

# San Jose Mercury News (CA)

## FOR 100 YEARS, HOUSE HAS ANCHORED CLUB

CAMBRIAN SERVICE GROUP PLANS TO SHARE HISTORY OF AREA'S CIVIC, SOCIAL LIFE AT WEEKEND CELEBRATION May 12, 2010

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**Caption:** Photo:Jacqueline Ramseyer/Bay Area News Group.

Marion Cilker, 93, is the oldest living member of the **We and Our Neighbors** in San Jose. Cilker is a granddaughter of a founder.

Photo:Jacqueline Ramseyer/Bay Area News Group.

This ledger dating back to 1935 shows yearly dues of \$3.00 for members of **We and Our Neighbors**.

Photo: Courtesy of **We and Our Neighbors**.

**We and Our Neighbors** Society, 1896. Mrs. Anne Jane Cilker, top row, sixth from right, was current member.

When 13 of San Jose's pioneering women gathered over tea at a friend's house in 1892, their goal was to support their growing rural Unified School District.

That mission is still part of the **We and Our Neighbors** club, which recently held meetings to garner support for a \$96 parcel tax approved by voters this month in the now-suburban district.

But over the years, the club and its Craftsman bungalow clubhouse also served as a thread of social and civic life for many Cambrian area families. It's that history that the club's current 30 members hope to share with the public at an openhouse Saturday to celebrate the 100th birthday of the clubhouse and the 118th year of the club.

"I remember in the 1950s every November and every June, **we** would have a big potluck family dinner with grandparents and parents and kids," said Charlotte Taylor, who commutes from her Oakland home for the meetings and is the great-granddaughter of a founding member.

Many people who drive by the clubhouse at the intersection of Los Gatos-Almaden Road and Union Avenue are unaware of the origins of the building, which is a San Jose historic landmark and on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places.

"It's a well-kept secret," said June Gwartney, a Los Gatos resident and club member for almost a decade.

The **We and Our Neighbors** women's club started in June 1892 with that first tea hosted by Anne Jane Cilker. Initially, members met at each other's homes to support the district and work for social causes.

They had a magazine lending library to keep up with current events and fashions, then sent the magazines to hospitals. In 1894 they collected flowers for the Mid-Winter Exposition of the Board of Trade in San Francisco. During the Spanish-American War, they sent books to troops in the Philippines and collected eggs, dried fruit, bandages and reading material for veterans in hospitals.

After the 1906 earthquake, they sent two wagonloads of blankets and clothing to victims. Not long after that, member Sophia LaMontagne sold the land on Union Avenue to the group for "one

gold dollar" so they could build a clubhouse, and a Mrs. C. Schofield donated \$2,650 for construction.

Having a clubhouse opened the way for community uses that continue today.

"As a very small child my mother took us all to all the affairs. Then, as soon as **we** could, **we** had to perform," said Marion Cilker, 92, of Los Gatos and granddaughter Anne Jane Cilker. "There is a nice stage there, and the grandchildren had to recite poetry or something to add to the program. If somebody played the piano, **we'd** all sing a community song."

The upright McPhail piano manufactured in Boston in the 1920s that Cilker remembers remains in use.

During the 1950s, the clubhouse was a branch of the San Jose Library. Club President Carolyn Newt of Los Gatos says she would sit on the porch with whichever book she had checked out while her mother, Beatrice Mead, was inside.

"When I was growing up, all the housing tracts were being developed, and then they built the Cambrian Library," Newt said. "I'm 60, and I went to a new school every year until I got into the fourth grade. That whole side of town was just booming in terms of housing and kids."

Mead, who still lives in the Cambrian area, says she and her husband, Thompson, moved to San Jose from Illinois in 1948, though she didn't join the club until 1968. The clubhouse has since been the scene of many important family gatherings.

"**We** had my husband's retirement party there, our 50th wedding anniversary party, our granddaughter's engagement party and my husband's memorial service last July," Mead says. "It's been a nice warm spot in our family."

The clubhouse was recently renovated, but it retains its original character. Wood wainscoting lines the walls, ceilings are coved and the fireplace, which was converted to gas, still has its original stonework. The renovation was made possible when San Jose purchased part of the property frontage for \$118,000 to widen the street in front.

The pergola in front supporting wisteria vines and a wheelchair ramp in the rear were both Eagle Scout projects.

Members say the clubhouse is an important part of the history of the area.

"It's been a central part of the community for a long time, and our goal is to bring it back into that same role," Newt said. "**We**'ve been successful with the Union School District holding parcel tax meetings here and **we**'re holding some candidate forums."

Taylor agrees.

"The main thing is to share this building for its beauty and its history. It is a place where people can come and gather, and it has been for 100 years."

The **We** and **Our Neighbors** Clubhouse Centennial Open House is from 1 to 4 p.m. Saturday at 15480 Union Ave., at Los Gatos-Almaden Road. Visit [www.weandourneighbors.org](http://www.weandourneighbors.org).

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