

Women's Travel Club 1935-1990¹

The Women's Travel Club was founded in an era of "Whither thou goest, I will go." In our case "thou" were husbands, fathers, and uncles who were traveling to far corners of the world. Many of these gentlemen were personal friends and colleagues, and they decided it would be mutually advantageous and enjoyable to share their travel experiences. In an age of thriving clubmanship, they founded the Harvard Travellers Club. The year was 1902.

But "thou" didn't travel alone. When the Harvard Travellers met and shared their tales of far-off peoples and places, it may or may not have occurred to them to note that their wives and daughters often had accompanied them. But it did occur to the ladies. They, too, had seen the diversity of the world's peoples, observed the complexity of human institutions, and viewed the monuments to gods and demons that decorate foreign landscapes. They, too, had crossed oceans, climbed mountains, and delighted in the variety of flora and fauna that inhabit the globe. If meetings of the Harvard Travellers were as enlightening as they were purported to be, why shouldn't the ladies get together and share their experiences? Why not indeed!

In October 1934, Augusta Batchelder Hartt invited five friends to lunch at the Chilton Club. Nothing out of the ordinary was anticipated by Mrs. Hartt's guests. More than a half-century later this story is being told because, at that assuredly gracious occasion, Mrs. Hartt proposed the idea of forming a club composed of women who had made unusual travels. "No cruisers or casual tourists," she said. Her idea was enthusiastically received. In

¹ This was written for a program on the history of the club held in 1989 on the occasion of its 55th anniversary. I acknowledge indebtedness to Mrs. Jasper Whiting's 1958 history from which I have borrowed liberally.

addition to Mrs. Hartt, the so-called "Six Self-Starters" were Mrs. Larz Anderson, Mrs. Richard B. Hobart, Mrs. George A. Lyon, Mrs. William H. Schofield, and Mrs. Jasper Whiting. Four of the six were married to members of the Harvard Travellers Club. The first order of business for the Six Self-Starters was to enlarge the group. Within one month a list of Charter Members was compiled, and the first organizational meeting of the Travel Club for Women was held on November 8, 1934, at the home of Mrs. Anderson on Commonwealth Avenue. Mrs. Hartt presided as Temporary Chairman. The dues for active members were set at \$3 and the purpose of the club was declared to be "the promotion of intelligent travel and exploration by women." (In 1989 the word "promotion," thought to sound a bit too commercial, albeit unintentionally, was changed to the "sharing" of intelligent travel and exploration by women.)

The Charter Members were:

Miss Mary Ogden Abbott	Mrs. Earnest W. Hocking
Mrs. Larz Anderson	Mrs. George A. Lyon
Mrs. Myles P. Baker	Mrs. Charles MacVeagh
Mrs. Oric Bates	Mrs. Francis P. Magoun, Jr.
Mrs. William H. Claflin, Jr.	Mrs. Daniel de Menocal
Mrs. John G. Coolidge	Mrs. Frank Cabot Paine
Mrs. Carleton S. Coon (later Mrs. Stanley Salmen)	Mrs. William H. Schofield
Mrs. Albert M. Creighton	Mrs. George C. Shattuck
Mrs. Courtenay Crocker	Mrs. Joseph Lindon Smith
Mrs. Richard C. Curtis	Mrs. Henry Stimson
Mrs. Raymond Emerson	Mrs. Frederick M. Stone
Miss Ethel A. Forbes	Mrs. Richard P. Strong
Mrs. Horace U. Gade	Mrs. A. Leas Strong
Mrs. E. T. Gregory	Mrs. Rebecca Smith Taylor (later Mrs. F. B. B. Bird)
Mrs. Arthur H. Hartt	Mrs. Robert L.M. Underhill
Mrs. Richard B. Hobart	Mrs. Jasper Whiting

On November 27, 1934, a second meeting was held, again at the home of Mrs. Anderson, and the club's first officers were elected. Mrs. Hartt modestly declined the office of President, and Mrs. Shattuck was so named. Mrs. Hartt became the Vice-President. (The election of two Vice-Presidents was instituted in 1937.) Women's Travel Club became the official name, although colorful alternatives had been suggested, including Marco Polo Club and Lady Hester Stanhope Club.²

The first regular meeting of the Women's Travel Club was held on January 14, 1935, at the Boston headquarters of the Girl Scouts, 87 Beacon Street. (Mrs. Hartt's chief interest throughout her life was the Girl Scouts, and this undoubtedly accounts for the meeting being held there.) Twenty-one women had joined the new club, bringing the membership, with the Charter Members, to 53. The meeting began with the reading of a letter of congratulations and wishes for future success from Thomas D. Cabot, Secretary of the Harvard Travellers Club.

Mrs. Carleton S. Coon (later Mrs. Stanley Salmen) holds the distinction of being the first person, in a long and remarkable list of women and men, singly, in pairs, and on panels, to address members of the Women's Travel Club. She spoke on her "Travels in Southern Arabia."

In the early years the club often had speakers who were not members. Among the well known were Baroness Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen); Margaret Mead; H.R.H. Princess Ileana of Romania, the granddaughter of Queen Victoria; and Jane Goodall.

² The niece of Prime Minister William Pitt, and accomplished hostess of his illustrious household, Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope (1776-1839) left a comfortable life in England at age 34 and, after extensive traveling, settled among the Druses of Mount Lebanon. Her influence was said to be considerable, owing in part, no doubt, to her self-proclaimed powers of divination! She remained in Syria (now Lebanon) until her death.

In recent years we have been enlightened by the presentations of non-member scholarship recipients as well as members' spouses.

The second meeting also was held at the Girl Scout headquarters, followed by two at the Y.W.C.A. Most of the meetings for the next three years were held at the Club of Odd Volumes on Mt. Vernon Street, until that club moved across the street and increased the rent.

Priced out of the regular use of the Club of Odd Volumes, the ladies began to hold meetings at the Women's College Club and the Boston Architectural Club. But they were not happy with this itinerancy, and in 1938 decided to find permanent quarters. That decision is surely part of the reason the club exists today. A sense of camaraderie and intimacy began to develop that would cement lifelong friendships. For the next 17 years the Women's Travel Club represented a place as well as an idea. It's true that the club rooms changed – four times, in fact – but each location had its special attraction.

The first home of the club was the top (fourth) floor of 38 Fairfield Street. The rent was \$45 per month. A housewarming party was held on November 29, 1939. The minutes record that the members were delighted. The rooms were well furnished with gifts and loans from members and included sofas, tables, chairs, and a grand piano. Maps of the world covered the walls. They had a bathroom and a small kitchenette, where members could prepare tea or luncheon for friends. And there was a Russian restaurant on the first floor, where a full-course meal cost 85 cents. The ladies often had food sent up from the restaurant, and some of their small occasions, according to Mrs. Whiting, had an "almost Bohemian atmosphere, unusual in Boston!" Both Executive Committee and regular meetings were held there, and by renting to other groups the club treasury was enriched. Every member had a key to the rooms and could stop by anytime.

As pleasant as it was, the Fairfield address was short-lived. Before a year had passed the building was sold, and the club moved to a first-floor room at the rear of 115 Commonwealth Avenue. Large meetings were held in a library at the front of the building. There was more concern about the war in Europe than about the attractiveness of the club's accommodation, however, and the latter was deemed adequate. A Red Cross Sewing Unit was started, and for a year members came weekly to make layettes. Many club members were away during the war years, and those in Boston became increasingly active in a variety of war efforts. They invested \$700 in U.S. War Bonds, and kept a file of their war activities. The club was smaller than before, but the commitment to continue was strong.

[The only other time the survival of humanity became a subject of collective club concern was in 1982. Although opinions differed about the strategy, the Executive Committee agreed that members should be encouraged to join the growing number of people opposed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons. A letter was sent to all the members with a list of books on the subject and the names of organizations that were actively working to halt the nuclear arms race. In order to relate the subject to the purposes of the club, the letter reminded readers that there would be no world to travel in if nuclear weapons were unleashed.]

In 1941, again because of an increase in rent, 133 Commonwealth Avenue became the club's third home. The building was controlled by the federal government and housed a non-profit educational radio station. Although these were the most attractive rooms the club ever had, with a fireplace and formal courtyard, there were drawbacks. For security reasons, members had to identify themselves every time they entered the building, and station personnel often interrupted their meetings. But the foreign language programs were of interest, and members sometimes assisted the broadcasters. The governmental prohibition on serving alcohol was ignored – the ladies regularly served sherry! The club remained at this address for the next 10 years.

75 Newbury Street was the last and final home of the club. A large room was shared with the Pan American Society, though some luncheons and dinners were held elsewhere. (Mrs. Shattuck founded the Pan American Society in 1940 for Latin American students who no longer could attend schools in Europe because of the war and were coming to universities in Boston in increasing numbers.) The beginning of the end was at hand, however, and the results of a questionnaire sent to the membership on the subject of a permanent location brought further deliberations on the matter to a close. It had become too costly to rent rooms, sharing with the Pan American Society was not ideal, and lives were just too busy to continue to maintain permanent quarters. Members met at the Pan American Society for two years, but 1954 marked the end of an era for the Women's Travel Club. In the spirit of a good traveler, the club went on the road and has been there ever since.

Though members missed the unique quality that having permanent quarters provided (in 1968 the minutes record discussion of the possibility of again finding club rooms), meeting places in the past 35 years often have had their own special rewards. Many gracious members have offered their lovely homes to the club for meetings. Collections of art and antiques, beautiful gardens, and magnificent ocean views have been the setting of monthly gatherings. We also have met in museums, at private clubs, in libraries, hotels, and aboard ship in the Boston Harbor.

That the women in charge of hospitality have been resourceful and imaginative is unquestioned. But occasionally there were minor difficulties. The club had met at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1948, 1953, and 1958, but in 1961 a request to come again was refused for security reasons!

Chinese national art treasures were on display, though why the Women's Travel Club was deemed a risk was not noted. Three years earlier no such problem had arisen when members had luncheon and viewed Korea's national treasures. The club didn't meet at the M.F.A. again until 1990, when a Monet exhibition

occasioned a return to Huntington Avenue. In the early 1970s the Internal Revenue Service was another source of concern for the Hospitality Committee. Meetings frequently had been held at the Chilton Club, but according to I.R.S. regulations, only members of that club could be hostesses. It seemed unfair and unreasonable to expect the Chilton Club members in our group to be responsible for all the bills. The solution arrived at was to stay away from the Chilton Club for about a year and hope that the revenueurs would forget about us! They didn't.

Boston was a small city when the Travel Club was founded. It was a city without skyscrapers, with grid-locked traffic, and with impossible parking problems. For nearly 10 years all but one or two meetings a year were held in the evening. By the mid-1940s that began to change, and most of the meetings were luncheons or afternoon teas. Annual dinners and meetings with the Harvard Travellers Club were held in the evening, and since the 1950s, one other meeting per year has been so scheduled. It was noted in Executive Committee minutes in 1966 that daytime meetings precluded the attendance of one member, a college professor. In the 1980s, not surprisingly, as younger members increasingly reflected the changing role of women in American society, the subject was discussed again at meetings of the Executive Committee.

The only organization with which the Women's Travel Club has ever held joint meetings throughout its six decades is the Harvard Travellers Club. It will be remembered that many early (and current) Travel Club members and Harvard Travellers were married to each other. Initial ventures were, in part, family affairs, which may account for their cordiality and the fact that they took place at all. The clubs have met together on 12 occasions, the first in 1938. The clubs continued to be guests of each other until 1949. From the 1950s onward, however, with financial considerations the deciding factor, "joint meetings" rather than "guests of" became the operative words. We were flattered to be invited to the Travellers 500th meeting in the early 1970s, but declined when told

the cost would be \$10 per person. There had not been a combined gathering for 14 years when the clubs met together in 1976. Many of our members found the logistics, large size of the group, and the programs a problem. Mrs. Whiting, writing in 1958, had described our meetings with the Harvard Travellers Club as "milestones in the life of the Women's Travel Club," and one surely does not wish to give an impression to the contrary. When the Harvard Travellers decided to accept women as members a few years ago they showed exceedingly good judgment by including, among those first invited to join, members of the Women's Travel Club. Several others of our members have since joined, and so the relationship, one way or another, continues.

This essay would be far too lengthy if sufficient attention were given to the wonderful programs we have enjoyed over the years. And one would be remiss to include mention of some members' presentations while omitting others. Suffice it to say that we have shared with each other both views and visions of all the continents and oceans of the world. We have heard lectures about flying over the land, digging into it, climbing to its heights, and skiing down from same. Adventures on the globe's waterways have been described via every conceivable manner of navigation. We have been favored with a number of talented artists among our members who have rewarded us with displays and discussions of their own works. Experts on the world's flowers, birds, and mammals have shared their considerable knowledge on many occasions. And, finally, be they with royalty or peasant, statesman or scoundrel, we have been enriched by the stories of encounters that continuously expand our understanding of the human inhabitants with whom we share the planet Earth.

Martha Lamberg-Karlovsy
Melrose, 1990