

THE WOMAN'S CLUB OF EL PASO

Constructing a Clubhouse

Founded in 1894, the Woman's Club of El Paso is a

"non-profit organization committed to providing an educational and cultural center for its members, preserving the integrity of its historic clubhouse, improving conditions and opportunities for women, and enhancing the quality of life in our

community." During the late nineteenth century, the Woman's

Club was the only woman's organization in El Paso, and its

members were instrumental in establishing the first public

school kindergarten in Texas as well as supporting city

sanitation and beautification efforts, historic preservation of

the San Jacinto Plaza, and cultural events in El Paso. As

membership increased during the early twentieth century,

members raised funds for a Woman's Club building that would

function as a permanent meeting space and as a venue for

community activities. Designed by architect Otto H. Thorman

and built by H.G. Ponsford, the Club House was completed in

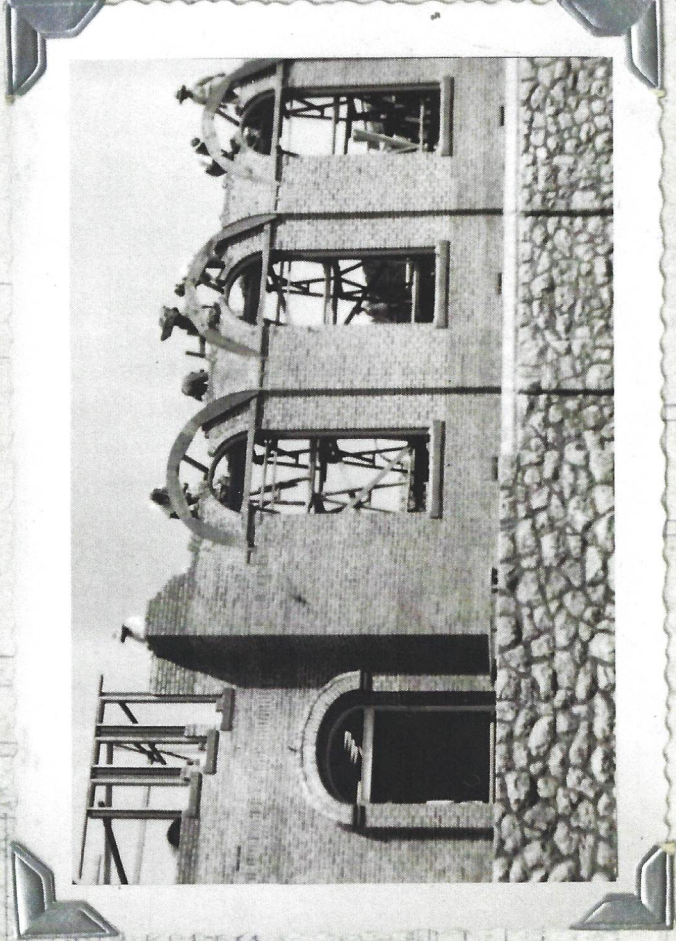
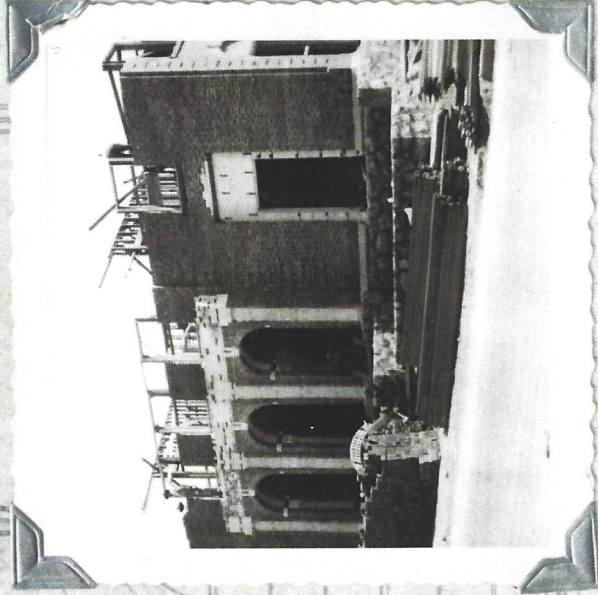
1916. This made the Woman's Club of El Paso the first

woman's group in Texas to own a club building. In addition to

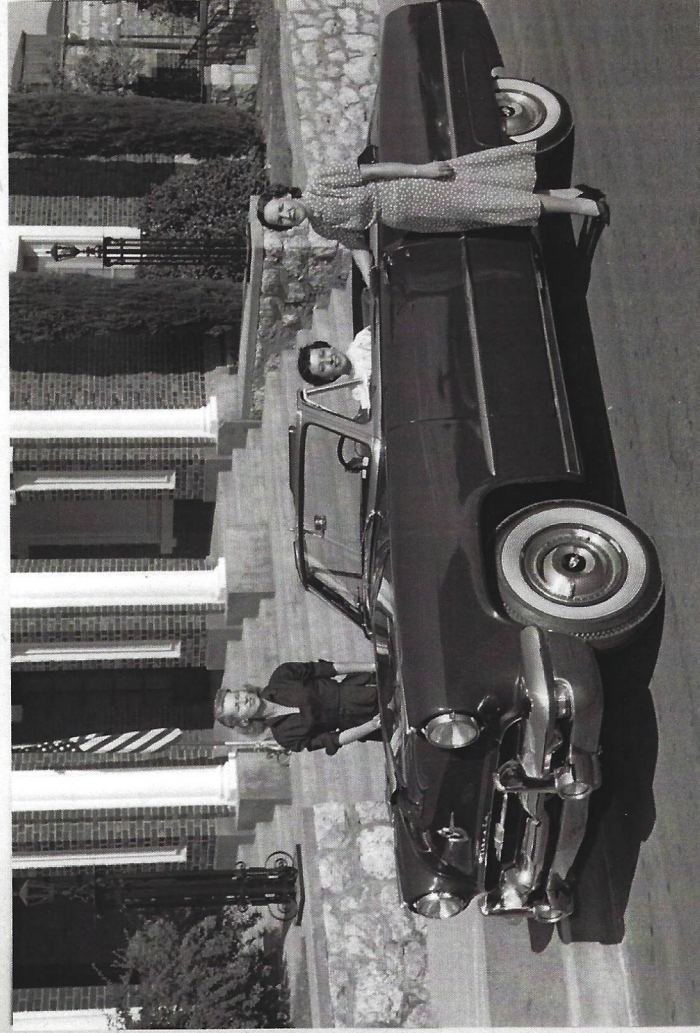
serving as a space for women's leadership in El Paso for one

hundred years, the clubhouse remains a center for civic,

educational, and cultural activities in the border region.



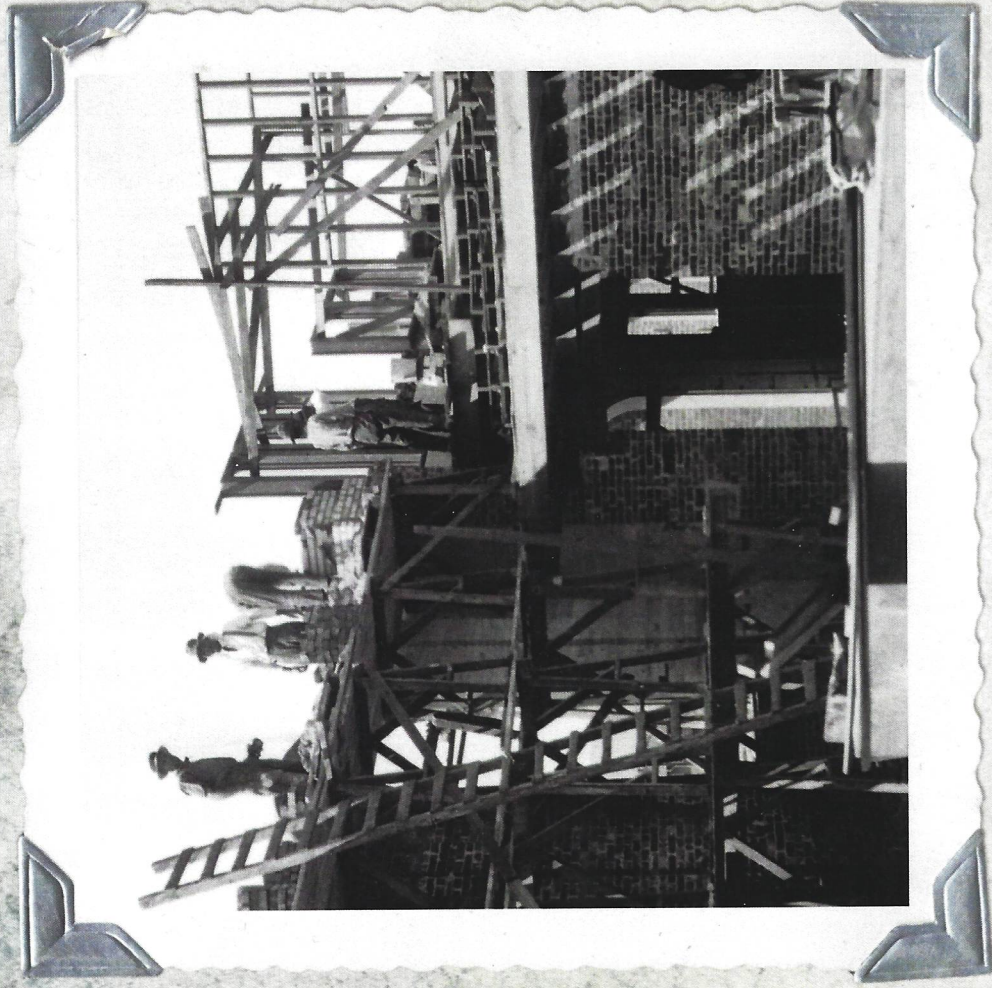
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Three members with a cool convertible, 1950s, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

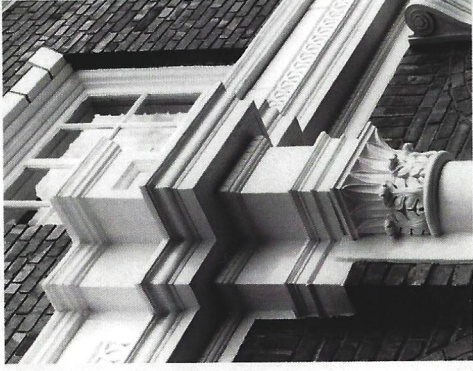
Prior to owning their own building at 1400 North Mesa, Woman's Club members met at various locations around El Paso. Some of the more memorable early meeting locations included: Mary Stanton's library room in the old Sheldon Block, Chopin Hall, the Masonic Hall over a meat market at 301-305 San Antonio Street, the Hotel Paso del Norte, and the First Christian Church at 501 North Oregon Street, which served as the Club's last temporary meeting space. Meetings were often spent trying to find locations that would allow for membership expansion as well as club and civic activities. Lack of adequate meeting and event spaces was an ongoing problem for the Woman's Club in its early years, which eventually led to the Club pursuing plans for its own building.

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The construction crew building the clubhouse, 1916, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

In 1915, \$300 in earnest money was paid on the lots at Mesa and River Streets, which were priced at \$8,500. At the March 1915 meeting it was announced that O. H. Thorman had been selected as architect for the building. That same month the plans were accepted by the Board of Directors. The cornerstone, a gift from Mr. Thorman, was laid on July 13, 1916. It contained the club history, the list of subscribers toward the building fund, the first yearbook of the Current Topics Club (1898), the current yearbook (1916-17), and a copy of the El Paso Herald of July 14, 1916. The clubhouse officially opened on November 8, 1916 under the presidency of Carrie Findley Sutherland.



Architectural details on building exterior; Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

Historic Preservation of the Building

The Woman's Club of El Paso is dedicated to preserving its historic clubhouse as part of its official mission. This charge is particularly critical to El Paso history as the continued demolition and neglect of historic buildings has resulted in significant damage to the city's rich architectural heritage. In contrast to this trend, the Woman's Club has long sought to maintain, improve, and protect their building and the furnishings and artwork housed within. Due to the efforts of its members, the Woman's Club of El Paso's building was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1979. The building was also designated as a Recorded Texas Historic Landmark in 1980, further promoting and protecting the clubhouse's historic importance.

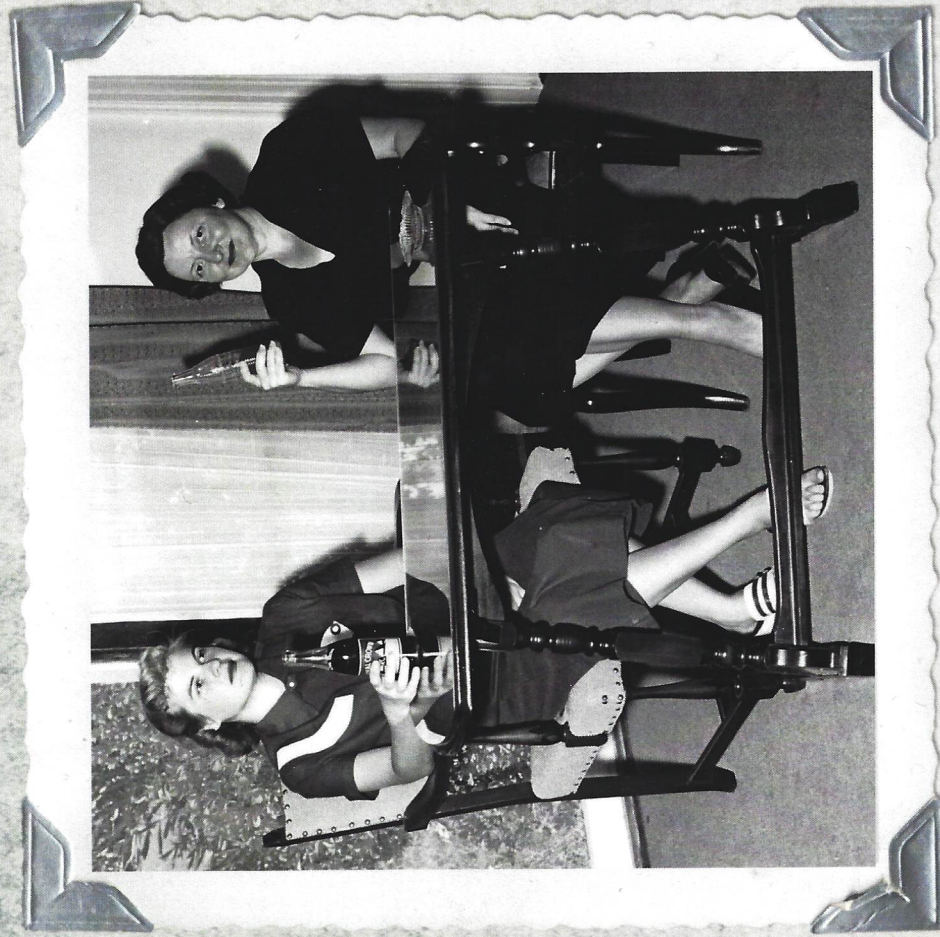
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Once the building was completed, with ample space and facilities, the Woman's Club's Art department sponsored at least one exhibit every year. Early exhibitions featured works by artists Fremont Ellis and Pablo Fischer. The first public art show took place in October 1943 in Carnegie Square. This tradition continued at San Jacinto Plaza, then Bassett Shopping Center, and finally at Sunland Park Mall. An Art Study Club was organized in March 1924, the purpose being "to cultivate the spirit of fraternity and to increase the knowledge of art among its members." It was admitted as a Woman's Club auxiliary in 1925, and today continues as the Arts and Crafts Study Club.

A Woman's Club member hangs paintings for an art show, October 3, 1963, El Paso Herald-Post records, MS 348, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

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Two members relax in the clubhouse on a hot day, 1950s, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

The Woman's Club of El Paso records contain receipts detailing some of the clubhouse's original furniture that was purchased at Lord & Taylor in New York City by Olga Kohlberg during 1916. Mrs. Kohlberg's order included: an antique ivory sofa, a desk, several arm chairs, and a colonial mahogany library table. The Club also relied on many generous donations of paintings, silver, lamps, and photographs to help decorate the clubhouse over the years; the ambiance in the clubhouse today is a step back in time. An extensive "Clubhouse Manual" was carefully compiled by Bonnie Whalen Brooks in 2000, which outlines the work done each year both inside and out to the clubhouse. The manual is an impressive record of maintenance and upkeep.

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With its own kitchen and large gathering spaces, the Woman's Club building became an important venue for luncheons and other celebrations. The Woman's Club's first cookbook, *Mexican Recipes*, was compiled by Mrs. D.W. Fennessy in 1916. Copies were sold at the International Soil Products Exposition hosted by El Paso in October 1916, in local bookstores, in Army camps, and at the Woman's Club. The cookbook helped advertise El Paso and the Woman's Club. Later cookbooks included: *Gift Shop Cake Recipes* by Mrs. G.W. Young in 1921, the *Young Matron's Auxiliary, Golden Collection* cookbook in 1985, and *A Century of Cookery* in 1994. Proceeds from *Gift Shop Cake Recipes* supported auditorium renovations and helped cover the costs of one pair of curtains (\$75) during the 1920s.

Cooking skit in clubhouse auditorium, about 1950s, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

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The Drama Study Club was organized in the early fall of 1920 by Mrs. A. W. Peatross, Chairman of the Literature and Current Events Department. The Drama Study Club was "formed for the purpose of studying the shorter dramas of American, French, English, and Russian writers, it also planned to produce upon the new stage one and two act plays." (Five plays were produced that first winter!) By the end of the year this group was accepted as an auxiliary. The stage of the Woman's Club was enlarged the summer of 1920 at a cost of \$1,706.42, which helped promote many musical and dramatic productions. Through the years the Woman's Club has enjoyed delightful performances by local musicians and dancers as well as its own members, as evidenced by this photograph.

Members dressed as flappers for a vaudeville show, Night of Nostalgia, March 16, 1979, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

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Woman's Club members showing off their hats, about 1963, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

In 1921, the Woman's Club hosted El Paso's first professional style show in its clubhouse, which was sponsored by the Popular Department Store, the White House, the Boston Store, and the Woman's Toggery. Due to its popularity, other fashion shows followed, and they soon became important sources of revenue for the Woman's Club in the 1920s. These proceeds went to support the Club's civic work as well as building maintenance and improvements. In an oral history interview, 1956 – 1957, Woman's Club President Betty Molina recalled her sartorial theory that every woman needed "a good-looking black dress and six colored hats." 1962 – 1963 President Jackie Williams recounted that she couldn't have presided over meetings without her hat and gloves.

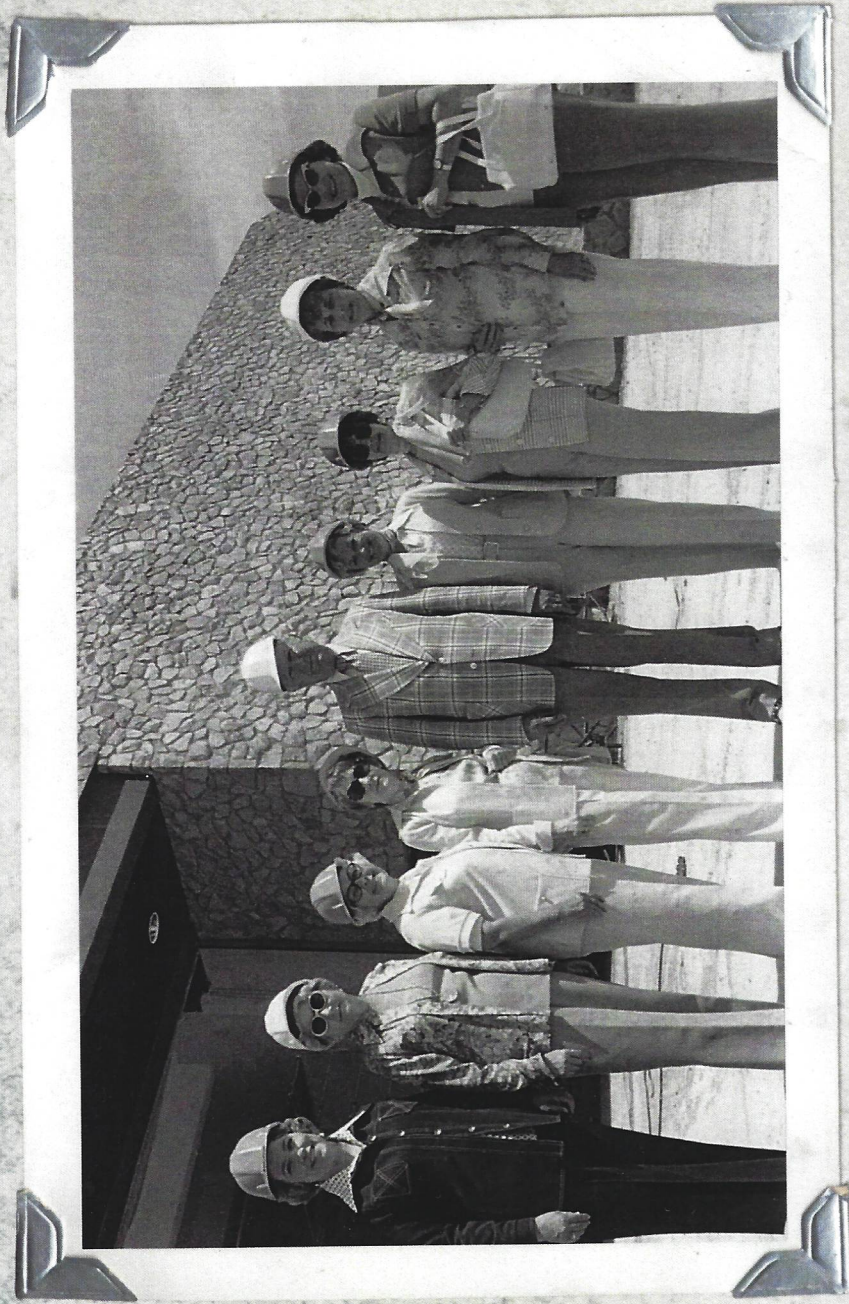
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Herb booth at a Mexican Fiesta hosted by the Woman's Club, 1941, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

In 1970, President Peg Hudson started the first Antiques Festival, which went on to become an annual event still held at the clubhouse in early fall. Martha Prime served as the first chairman and later served as President in 1984-85. All proceeds from this event benefit the club and help to maintain the building. Eventually the Antiques Festival evolved into a "Fall Festival," with 15-20 vendors selling jewelry, paintings, fine art, wood carving, candles, and other goods; a tea room where luncheons prepared by club members are served daily; a bake sale, which features homemade goodies; and "Grannie's Attic," where family heirlooms and "white elephants" are sold at discount prices.

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In 1976, Woman's Club member Naomi York arranged for Lawrence Welk and his Champagne Music Makers to perform at a Woman's Club fundraiser in El Paso. The Lawrence Welk concert, held on March 4, 1977, was the first event at the University of Texas at El Paso's newly constructed Special Events Center, now known as the Don Haskins Center. Net proceeds from the concert resulted in the Woman's Club's largest donation in its history: \$35,047.15 to the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP). The funds were divided among the University's Athletic Fund, Library, School of Nursing, and Goldiggers dance team.

Members touring the Special Events Center construction site with UTEP President Arleigh Templeton, November 1976, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

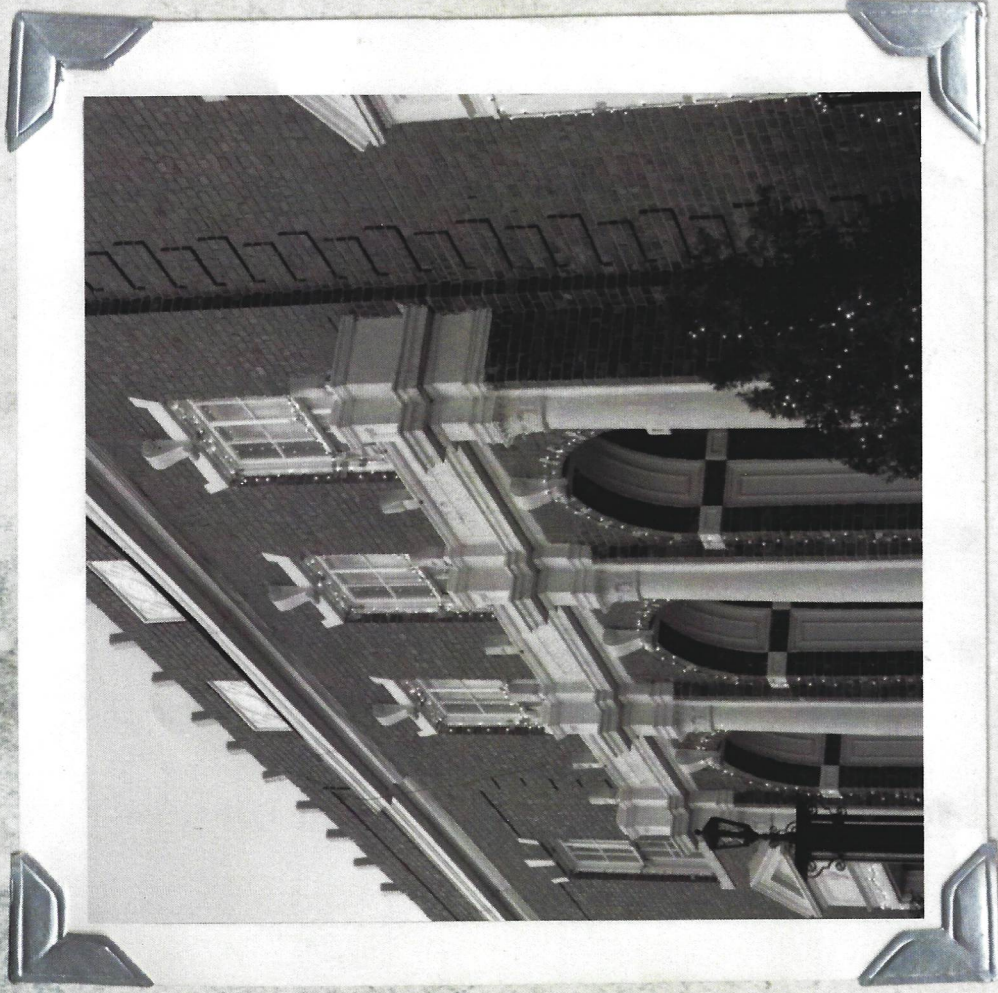
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Mary S. Cunningham at the plaque dedication ceremony, March 18, 1981, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

Dedication of our historic plaque from the Texas Historical Commission took place on March 18, 1981. Previously the Commission had nominated the clubhouse for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places, and on July 22, 1979, our building was entered in the Register. Mary S. Cunningham, pictured with the plaques, served as Woman's Club president in 1943-44. She researched the early history of the Club for thirty years, and her book, *The Woman's Club of El Paso: Its First Thirty Years*, was published in 1978 by Texas Western Press. Two other plaques are also located on the front porch of the building. They were presented to the Club on October 2, 1963 and explain the early beginnings of the Woman's Club and the establishment of the first kindergarten in Texas. An additional plaque honoring the Woman's Club's third president, Olga Bernstein Kohlberg, was dedicated on January 18, 2015, by the El Paso Historical Commission and is located in the front of the building on the southside.

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Farolitos and lights decorate the Woman's Club building, 1995, Woman's Club of El Paso records, MS 576, C.L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department, University of Texas at El Paso Library.

Over the past one hundred years, the clubhouse has hosted numerous Woman's Club and community group meetings, concerts, art exhibits, commencement exercises, dances, receptions, and fundraising events. As part of its holiday traditions, the Woman's Club decorates its building with Christmas lights and farolitos. A festive luncheon and the annual Wassail Party, which started in 1974 and honors the Club's auxiliaries, also help celebrate the holiday season.