

The Founding of Gamble Garden - Karen Olson

It was 35 years ago that Elizabeth Gamble died, leaving her home to the city of Palo Alto - and it was 30 years ago that the newly formed Gamble Garden Center took over the property. Those five intervening years were among the most exciting years of my life, for I chaired the Gamble Founding Committee for the Palo Alto Garden Club.

At our last meeting, I was so impressed by Nancy Butler's talk about her travel business, because her passion for her work really came through. It was that same sense of passion that propelled me to take on the challenge of the Gamble Estate to preserve it intact as a window into our historic past and to carry-on Miss Gamble's passion for gardening.

Elizabeth lived in this home from the age of 12 until her death. She was a quiet woman, involved with many organizations in her community to which she gave generously - but her real love was her garden. She was a true horticulturist and introduced new species which she ordered from the New York Botanical Garden or DeMoto's nursery across the bay. Her garden was designed by Walter Hoff with a series of rooms to match the style of the era - boxwood allee, clock golf rose garden, grotto, orchards, a perennial border and a kitchen garden.

In 1971 she gave her property to the city of Palo Alto, maintaining a life interest in the estate. For years, the Garden Club of Palo Alto had been eyeing various properties in Palo Alto with the idea of finding a home for the club with gardens for display, so upon Elizabeth's death 10 years later, we contacted the City to express an interest in the property. Little did we realize that our task would be a long, involved and political effort lasting for five years!

As the City went through the arduous process of deciding what to do with their inherited gift, the Garden Club gained permission to maintain the gardens. So while our members were busy clearing away the weeds and amending the soil before planting, the Gamble committee was formulating our ideas for our proposal for the property. We researched other garden centers around the country and asked our members to submit their ideas.

Very soon it became clear that the project was much bigger than the Garden Club could handle on its own. Whereas we started with the idea that this would be a home and project for our club, we concluded that we needed to establish a separate organization made up of a broad-base of community people, in order to convince the city that we could succeed and to attract the large amount of funding that would be necessary

However we were not the only group that had ideas for the estate. Among the others were the Lawn Bowlers who wanted another bowling green, the Co-Op Housing Corporation who wanted to apply for HUD funding to build housing for low income seniors, the Standing Committee for the Arts who wanted studio space for local artists, a room who wanted teenage drop in center, and the Older Women's league who wanted to use the house as a residence. Each of these groups were willing to let us take care of the gardens but we were the only group that had proposed using the entire property for the benefit of the whole community not just a few individuals.

By 1984 our committee was ready to present our concept of forming a nonprofit corporation to lease the entire Gamble property as a Community Horticultural Center. Our mission was "to create a beautiful garden oasis where people can learn the joys and skills of horticulture and

could find relaxation and renewal in the serene atmosphere of a lovely garden.” Our plan also included the very important provision that the new nonprofit would be responsible for raising the funds necessary for restoring the grounds and buildings - and would also raise all the funds needed for annual operating expenses

It was now time to work on a detailed plan. We talked with the city staff to learn what was necessary to meet their code requirements for public access and parking; we research funding sources and developed a fundraising plan; we estimated costs in order to come up with a budget; and we developed a use plan showing the activities to be provided and estimation of the number of people who would use the garden center. The more information we gathered, the more we realized that we needed the entire property in order to have enough space to accommodate our needs.

Our plans made headlines in the press - the Palo Alto Times read "Plan to turn Gamble Mansion into a Floral Center". The public was becoming aware of our desires and we were anxious to gather their support. Club members held 20 neighborhood coffees where we presented our plans. We started lobbying the planning commissioners and council members, and we met with many community organizations to gain their support. Our club sponsored a tour of the gardens for the public which was incredibly well attended. So when it was time to present our plans to the city, we were in a very strong position, having gathered over 1000 signatures of endorsement and having the support of many community groups including the neighbors.

By the spring of 1985 we decided to select our first Board of Directors, feeling that these people would be crucial to our credibility and success. We began by zeroing in on all of the tasks that would have to be accomplished once we took over the property, and we thought of the most outstanding and qualified people in our community to do them. We reached for the top ... and all them said yes! In retrospect, this incredible board was a major key to the successful establishment of the garden center.

Late that spring, the staff finally placed the Gamble property on the agenda of the Planning Commission and City Council meetingand the staff made their recommendation - They proposed a joint use of the property encompassing 20 units of low cost senior house around the perimeter of our Garden Center. The staff had bowed to political pressure and we were astonished and heartbroken. With unanimous approval of our new Board, we made our infamous "all or nothing" decision ... if the council's final vote favored the staff recommendation of a joint use, we would pull out of the project. Many people have since asked me if we really would have walked away at that point. The answer was a resounding "yes". Splitting the property as a compromise would have provided for a mediocre project and we were striving for excellence.

When put before the Planning Commission, 3 members favored the compromise and 3 members favored our proposal - a tie vote and no decision to guide the City Council. Needless to say, community interest was extremely high about the Council's pending decision. The Times Tribune came out in favor of us, but the Palo Alto Weekly proposed to solve the dilemma by selling the property!

On Monday evening May 13, 1985 it went to the Council. Their chamber was overflowing with Garden Club members and community citizens. Everywhere one looked, there were men and women wearing flowers from the Gamble Gardens. The supporters of our project had come out

in full force. We presented the council with a the letter from Mary Gamble, Elizabeth's sister-in-law, stating that she felt Elizabeth would applaud having her estate preserved as a garden center. One after another, our supporters spoke. At midnight the vote was taken ... the council voted 8 to 1 in favor of our proposal. We were thrilled that we had won the opportunity to make our dream a reality but a little scared as well, because we knew our work was really just beginning.