

**Laura Lyon White** (Mrs. Lovell White)  
1839-1926

***"Wisdom is knowing what should be done.  
Virtue is doing it."***

Motto, *California Club*, San Francisco

In 1902, Laura Lyon White, a wealthy and influential woman whom some called "*the foremost club woman in San Francisco*," might well recall the motto of the California Club she had founded five years earlier. She knew what "*should*" be done, and she set about doing it.

Mrs. White, wife of the successful banker Lovell White who opened Mill Valley to development, "*dearly loved Mill Valley*" according to her biographers. After the real estate auction of 1890, Lovell White built the first dramatic hillside home, *The Arches*, at 95 Magee, as a summer home. The Whites year-round residence remained in San Francisco. The town of Mill Valley, incorporated in 1900, still suffered from unruly and unplanned growth. By 1902, a group of civic-minded women asked Mrs. White to help organize a club similar to others she had founded. And The Outdoor Art Club was born.



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From all accounts, White was a paragon of the 19<sup>th</sup> century woman of privilege, with a DNA of dynamic energy and brilliant intelligence. Born in 1839 in French Lick, Indiana, she was the eldest daughter of a wealthy owner of Lyon's Flour Mill. The family moved to Iowa when she was young. Her college years at Oberlin, Ohio, were spent in hard study and refining her ideas of woman's role in society. Oberlin was coeducational and integrated, and probably inspired White's philosophy that "*nature is divine...she sets no permanent or eternal stamp of superiority on any sex or race.*"

Later, White would refuse the presidency of the California Federation of Women's Clubs because of maneuvers to deny membership to "*colored women's clubs*". Membership was never restricted by politics, religion or race in any of the clubs White organized. The Outdoor Art Club asked only that members support the club's purpose of conservation, beautification and civic good works.

What made White an exceptional leader in any century was that her progressive ideas were firmly grounded in democratic principles. She had a rare charm that enabled her to argue the most basic questions without making an enemy of her opponent. Her most intransigent opponent in the struggle to protect the Big Trees of Calaveras from the sawmill was Robert Whiteside, a lumber baron and owner of the acreage at risk. He referred to her as "*Mrs. Lovely White*" for her "*charm and sense of fair play.*"

Her passionate determination to protect the great forests of California led her to the national stage. White led a delegation of women to Washington in 1904 bearing petitions with 1,500,000 signatures, presenting them to President Theodore Roosevelt. He in turn sent a special message to Congress “*at the request of an organization managed by women.*” The battle went on for years but the trees were saved, along with the South Park Grove in Tuolumne County.

White was an ardent suffragist and organized Political Equality Clubs in all California Assembly districts to help pass the women’s voting rights acts in 1896. It lost, but by 1911 the suffragists won and California accorded women the right to vote, years before the rest of the country.

She was elected president of several organizations during her life and helped to organize others. She was never president of The Outdoor Art Club, but remained a member. Her civic works in San Francisco are many, including services on the first playground commission.

Her reticence insured privacy in her life. She and Lovell did suffer the sad death of two small children in their early marriage. A robust son, Ralston was born in 1877 and he followed in banker father’s footsteps. With architect Willis Polk, he built the magnificent Garden of Allah on a hill overlooking the Blithedale Canyon. Mrs. White died of a cerebral hemorrhage in January 1916. She was mourned by a legion of friends on both coasts. She left a legacy of dedication to preserving a natural environment and serving the best interests of community life.

Written by Katharine Mills  
Excerpted from the OAC’s 2002 Centennial Publication

*In addition to the above, it is edifying to learn the following about Laura Lyon White from this excerpt of an article written by Joyce Kleiner in the 2015 Mill Valley Historical Society [Review](#).*

Credit for at least one of The Outdoor Art Club’s biggest achievements has been largely forgotten—the establishment of Muir Woods National Monument. The traditional story of Muir Woods tells of Laura’s husband, Lovell, asking William Kent to buy the pristine “*Redwood Canyon*” and save it from development. But wouldn’t Laura White have been the more likely one to appeal to Kent, her friend and fellow Progressive Republican on behalf of the forest (or at least insist that her husband do it)? The headline of a January 1908 article in the San Francisco Call about the transfer of the land to the federal government read, “*Mill Valley Women Win in Fight Against Water Corporation.*” The article went on to state:

*“William Kent, a wealthy Marin county resident, and The Outdoor Art Club of Mill Valley, have outwitted the Tamalpais water company in its efforts to condemn for water purposes a section of the picturesque redwood canyon...Associated with the league was Mrs. Lovell White (who) gave full cooperation to the movement.”*

We think it is important to recognize that while Laura Lyon White is rightly acknowledged as “*Our Founder*”, (her portrait hangs above the mantle in our Founder’s Room), in 1902 she found in Mill Valley a rich source of female talent and energy to organize. She helped give compelling voice to a critical mass of women who also possessed passionate desires to preserve their natural environment as well as improve their community’s civic life.

In the next installment of the OAC Serial, **The 35 Ladies Project**, you will read about a mother of five who struggled but also contributed.