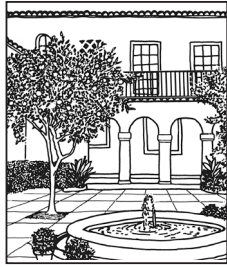


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Contents

The Ebell of Los Angeles

Libby Simon 3

The Glamorous Gardens of Tommy Tomson: Part Two

Steven Keylon 8

CGLHS 2015 Annual Report 18

Front Cover: *The courtyard of the Ebell of Los Angeles.* Photo by Kelly
Comras, November 2015.

Above: *View of the interior courtyard of the Ebell of Los Angeles, The Mott
Studios, 1931.* Photo courtesy of the Ebell of Los Angeles.

Right: *The interior courtyard of the Ebell of Los Angeles, 1933.*

*All photos in Libby Simon's article are courtesy of the Ebell of Los Angeles
photo archives.*

The Ebell of Los Angeles

Libby Simon



In the mid-1920s, the decision to relocate the Ebell Club to
Wilshire Boulevard, which is considerably west of downtown Los
Angeles, was a shrewd move on the part of a group of genteel ladies.

Named for Adrian Ebell, a German professor who traveled around
California forming study groups of women, the Ebell as an institu-
tion was intended to be a substitute for the university education
that most women were largely denied. The Los Angeles club was
one of the largest members of the General Federation of Women's
Clubs, founded in 1890 during the Progressive Movement.¹ In its
heyday in the 1920s, the club had 2,500 members, rivaled only by
the Friday Morning Club, an earlier women's club in downtown
Los Angeles. Offering talks and classes ranging from art and lit-
erature to parliamentary law and social science, the club attracted
the wives of the city's elite.²

When the Ebell Club was originally established in 1894, down-
town Los Angeles was the business and social center of the city.
The first Ebell clubhouse was on South Figueroa in the tony West
Adams neighborhood, a convenient location for members who
lived southwest of downtown. As the club grew, members began to

consider plans for expansion on Figueroa, but reconsidered when
Los Angeles began a development of downtown farther west.
Instead, they purchased a lot on Wilshire just east of Vermont at
Shatto Place, within easy walking distance of five streetcar lines

The growth of Los Angeles exploded in the 1920s, fueled by major
industries, including petroleum, manufacturing, aviation, and the
film industry. The city's population swelled from a half a million in
1920 to more than 1.2 million in 1929. In the rush to expand com-
mercial zoning on Wilshire, the value of the Ebell's Wilshire/Shatto
property soared, which prompted bankers to advise the club to
take the profit and secure a lot even farther west. Mrs. Grantland
Seaton Long (Pearl), who served as president of the club from 1922
to 1924, negotiated the purchase that would establish the Ebell's
new home at Wilshire between Lucerne and Fremont Place, safe
from the boulevard's commercial zoning that extended as far west
as Western.

The new Ebell became a cornerstone of gentility and culture for
the neighborhoods of Windsor Square, Hancock Park, and Fre-
mont Place. A committee was organized to choose an architect,



and Henry Hewitt was commissioned to design the new building. Writing in the March 1925 newsletter of the *Allied Architects Association*, Hewitt described his architectural vision: “We are Mediterranean in climate, in vegetation and sunlight. This whole glorious sweep of coast from Malaga to Messina is ours to draw inspiration from.”³

The Mediterranean Revival-style building was a large cast-in-place, two-story concrete structure surrounding a courtyard. Inside were the famed Wilshire Ebell Theatre (a 1,270-seat auditorium renowned for its acoustics) with a rare 3/13 Barton pipe organ, the clubhouse with a large lounge, and dining rooms, and there were works of art throughout.

Hewitt’s dream and architectural vision were cut short when he died suddenly in January 1926 at the age of 51. The Ebell commission was then awarded to architect Sumner Hunt, whose wife was a club member (as was Hewitt’s). Mary Chapman Hunt also served on the committee that had originally selected the architect for the building.⁴ How much of Hewitt’s work made it into the final design of the Ebell Club complex is unknown, but Hunt’s work reflected a similar aesthetic, as evidenced in his design for the Southwest Museum and the Los Angeles headquarters building of the Automobile Club of Southern California.

The club membership insisted that a female landscape architect be hired, and Florence Yoch and Lucile Council were chosen to design the interior courtyard garden and the exterior landscaping.

Above: Exterior view of the Ebell of Los Angeles at the corner of Lucerne and Wilshire Boulevards, ca. 1930.

Born in 1890 in Southern California, Florence Yoch was the youngest of six daughters. Her father, Joseph Yoch, came from Berlin to the United States at the age of three. His father was a stonemason, contractor, and farmer who eventually made his fortune in coal mining. Joseph took over the mining business at the age of nineteen. After selling the business, he moved his family from Illinois to Santa Ana, California, in the late 1880s. Florence’s mother, Catherine Isch Yoch, was a teacher before she married and “active in political and social affairs.”⁵ The Yoch family helped establish Laguna Beach as a cultural resort, building the Laguna Hotel and a wharf.⁶ The Laguna Hotel hosted art exhibits and rented cottages to visiting artists and became a social gathering spot.⁷

Yoch spent most of her childhood outdoors and was inspired by the country settings of her family’s rides to their summer home in Laguna Beach. Owning an adjoining ranch in Santiago Canyon, her family was friendly with Polish actress Madame Helena Modjeska who lived in Modjeska Canyon in a house designed by Stanford White. Visits to her home, “Arden,” now a National Historic Landmark, exposed the young Florence to people in the arts and in horticulture. In fact, Theodore Payne, who later became well known as the premier native plant specialist, worked as a gardener at Arden from 1893 to 1896.

Yoch studied landscape architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and then enrolled at Cornell University in the College of Agriculture in 1912. She finished her education in 1915 at the University of Illinois with a bachelor of science in landscape gardening.⁸

In 1918, according to a *Los Angeles Times* article, Florence was chosen as the new temporary field secretary for the Women’s Land

Army of America in Southern California. The WLAA, modeled after the British Women’s Land Army, was established to employ women in agriculture. Working in farming, dairying, fruit picking, and canning, the mostly college-educated women helped in the war effort.⁹ That same year, Yoch started her own landscape firm, and Lucile Council joined it as an apprentice in 1921.

Born in Massachusetts, Council had studied at the Cambridge School of Domestic and Landscape Architecture.¹⁰ The two formed a partnership in 1925 and worked mainly in Pasadena, San Marino, Beverly Hills, and Montecito, “Florence Yoch was the principal designer, and Lucile Council was in charge of the office,” writes James Yoch in *Landscape Architecture: The American Dream*. Lucile was also the “plant organizer and finder.”¹¹

When Yoch and Council began work on the Ebell project, Yoch had already completed gardens at Rancho Los Alamitos in Long Beach, the Wilshire Country Club, Il Brolino in Montecito, and The Women’s Athletic Club in Los Angeles. Although the original Ebell landscape plans have never been found, the Los Angeles Ebell’s archives are a researcher’s dream. Besides having the original architectural plans of Hunt & Burns and receipts for every plant, every pottery piece, and every item purchased from nurseries and shops, the archives also contain all the service and labor invoices. The receipts show quantities, sizes of plants, unit prices, along with a breakdown of labor and construction costs.¹² Also found in the archives is the Yoch-Council contract, dated September 14, 1927, for a total of \$10,000 (equivalent to \$132,662 today).¹³

The Ebell Club was officially opened with a musicale tea hosted by the members in October 1927.¹⁴ The Wilshire Ebell Theatre opened in December of that year. The Ebell of Los Angeles site

was listed on the National Register of Historic Places on May 6, 1994. It was listed a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument and declared an Official American Treasure by the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1982.¹⁵

Exterior Landscape

At the Ebell, the Yoch-Council design is still in evidence. On either side of the rarely used main entrance at Wilshire Boulevard, two olive trees lead to an elaborate wrought-iron front door. Nurseryman W. H. Smither of Pasadena provided eight orchard-grown olive trees, which were planted around the Ebell exterior. Now ‘Iceberg’ roses join the olives and a lawn slopes down to the sidewalk.

Originally planted as shrubs, the pittosporum have grown into trees. Photos from the Ebell archives show eucalyptus and cypress planted along Lucerne. However, of the 10 eucalyptus and 11 Italian cypress on the original plant list, none remain, though the original olive trees still exist at the corners of the building as do the original olive trees that were planted on either side of the entrance to the famed Ebell Theatre.

Interior Courtyard

The interior courtyard is enclosed with clubrooms along two sides, and runs north and south, with the entrances along an open arcade and loggia arches. The courtyard is rectangular, with a central lawn area and concrete steps and paths on either side, as the property slopes down towards the south. An upper, open patio along the west side is furnished with outdoor tables and seating. A hexadecagon-shaped memorial fountain with a statue by artist Henry Lion was erected in 1930.



A large Cocos palm, moved from the old Ebell grounds at Figueroa Street in 1927, was removed along with other palms from the original Yoch-Council plantings in 2013. At the time of planting, the large old palm was fitted at the top with its own sprinkler sprayer. According to the records, Dr. Albert E. Chisholm installed the one sprinkler for a cost of \$16.45, which included \$10 in labor.

In the late 1920s, a flat of *Ajuga reptans* was \$2.00, and the olive trees were \$100 a piece. A crape myrtle purchased from W. H. Smitter of Pasadena by Yoch and Council for \$110.00 was placed in the northwest corner of the courtyard. A crape myrtle remains in this area today.

Roses such as ‘Irish Fire Flame Rose’ from Earl M. Wagner in Hollywood and ‘Belle of Portugal’ and ‘Silver Moon’ from the Jannoch Nurseries in Pasadena were placed in the side planters. The irises ‘Monspur’, ‘Princess Beatrice’, and ‘J.J. Dean’ were from Southern California Iris Gardens. Tulips were procured from the Holland Bulb & Nursery Company in San Francisco, including ‘Moonlight Girl’, ‘Orange King’, and ‘Blue Aimable’. Most of these plants no longer exist in the garden.

“A few years’ growth of vines and thickening shrubbery—potted plants and tubed trees on the terraces—gay awnings and summer

frocks—and one can picture this patio as a most enchanting spot, under the warm blue skies of sunny Southern California,” reflected a *Pacific Coast Architect* writer about the interior patio garden in 1927.¹⁶

In his book *California Gardens: Creating a New Eden*, David Streatfield writes that in the 1920s, Los Angeles, unlike the rest of the country, had few landscape contractors. Landscapers formed their own crews and used them for their entire careers. “One advantage of this system was that the members of these crews became thoroughly familiar with their employers’ preferences,” says Streatfield, and “that experience reduced the need for elaborate specifications and guaranteed a more reliable level of craftsmanship.”¹⁷ According to Art Seidenbaum, Los Angeles in the 1920s was growing so fast that “23 firms in the area [were] calling themselves landscape architects, 15 of them with nurseries and design staffs.” Some 90 nurseries served the area’s horticultural needs.¹⁸ At the time laborers worked for as little as 50 cents an hour for hauling dirt to as much as \$1.37 hourly for finished concrete work. Gasoline prices were 20 cents a gallon. On one of the “Labor Summaries,” laborers for a week in September of 1927 were 95 percent Hispanic.

Yoch and Council continued to landscape public gardens in the region, such as Occidental College in Eagle Rock and the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena, as well as residences for film industry luminaries George Cukor, Jack Warner, and David O. Selznick. These movie industry connections led to Yoch’s designing the movie sets for “Gone With The Wind,” “The Good Earth,” and “How Green Was My Valley.”

Yoch and Council remained partners in their business and personal lives until Lucile’s death in 1964. Florence continued to work until her death at 81 in Carmel on January 31, 1972. In her 53-year career, she completed over 250 projects, all the while developing an

elegant, yet casual Southern California style. From their extensive travels through Europe, Yoch and Council combined the classic Spanish and Italian style of garden design with the natural landscape of Southern California. These women became an important link, a transition from the traditional and formal to the 1960s’ modern style and the desire for outdoor living.

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The author would like to thank Libby Motika for her writing and research on women’s clubs in Los Angeles and the early architectural history of the Ebell Club.

Libby Simon, formerly an animation artist and currently a CGLHS board member, is a graduate of UCLA Extension’s Landscape Architecture program. Now designing residential gardens, she has also been involved in historic preservation, having completed Historic American Landscape Surveys of the San Gabriel Mission, the Los Angeles Ebell garden by Florence Yoch and Lucile Council, and the Old Zoo at Griffith Park.

Above (left to right): *The hexadecagon-shaped memorial fountain in the Ebell Club’s interior courtyard with a statue by artist Henry Lion, erected in 1930. Haskell Studios Photography, ca. 1930.*

Patio arcade in front of the Ebell Club, along Lucerne Boulevard, ca. 1930.

Interior courtyard garden from the upper patio, ca. 1930.