the university community was another challenge addressed by the faculty wives, who turned their attention to cementing social ties with entertainment. Mary Carol Isaacs organized beach picnics for 70 in an afternoon, and oversaw the catering of scientific meetings, like the Rancho Santa Fe Symposium on Oceanographic Instrumentation in 1952. Edith Nierenberg saw the close of his era in 1965 when her husband William became director of Scripps. She was expected to serve dinner to legions of visiting scientists and tried to save the university money by using steaks from the meat locker of the research fleet. This thrifty move was met with horror by the university auditors, and campus catering replaced home cooking at Scripps.

The university community is now more diverse and more dispersed, but its interests in music, theater, conservation, science advocacy and community action persist. All have their roots in the old biological colony and a community created and nurtured by the faculty wives.