

Women's Travel Club 1935-2010¹

In October 1934, when Augusta Batchelder Hartt invited five Boston women friends to discuss forming a women's travel club, the club that she and they had in mind was essentially a clone of the men-only Harvard Travellers Club,² where four of their husbands were members. They held to their plan. When they convened the first meeting of the Women's Travel Club in January 1935, the "objective" that they chose was word-for-word the Harvard Travellers Club's "objective" – "the promotion of intelligent travel and exploration." But they added two words – "by women." In most other ways, the Women's Travel Club, like the Harvard Travellers Club, rented rooms for its monthly meetings and listed its members just the way the Harvard Travellers Club and other men's clubs did – all men's names, save in this case for a preceding "Mrs." If a member wanted her own first name listed (in parentheses), she had to ask for it. Exceptions were spinsters.

The Women's Travel Club has come a long way since 1935, the same year that our oldest active member, Catherine N. Stratton, honeymooned in Europe, where she and her new husband, sitting on a dance terrace overlooking the Bosphorus, had a chance encounter with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. While the Harvard Travellers Club has begun every meeting since it was founded in 1902 with the proclamation "This is the Club's 000th meeting," actively solicits outside speakers, and continues to rent meeting space, the Women's Travel Club today does none of these things. Its speakers are its own members, it usually meets in members' homes, and in 1989 it even changed its "object" from "the promotion of intelligent travel and exploration by women" to "the *sharing* of intelligent travel and exploration by women."

When the Harvard Travellers Club began accepting women as members in the 1970s, it invited members of the Women's Travel Club to join. Although they did not join *en masse*, several did or have done so since, but no one has chosen one club over the other. Both organizations thrive and even hold joint meetings from time to time. But they have moved in distinctly different directions.

Our founding mothers set a high hurdle for membership: "Unusual traveling, really something worthwhile – no cruisers or casual tourists." Consequently, the travel records submitted by women who made the first cut are a good read. In 1915, Mrs. Gordon Allen had spent a month in Athens where her husband "was designing and superintending a school, hospital and country house for King Constantine and Queen Sophie." In 1923 and 1924, Miss Mary Ogden Abbott had "traveled along the Indus River with a shikar outfit ostensibly in search of ibex and markor, camping in remote nullaks, moving from place to place with a retinue of servants and coolies." In 1921, Mrs. Laurence Kennedy Marshall had carried her money in Austria, where inflation was rampant, "in a suitcase to have enough to pay one's bills." In 1934, Mrs. Bruce Hopper had gone "via Lake Baikal

¹ This history expands and extends the 1935-1990 "History of the Women's Travel Club" that Martha Lamberg-Karlovsky wrote 20 years ago. It would have been impossible to write without the involvement of Elinor Nichols, who joined the Club in 1970 and who has meticulously retained and maintained the Club's records for the 40 years since.

² The Harvard Travellers Club had no connection with Harvard. It derived its name from its first meeting in 1902 "in the assembly of the Harvard Union at Cambridge." Today the Club holds its monthly meetings at the Harvard Club on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston but still has no affiliation with the University.

and the Amur, Vladivostok, Seishin and Hsinking for the enthronement of Henry Pu Yi, as guest of the Japanese Government.” Years later, in a 1957 panel discussion of “The Good Old Days,” Miss Lucy Drew told of “An Audience with the Empress Dowager in 1902,” Mrs. George Handy described “An Ascent of Mt. Blackburn, Alaska, 1912,” Mrs. Jasper Whiting revisited “The Elhi Durbar in 1911,” and Miss Mary Abbott recounted her 1926 journey “Through the Desert from Bagdad to Damascus.”

From the beginning, the Women’s Travel Club has exploited its members’ rich travel experiences by asking them to give presentations about their travels, preferably with slides. Early speakers included Mrs. Eric Schroeder, who spoke about her “Travels in Persia” (1936), Mrs. John K. Fairbank on “Archeological Findings in Shantung Province” (1937), Mrs. G. C. Shattuck on “Poland” (1938), Mrs. E. H. Lattimore, at a joint meeting with the Harvard Travellers Club in 1939 (“150 present”) on “Peking to Chinese Turkistan and India,” and Mrs. I. A. Richards on “Over the Old Jade Road from Yunnanfu to Mandalay” (1940).

Travel resumed after World War II, cautiously at first, then with its old energy. Every presentation, usually eight a year, had good reason to hold the audience’s attention. Here is a random selection. In 1953, Miss Grace Boynton described “Fifteen Months in Communist China 1948-1950.” In 1963, Mrs. Rupert Emerson described an “Emotional Geography – Return to Russia after Thirty-Nine Years.” In 1977, Fay Dabney described “The Azores: Peaceful and Picturesque,” the Portuguese archipelago where three generations of Dabneys had served as American consuls. Mary Ashton, the fourth generation of her family born in Sri Lanka (Ceylon), has given several presentations on Borneo and other parts of Southeast Asia where she has spent much time with her husband Peter as he has progressed from Forest Botanist to the Sultan of Brunei to professor at Harvard and director of the Arnold Arboretum. For six years Pat Pratt made “Sybaritic” trips to Venice with her good friend, famous chef Julia Child; at a meeting in 1996, she shared a taste of these experiences with tiramisu that she had made from the recipe presented to their cooking class at the Cipriani Hotel by a woman who lived in the 14th century palazzo in which she was born. In 2003, Marian Cannon Schlesinger, a member since 1951 but a traveler since 1933 (Paris, China, Guatemala, the Dalmatian Coast) gave travel another dimension with memories from her local childhood, “Travel in Time: What Cambridge Was Like.”

It is always a challenge to match Elinor Nichols, the child of missionaries, whose narratives of growing up in the jungles of central India (when the story demands, she breaks out in Hindustani) and living for years in Saudi Arabia (her husband was associated with medical initiatives there) cannot be captured in a secretary’s minutes. Libby Ingalls, a member since 1976 but who has lived in California for the last 22 years, came close in March 2010 when she spoke with compelling PowerPoint photographs, humor, and passion about “Great Old Broads for Wilderness,” an organization primarily of older women (“younger women are Broads-in-training”) committed to protecting wilderness areas across the country.

The nature of travel has changed. In “the good old days,” individuals, couples, and families tended to mount their own Grand Tours and often lived overseas for extended periods of time. “My first trip, just after our marriage in 1940,” reported Mrs. Bradford Washburn, who joined the Club that same year and still comes to meetings from time to time, “took us to southeastern Alaska where we dog-teamed across the vast snowfields of

the Brady Glacier and eventually made a first ascent of 11,000 foot Mt. Bertha.”³ Today we are more apt to join organized tours with specific orientations. Indeed, several members – Fay Dabney, Gaby Whitehouse, Judi Wineland, Lauren Bruck Simon – have parlayed their childhood love of travel vacations into grownup travel vocations. They regularly arrange, organize, accompany, and lead tours to familiar and unfamiliar locations around the world. Nancy Kelly and her husband Jay Keyser accompany travel groups of MIT alumni. Zeren Earls, Westy Lovejoy, and Elizabeth Ross have led affinity groups to destinations around the world that they know well but that their followers would never have found on their own.

The style may have changed, but we are still experiencing “unusual traveling, really something worthwhile.” Kathryn Willmore joins expeditions of fellow scuba divers to explore some of the world’s most beautiful oceans. In November 2007, Gillian Kellogg reported an unforgettable “Off the Beaten Path in Outer Mongolia” that she took under the auspices of a travel company that specializes in “the magic of Mongolia.” In 1983, Paula Cronin trekked the Baltoro and Godwin-Austen Glaciers to the 17,000-foot base camp of K2 in the care of an organization that had years of experience with ice and altitude. Her experience was daunting, but perhaps not as daunting as it had been for Gail Bates. Gail, who joined the Club more than 50 years ago and now comes to meetings from her retirement home in Exeter, New Hampshire, made the same month-long trek to K2 in 1974 with her famous mountain-climbing husband but with much less high-tech equipment and clothing and much more on-the-spot management.

The Club has changed. We take seriously our “*sharing* of intelligent travel and exploration.” With few exceptions – in January 1998, Joan Nordell talked about travel books at the Boston Athenaeum with comments by Athenaeum curators; in October 2009, Mari Hook explained “The Puppet Tradition in Indonesia” with commentary from practitioners in Freeport, Maine – our speakers are usually ourselves.

Sometimes our programs enable several of us to share common experiences. Often in May we say where we plan to go during the summer and in September we say where we went. In April 1944, when the war had suspended all travel, six members put on “A Musical Trip around the World.” A year later, still homebound, talented members exhibited their arts and handicrafts. In May 2005, eight members with artistic talents exhibited their work at Habitat in Belmont. In 1948, members shared “Travel Treasures,” and in March 1956, four women described their experiences as “Travelling Wives.” The show-and-tell theme recurs over and over again, viz. “The Highs and Lows of Group Travel,” “Memorable People in Our Travels,” “Stories about Small Small Objects,” “My Worst-Ever Travel Fiasco,” and “Behind Treasured Textiles.” In November 1989, seven women remembered their special times together as members of the Club under the rubric “The Best Mirror is an Old Friend.”

One of the most memorable joint efforts took place on December 3, 2009, when the Club celebrated its 75th anniversary with a gala reception and dinner at the Wellesley College Club. Members and guests came in costumes from around the world and earlier times, and three members gave abbreviated show-and-tell presentations of their travel experiences – in the air, Anne Baddour, who flew a single-engine aeroplane across the Atlantic in a cockpit so cold her water bottle froze; on the sea, Amanda Hurd, who sailed

³ These and many other travel records are included in a spiral-bound paperback, “Women’s Travel Club 1934-1958.”

around the world with her husband on their 30-foot yacht; and on land, Paula Cronin, whose slides recreated some of the most terrifying moments of her 1983 Baltoro trek. Missing from the gala were Denise Bienfang, who had put in countless hours arranging it, Lee Harrison, and Christine Farrow-Noble. All three took advantage of a last-minute opportunity for their singing group to give concerts across Cuba. At our November 2002 meeting, Lee had described a similar trip to South Africa, Denise and Lee described one to Vietnam in November 2006, and Chris described one to Brazil in November 2008.

One of the most compelling proofs of our determination to share travel experiences originated at the Club's first meeting in 1935, when the new members determined that they would meet "not for social purposes" but "to provide help to other women travelers." Mrs. Hartt gave life to this phrase in 1962 when she left the Club \$2,000, "interest from which was to be added to the Travel Fund." Almost at once, Mrs. Carl E. Taylor received a grant to buy film "for a movie to be taken in Bhutan and India recording the life of village women." The next mention of the Travel Fund came at the annual meeting in May 1967, when someone noted that the Club had more than \$4,000 in the bank and asked, "What shall we do with our money?" The question triggered a conversation with Douglas Oliver, a professor of Anthropology at Harvard, who suggested "offering a grant to a woman scholar for field work." Further discussion led to the recommendation that "funds be made available from time to time to a woman for work in a field of particular interest to the Club." The Women's Travel Club Scholarship Program was born. Not surprisingly, the first grant, made the next year, went to Gloria Jean Edynak, a graduate student in anthropology at Harvard. She received \$1,100 to study migration hypotheses in the Karst region of Yugoslavia.

Minutes of a meeting in 1971 explain the Oliver connection: "A Travel Grant was named in memory of Sheila Mitchell Oliver, wife of Douglas Oliver, chair of the Department of Anthropology at Peabody Museum, Harvard. She was a member of the Club and had died [in 1964] after eight years with melanoma, leaving her husband and three adopted children 10, 9, and 8." But naming a grant in someone's memory was a short-lived tradition. One year later the members decided that, "as a general rule, the grant should not be given in memory of anyone, because, as Clarita Bright [a member of the U. S. Women's Ski Team to the 1936 Winter Olympics and of the Club from 1968 until she died in 2003] said, 'a member dies every year.'" The Club has reaffirmed this general rule several times in the years since.

Early records of Travel Grants are sketchy. When money ran low, grants were offered "from time to time." Today we make them biennially. We choose our Travel Scholars from a pool of women applicants, students and working women who perceive travel as critical for their professional advancement. We limit publicity about the Scholarship Program to the Boston area so that the Scholarship Committee can interview finalists personally. The list of the Travel Scholars' projects is at least as interesting to read as a list of the members' own travels.

For example, in 1983, Anne Hawley, today the director of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and arguably our best-known Scholar, traveled to Rome to study "Italian Industrial Design." Anne Hallward '87 taught literacy and nutrition in the Philippines. Melanie Bowen '93 lived and worked in Almaty, Kazakstan. Catherine Beckerleg '99 explored ancient archaeological sites in Malta and Israel. Amanda Dickson '01 observed the influence of light in the northern hemisphere on architecture from Iceland to Finland. Elizabeth Ogbu '03 visited potential urban architecture sites in South African slums.

René Covalucci '03 studied woodblock printing in China with a Master. Marilyn Pappas '07, a recognized fiber artist but there's no money in that, attended a gathering of fiber artists in Poland. Andrea Bien '07 lived and taught in a village in Ghana from which many of her 5th grade students in Worcester had come.

The Scholarship Program offers Travel Scholars the kinds of enriching travel experiences that we have had. The Program enriches our lives as well as theirs because when the Scholars come back from their travels they tell us what they did. Whenever they do, they bring with them a palpable sense of excitement, immediacy, and vitality about the experiences that the Club has made possible. Deborah Theodore '89 gave an account of her months traveling across Algeria that is as thought-provoking today as it was when she gave it more than 20 years ago. "She described her frustrations as a single young woman traveling alone in Algeria, the slow realization that she was warmly welcomed in the women's quarters but couldn't do anything outside the house without a male escort. The irritation of being constantly controlled, and then the realization that she was becoming docile and accepting and even happy to be so taken care of . . ." ⁴

The Women's Travel Club subsidizes its Travel Scholarships through donations and excesses of income from annual dues (\$60 in 2009-10, up from \$3 in 1935). Currently we award individual scholarships of \$2,500 to three deserving women every two years. With each cycle, we receive many wonderful applications from truly outstanding candidates. Members of the Travel Scholarship Committee who read all of the applications and interview all of the finalists report that meeting these promising and accomplished women is among the most satisfying experiences they have as members of the Club. ⁵

We have changed. Increasingly we are an eclectic mix of younger, working women who can find it difficult to attend meetings during the daytime and older members who can find it difficult to attend evening meetings, particularly in the winter. The Program Committee is diligent about scheduling meetings around the clock – some in the morning, some in the afternoon, some in the early evening (wine-and-cheese hour). One meeting not to be missed is the picnic lunch (bring your own) that sculptor Beverly Seamans has hosted many Septembers for the last 20 years at her home on Marblehead Harbor. Members enjoy turns around Bev's garden and workshops, al fresco and works-in-progress displays of her popular bronze sculptures of animals, birds, and children.

More than 50 years ago we abandoned costly rental spaces and opted instead to meet in each other's usually spacious homes. But now these locations, too, are becoming a problem as older members downsize to apartments and condominiums too small for a crowd, or retirement communities or second homes not near Boston. Public spaces at the Weston Public Library and Brookhaven at Lexington have become repeat destinations.

As of 2009-10, men's names have vanished altogether from our membership list. We list only women's names with the parentheses reserved for nicknames; men only show up when we bring them as guests. The lists themselves are longer because they include email addresses, which nearly everyone has. Meeting notices go out electronically, albeit on digitally printed recycled paper as well for the shrinking number of members who do not yet have email. This single change has resulted in tremendous savings in cost and time

⁴ Nancy Turner, then secretary, captured these reflections in her minutes.

⁵ We are realistic enough to know that \$2,500 is not going to take any one person very far, so we ask each applicant what other travel support she has secured.

over letterpress, stationery-quality paper, and postage. Minutes that used to be typed and read out loud at meetings are now emailed – missed by members without email – and not read out loud at all.

One of our most challenging transitions to the electronic age has been learning to illustrate our travel talks with PowerPoint instead of slides. Fortunately, we can usually get help – from young family members, “computer doctors” who make house calls, and our own technologically proficient Nancy Kelly, who cheerfully shares her PowerPoint skills through hands-on tutorials. Nancy, too, makes house calls.

Tempus fugit. We may not text or twitter or tweet as fluently as our children and grandchildren, but we are moving in that direction, beginning with remembering to turn off our cellphones when meetings begin. Years ago when women had the leisure to write friendly letters, they also had the leisure to craft engaging accounts of their travels for the one-page travel bios that we keep in our green Women’s Travel Club binders. Today that practice seems threatened, as some of us send in travel reports that read a little like annotated lists of appointments – name, date, place, few details. Introductory teas or luncheons to vet proposed new members continue, but we have reduced the number of supporting letters for proposed new members from five to three with the rationale that “it is better to have quality than quantity.” Terms of office – president, 1st vice president, 2nd vice president, and so on – remain two years with the option of one renewal. The exception is treasurer, who may serve any length of time. Sally Cheffy may hold the record. She was treasurer for 13 years.

The records of the Women’s Travel Club from its founding in 1935 – 52 members – to the present – 73 members – are on deposit at the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute. The public is welcome to read them there, as did the author of this history. Kathryn Allamong Jacob, curator of manuscripts, reports that scholars often show interest in this very special facet of some women’s lives.

Paula B. Cronin (Polly)
March 2010