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Winter 2019

## Guiding Lights

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### Digital USD Citation

McClain, Molly, "Guiding Lights" (2019). *History: Faculty Scholarship*. 46.

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## Guiding Lights

### Abstract

The article describes a group of free-thinking, creative women who founded a vital social and intellectual community in La Jolla, California, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

### Keywords

utopian communities, La Jolla, women, Theosophy

### Disciplines

Cultural History | History | United States History | Women's History | Women's Studies

# TIMEKEEPER

THE LA JOLLA HISTORICAL SOCIETY WINTER • SPRING 2019 VOLUME 37, NO 4





Florence Sawyer, advocate of New Thought metaphysics circa, 1895.  
LJHS archives

# GUIDING LIGHTS

By Molly McClain

At the turn of the 20th century, La Jolla attracted free-thinking women who embraced creativity, spirituality, and reform. These women lived at a time when many people were looking beyond the physical realm to explore the power and potential of the human mind. They studied alternative religions, experimented with "mind cures," and sought the artistic expression of spiritual ideals. Together with other La Jolla residents, they founded a vital social and intellectual community on the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

By the 1890s, many Americans had become disillusioned by modernity and its manifestations. Devastated at the changes wrought by industrialization and rapid population growth, they turned to artistic and spiritual movements that promised order, harmony, and connection to ancient wisdom and cosmic principles. Some joined utopian communities while others experimented with systems of belief that promised physical and spiritual rejuvenation. For artists and writers, creativity was their creed.

Southern California attracted many free-thinkers, not the least



Rebecca Webb self-portrait photo as Florence Sawyer Bransby (Thou shall gain by giving)

because of the weather. Those suffering from pneumonia, tuberculosis, arthritis, and other ailments were encouraged to try a dry, warm climate with year-round sunshine. Spiritual remedies were also available. Florence Sawyer (1874-1942) was a member of the Home of Truth, a group that sought to cure the sick using New Thought metaphysics. Having inherited money from a former patient, Florence donated the Reading Room to the community of La Jolla. In 1899, she married John Ransome Bransby, best known for having invited Swami Vivekananda to introduce the Indian philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to Los Angeles. Florence later sold her La Jolla property – including the seaside cottage known as the Red Rest – to benefit the Home of Truth.

In San Diego, the Point Loma Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society, founded by Katherine Tingley, attracted women seeking to realize their power and potential. Philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps (1836-1932) joined a theosophical reading group that dived into books like Esoteric Buddhism (1883) and discussed karma, reincarnation, the

Photograph: LIHS archives collection



Louise Balmer supervising playtime at her Balmer School, circa 1940

building of the cosmos, and astral projection, among other subjects. Ellen's half-sister Virginia Scripps (1852-1921), meanwhile, came to believe that the color purple had personal significance. Theosophists associated the color with the moon, the source of female cosmic power. As a result, Virginia wore purple, or violet, dresses and named her cottages the Iris and the Wisteria. One early resident recalled, "It was her color. No one could wear lavender but Miss Virginia Scripps."

For other women, creativity was their chosen brand of spirituality. Anna Held (1849-1941), a former nanny, was passionate about music, particularly German classical music by composers such as Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, and Weber. On moving to California, she developed the Green Dragon Colony which attracted visiting artists, writers, and musicians to La Jolla. Mary Richmond (1864-1946) also was interested in promoting the arts, having studied drawing and painting at the New England Conservatory in Boston. In 1911, she commissioned architect Irving J. Gill to build Richmond Court, one of the first bungalow courts in the village. Like the Green Dragon Colony, this group of four cottages became home to many visiting artists and writers including the avant-garde painter Robert Henri and his wife, Marjorie.

The next generation of women found employment in the arts. Architect Lilian Rice (1889-1938) designed 18 homes in La Jolla between 1928 and 1938, though she remains best known for her Spanish Revival structures in Rancho Santa Fe. Florence Palmer (1893-1969), meanwhile, ran her own architectural design firm working in a variety of revival styles. Her most memorable creations were four cottages on Fern Glen in the La Jolla's Barber Tract neighborhood, all designed and built in the late 1920s.

Free-thinking and creative women left behind a legacy that La Jolla continues to enjoy today in the form of institutions like the Athenaeum Music & Arts Library, the Christian Science Reading Room, the La Jolla Historical Society, the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, the La Jolla Music Society, the La Jolla Symphony & Chorus, and the La Jolla Playhouse, along with dozens of churches and civic organizations. They also established a tradition of leadership that continues to empower La Jolla women and girls.



Artist Becky Guttin encircled a small portrait of Louise Balmer with a color wheel of light and shadow to show the progressive teacher in an interpretive educational context.

McClain is a professor of history at the University of San Diego and a member of the Society's board of directors.