

Ladies of the

LAKE

The Oakland Women's Rowing Club is still going strong more than 100 years later.

By Alejandra Saragoza

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID FRY AND MITCH TOBIAS



It's a crisp, early Wednesday morning, and a group of women—impeccably dressed in white pants and jackets, blue star-studded scarves, and white sailor hats—gather near the docks of Lake Merritt.

The ladies arrange themselves into rows of two while holding oars high in the air, not seeming to notice several curious onlookers. When a couple stop and ask for a picture, the women politely oblige, smiling for the camera. A few minutes later, a little boy comes up and asks, “I don’t mean to be rude, but why are you dressed like that?”

They aren’t offended in the least. As members of the Oakland Women’s Rowing Club (OWRC)—the oldest continuous women’s rowing club in the country—they’ve gotten used to these types of reactions over the years, and they take pride in sharing their story. “Things like that happen all the time,” says member Carolyn Bruck. “But I guess we are quite a sight!”

If you catch a glimpse of these women—affectionately known as the “Ladies of the Lake”—gliding across Lake Merritt in their striking white-and-blue boats, you’d agree. They don’t look like a typical group of rowers. The women range in age from 55 to 95, and many of them

are grandmothers and retirees. But when they’re out on the lake, they look like professionals, moving smoothly across the water and rowing in perfect unison.

Lake Chalet co-owner Lara Truppelli recalls the first time she saw the OWRC: “When we were first developing the restaurant, we would see them rowing in their boats, and it was majestic to see them out there on the water. They looked like a professional crew and were always in sync. Little did we know, the boats were full of older ladies.”

Beatrice Van Wetter, an 86-year-old Castro Valley resident, has been a member for 19 years and says she never ceases to amaze people when she tells them she’s part of a rowing club. “People are always very surprised to hear that I row,” she says, laughing. “But I plan to do it for as long as I’m physically able.”

The members may not be young in terms of years, but they match the vigor and discipline of the college-aged women who founded the OWRC in February 1916. The



OPPOSITE: Oakland Women’s Rowing Club member Rosalind Meisel on the dock at Lake Merritt. **ABOVE:** Former club members line up for inspection before boarding the boats.

THIS PAGE: COURTESY OF THE OAKLAND WOMEN’S ROWING CLUB. OPPOSITE PAGE: MITCH TOBIAS



1

club was founded by a group of local volleyball players who wanted to take up another athletic activity, and they enjoyed it so much that they began rowing on Lake Merritt every Wednesday morning. The average age of the members changed gradually over time—especially during and after World War II, when more women started working—and now the club is comprised mostly of retirees.

But each generation has carefully preserved the OWRC’s long-held traditions. Members still row every Wednesday morning (weather permitting) with big wooden oars, about six to 10 women in a boat. They are always in uniform according to the season: white jackets in summer and fall, and warmer orange jackets in winter and spring. They also wear neck scarves featuring appliquéd red and gold stars that represent how long each woman has been a member. Red stars signify one year while gold ones signify five years.

Though the Ladies of the Lake certainly love tradition, they’ve made some changes over the last 101 years. They have traded long, heavy skirts and heeled shoes for pants and sneakers, and they have revamped their boats. The old wooden boats have been replaced with fiberglass models, although one wooden vessel remains.

“Wooden boats weigh about 2,000 pounds, but fiberglass boats are half that weight, so they’re faster and easier to row,” says Bruck, who served as OWRC president from 2009 to 2010, when the club purchased its first fiberglass boat. “Wooden boats are also harder and more expensive to take care of.”

Bruck, a Piedmont resident, joined the club 11 years ago after retiring from teaching elementary school. “I read an article about the club in the newspaper, and being a

Lady of the Lake sounded like a lot of fun, so I applied,” says Bruck. She had to wait three years before she could become a member, but she says it was well worth the wait. “It’s so nice to belong to a club of older ladies who love being in the outdoors and love a challenge. And I’ve made some wonderful, long-lasting friendships.”

Women want to join the OWRC for a variety of reasons, including exercise, friendship, or recreation. But spots are limited, so women typically have to wait two to five years. Once places open up, new members are accepted in spring and go through training before rowing with the veterans, so no previous experience is required. In fact, many of the women had never rowed before joining the club, including Bruck and Van Wetter.

There are currently around 70 members in the OWRC, which has become an Oakland icon. There’s even a beer in honor of the group. “At Lake Chalet, we like to associate our beers with Lake Merritt and other local landmarks or symbols, so we came up with the Lady of the Lake honey blonde ale,” says Truppelli. “We were really inspired by what we learned about the group. We’re thrilled that we’ve been able to celebrate the timeless vitality and beauty of these ladies in this small way.” ■

1. Members of the Oakland Women’s Rowing Club row across Lake Merritt. 2. Joan Augustine. 3. Former members gather on a social outing. 4. Ellen Miller. 5. Mary Dial. 6. Former members row in one of the club’s first whaleboats: a World War I captain’s gig, which was donated to the Oakland Parks and Recreation Department for the OWRC to use. 7. Twenty-six of the original OWRC members, 1916. 8. Susan Durein.



THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: DAVID FRY; MITCH TOBOAS. OPPOSITE PAGE: DAVID FRY (2, 4, 5, 8); COURTESY OF THE OAKLAND WOMEN’S ROWING CLUB (3, 6, 7)



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