

# Biologue of Founder Violet Richardson Ward



I was born Violet Richardson in Summit, New Jersey on August 27, 1888, the third child and

second daughter of John Meade Richardson and Lucy Shipgood Richardson, who emigrated three years earlier from Great Britain.

Father worked for a number of railroads and insurance companies during the years of my youth. As a result of our constant moving I received my early education at home, as well as in a number of schools. As a teenager I had dreams of becoming an artist. I was lucky to have received a scholarship to attend the Pratt and Carnegie Institutes of Art while it was possible. We didn't stay in one place very long so my attendance was short!

In 1907 we moved to the San Francisco Bay Area. I was excited and 19. I finished my high school education that year at the San Francisco Girls High School. After graduation I enrolled at the University of California in Berkeley as an art major, but I soon realized that my passion was in health and physical education. I guess, one might say that I was a pioneer in this field!

In 1911, while a student at the University of California, I organized the Berkeley Women's Gymnasium and one year later I received my degree in Physical Culture, which became known as health and physical education in later years. It was also at the University when I established a women's hiking club so that women could enjoy the pleasures of the Berkeley hills on Sundays and holidays. There were funny stories about me hiking with my shotgun in hand, but it was necessary --- since there were rattlesnakes in those hills!

In 1916 I received my Master's Degree from the same university. While in my second year of study, I began to teach physical education classes to the underclassmen at the university, and substituted in the physical education departments at Mills and Holy Names Colleges in nearly Oakland.

I guess today one might call me an activist or a rabble rouser! As a physical education instructor at the university during my college days, I fought for equal pay for women. Can you believe that I was only paid \$20 a month to lead classes, yet a man was being paid \$40 a month simply to take the roll in my classes! I couldn't believe it! So, I insisted on equal pay! When it was not forthcoming, well, I just quit! The university president rehired me at \$40 a month, which was great except for one thing: he then raised the man's salary to \$60! Guess what? I resigned again! However, this time I did not return to teaching until the university board of regents signed an employment contract with me which guaranteed me \$60 a month too!

Soon after graduation, I was hired by the Berkeley School District and retired a short 41 years later in 1954. While serving as Supervisor of Health and Physical Education for the District, I established physical education classes for boys and girls in grade schools, and established the first girls physical education classes at Berkeley High School. And during the later years of my career, I served as Director of Physical Education for the entire Berkeley School District.

I became well-known in the Bay Area for my work in health and physical education. As a result I was asked to join a new organization for women in 1921. I met with several professional women in Oakland and after interviewing me they asked me to join them. The organization was all about service, about professional and businesswomen, and I was promised that it would become an international organization. This was very important to me. So important, that I only joined after being assured by the organizer, Mr. Stuart Morrow, that it would develop into an international organization for women.

We all met for weeks until there were 80 of us ready to charter the new club. We decided to call ourselves "Soroptimists" – a coined word from two Latin words: "soro" meaning women and "optima" meaning best --- thus the phrase "the best for women" was developed. Now we were ready to charter and elect officers. The women asked me to serve as the charter president. Imagine that, what an honor? This was only the beginning of a long wonderful relationship with this organization called Soroptimist. So on October 3, 1921 in the Oakland Hotel I was installed as the charter president of the Soroptimist Club of Alameda County and was inducted into membership along with 79 other women.

After working hard to form other Soroptimist clubs throughout California, the United States and Canada, I met the love of my life, Stanley Ward, and in June, 1926 I became Violet Richardson Ward. And 18 months later, I gave birth to my one and only child, John in December, 1927.

Throughout my adult life, I was very active in numerous community activities. In addition to Soroptimist, I served twice as president of the local PTA chapter, not as a parent, but as a teacher. I taught American Red Cross water safety classes. I was a member of the Kensington Girl Scout Council, the Order of the Eastern Star, American Association of University Women, the YMCA, the University of California Faculty Club, the Berkeley Teachers' Association and the Association of California Retired Teachers. I was very honored to have received numerous awards for service from many of these organizations throughout my lifetime.

I always treated all my students with dignity and respect. When teaching dance classes, I always picked the most unattractive or shy boy in the class to be my partner.

After 41 years with the Berkeley School District, I retired. However, as one might expect, I did not stay still. I traveled and was very active. So active that in my retirement years, I broke both hips, a leg and even had a severe concussion while traveling in Sweden. But, it took more than broken bones and a concussion to slow me down! I recovered from all and was just like new again! I am proud to say that I have led a full and rewarding life, and at the age of 90 I died in Danville, California at the home of my son John with my eight grandchildren at my side.

I guess in looking over my long life one could say that "I made a difference!" One might call me a "pioneer" in physical culture. I worked tirelessly for people to understand the importance of health and physical education for our young people, especially for young women. Because of my constant nagging and in the face attitude, physical education became a required subject in the Berkeley School District's curriculum for both girls and boys, which preceded by several years any California state law requirements. It was rather fun to see the response of the public when

my girl students took the field to play basketball, or other so-called “male sports” wearing their “bloomers”!

I also feel good about making a difference for women in helping to organize and develop the Soroptimist organization. I know that every person, working at the best of his or her ability, is necessary for a successful society. I think that my work in Soroptimist is best summarized by my statement made at the end of my presidency of the Alameda County Club: “Let us continue the work together and with others, toward the development of a better womanhood, a better manhood, and a better citizenship.