

Time Capsule: The Phoenix Writers Club in the 1930s

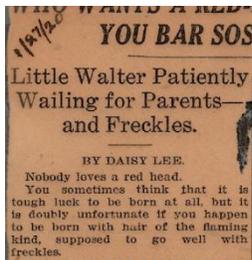
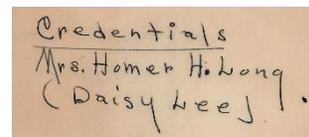
The 'Roaring Twenties' came to a shuddering end in October of '29, when a run on the markets sent investments tumbling, businesses shuttered and put millions out of work. A year later, the Great Plains of the US withered. Silted winds blew across the country, compounded by droughts in '34 and again in '36 causing economic havoc and delivering dust as far away as Canada and Boston. Enter the 'Dirty Thirties', a time of widespread poverty, bread lines, global turmoil. Yet a time that showed the resilience of the human spirit. It produced the art deco movement, saw the dawn of film and radio's golden ages. It gave us the jet engine, the radio telescope, sliced bread, and the parking meter. It was a time of rebellion, resilience, and enduring elegance, characterized by jazz, flappers, and speakeasies.



Member Idah Meacham Strobbridge 1855-1932, author of "In Miner's Mirage-Land" (1904), "The Loom of the Desert" (1907), and "The Land of Purple Shadows" (1909)

A few faded clippings and the starchy language of the society pages paint a romantic picture of a simpler, more respectful time and among the 65,000 people that made up the city in 1930, the determined group of women authors, poets, and journalists comprising the **Phoenix Writers Club** entered their fifth season.

The Club required aspiring members to submit examples of their published works. Daisy Lee's entries (Mrs. Homer H. Long - as women were commonly known by their husband's name) consisted of an 1/8th page article on wage tensions in the copper industry, a clipping with her name footnoted as one of forty-three correspondents of an all-male Labor Editorial Board and, an



article from 1920 entitled "Little Walter Patiently Wailing for Parents – and Freckles" which sought to foster the adoption of the red-headed boy described as age "four or five." Her opening line, a gem of reverse psychology - "Nobody loves a red head." Daisy went on to become an active member of the club and elected club president in 1952.

Club agendas featured teachers, musicians, the city librarian, nationally renowned authors, and noted poets. Contests provided incentive and motivation to hone their skills with contest judges to include national magazine editors, authors, and publishers as far away as New York. The club organized one-act play writings and other creative contests in collaboration with the Phoenix Union High School. These annual contests engaged students to write short stories, poems, and other works. Prizes included publishing opportunities and future Club membership.

Writers Hold Competitions

Discussion of writing technique, exchange of trade tips and "short-cuts to success" as well as constructive criticism of members' manuscripts make the meetings of the Phoenix Writers Club invaluable to the serious writer and afford a means of social contact between persons of similar tastes. Annual short story and poetry contests in which manuscripts are judged by nationally known critics attract a great deal of interest from the members and add incentive to produce the highest quality work possible. Monthly competitions, with judges being chosen from among the club members, are an innovation in club activities this year. A department for criticism and judging of manuscripts for juveniles—a field of writing in which demand is increasing and prices are rising—also was formed at the first fall executive board meeting.

In February 1930, a country club luncheon celebrated the publishing of Anne Ellis' memoir, "The Life of an Ordinary Woman" which explored life among western mining camps with humor and heartbreak. Ellis was the mother of future club president, Neita Carey. In excerpt from her work, contemplating suicide following the death of her little girl, Ellis writes,

"I often think today I will end it, and go so far as to lift the gun (very carefully, as I am afraid of guns and the darned thing might go off) and stand in front of the mirror seeing just how to place it." Fear of the gun, a thought of how unattractive a messy bullet hole would look at the funeral-- I wonder if those have not often deterred other women from suicide? Trifles do determine destinies."

February 1933, Versecraft lauded club member Frances Davis Adams (newly Mrs. W. P. Moore) with the annual Sidney Lanier poetry prize. At that time, Adams had more than 100 poems



published in 25 magazines across the country. May 1933 offered a chicken dinner at 6:30 followed by talks given by three of the membership. On October 2, Margaret Wheeler Ross gave a report on a poetry convention held in Denver. The ASU library archives hold the Margaret Wheeler Ross papers, a collection in four boxes spanning six decades that can be viewed by appointment and you can still find some of her work at poetryexplorer.com.

In November that year, Prof. J. W. Laird, dean at Phoenix Junior College presented "The romance of Arizona mines." Powerhouse story judges for the contest that year included Miss Alice Booth,

associate editor of Good Housekeeping, and Miss Mabel Search, associate editor of McCalls Magazine.

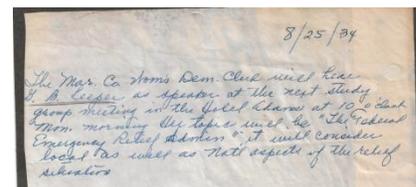


Neil Cook Speaks At Writers Meet

Neil E. Cook was guest speaker at the first fall meeting of the Phoenix Writers Club Monday evening in the card room of Hotel Adams. Mr. Cook discussed informally the writing of short stories, recommending the "X-ray method" in which the entire story is seen through the eyes of a single character. He also related some of his recent personal experiences in writing and publishing.

The club took advantage of the many authors and lecturers traveling to Arizona during winter months. In 1936, the club heard from author Stuart Engstrand, who said, *"to write honestly and sincerely, one must be of the people, living their lives, sympathizing with their griefs, sharing their joys."*

1938 saw international writer, conductor and lecturer Manoah Leide-Tedesco address the club. The writing contest that year went to Maude Longwell for her short, "Tears Spot Taffeta," judged and praised by Ward Thomas, a famous New York critic. In October, local radio announcer James Creasman gave a talk on prepping radio scripts for commercial use (Now we'd call that a podcast). That December hosted Newberry Award winner Carol Ryrice of Minneapolis and Mrs. Fred L. Vandever, former president of the Michigan Women's Press Association and Detroit Women's Writers Club.



This hand-written note, likely from former club president Gertrude Leeper to the AZ Republic's society pages highlights her as speaker at the Women's Democratic Club

Club organization is little changed since its inception with president, vice president, secretary, and treasurers elected from, and by the members. The Club's first president Gertrude Bryan Leeper, was then woman's editor the Phoenix Gazette and one of the Club's founders. Leeper was also one of six women elected to the Arizona state legislature (Maricopa District 7). These women were so successful in their duties, fears rose that they would "take over the state." Leeper is quoted as saying, *"women were not trying to take men's places. They are merely trying to find places of their own."*

Mrs. Robert Eton succeeded Leeper, followed by Odessa Davenport, who served two terms. Mrs. Jay, Hyde, Mrs. Ellis Gentry Fisher, Mrs. E. J. Middleton and Miss Ida McDaniel took successive turns at the helm. Neita Carey followed in 1937. Two months earlier, Carey took first place in the club's poetry contest for her poem, "Homesick." Zula Stevens finished out the decade.



Neita Carey



PWC President Mrs. Ellis Gentry Fisher, August 7, 1932

At the last club meeting in 1939, three songs by contralto Ms. Bess Barkley preceded Dr. Francis Neilson discussing the "European situation in relation to America." The Nazi invasion of Poland took place a scant three months earlier. The world began to tremble as the drums of war thumped across eastern Europe.

Throughout the 1930s, the women of the Phoenix Writers Club showed their dedication to writing, to the community, and to each other, with as much camaraderie as craft occurring at each event. They held a deep conviction in serving the needs of its membership. An excerpt from a 1937 article provided an apt and timeless description of the club; *"...banded together for the purpose of sharing ideas and experiences with regard to authorship..."* to *"...further the creative talent of its membership and youth of the state through contests, both in poetry and prose."*



PWC President Mrs. Jay Hyde September 25, 1932



Mrs. Jay Hyde again in 1935 from an article on how notable local women spent their leisure time





—Photo by Alexander
ELMA ROBERTS WILSON

The ‘Dirty Thirties’ came to an end. The next ten years - ‘the war years’, would see profound social and economic change, experience the birth of the post-war American dream, and the rise of the cold war. Through it all, these committed women writers strove to tap into the deepest elements of human experience; the raw, heartbreaking, entertaining, and beautiful moments brought to the world through their writing.

*Elma Roberts joined
Margaret Ross
Wheeler in a
published anthology
of women poets,
their work selected
from 30,000 entries
to join the 1,300 to
be published*