



AUSTIN PAN AMERICAN ROUND TABLE'S FOUNDER, CLARA DRISCOLL SEVIER

Written by Mrs. Joe B. Frantz

All of you have probably heard some story, maybe apocryphal, about Clara Driscoll, such as the building of the Robert Driscoll Hotel in Corpus Christi. Supposedly she did not like the service at a hotel there, told the manager so, and announced to him that she "would build one tall enough to spit on his". There are two hotels on the bluff overlooking downtown and the Bay, and hers is much taller.

But I plan to deal with fact rather than fiction and relate some of the facets of the founder of the Austin Pan American Round Table and to conclude with a re-counting of our first decade.

Clara Driscoll was born in 1881 in a town called St. Mary's near Rockport. Her grandfather fought in the Texas Revolution and was given a bounty warranty of 1230 acres by the Republic of Texas for his services. This land was the foundation of the cattle and ranching empire which her father, Robert, later managed.

Due to the influence of her mother, Clara was schooled first in San Antonio, then later in New York and France. After completing her studies she was joined by her mother, and the two women traveled extensively throughout the world - living for a time on a houseboat in India. She wrote of her experiences in a series of letters which she sent to San Antonio and Corpus Christi newspapers under the pseudonym of "A Texas Girl." After her mother's death in England in 1899, twenty-year-old Clara returned to San Antonio. In 1904 Putnams published her novel, The Girl of La Gloria, followed two years later by In the Shadow of the Alamo, a collection of short stories set in San Antonio. With the aid of a lyricist she wrote a musical comedy, "Mexicana" which ran on Broadway. A reviewer wrote "There is certainly nothing in "Mexicana" to give it any claim to immortality - a piquant dance in the third act never fails to arouse the apathy of the Bald Head Row".

In 1883 the State of Texas purchased the chapel where the mission San Antonio de Valero was established and it was considered by everyone to be The Alamo. However the battle had been fought in the convent and monastery area of the mission which was privately owned. Clara Driscoll was a fervent believer in the preservation of the Alamo and joined the Daughters of the Republic to help in this cause. She was immediately made head of the Committee to raise the necessary \$75,000 and paid the option to buy it herself to secure time. In a letter appealing for funds she wrote "There does not stand in the world today a building or a monument which can recall such a deed of heroism and bravery worldwide. Today the Alamo should stand out free and clear for what it is - the grandest monument in the history of the world.

The 1904 report of the Daughters of the Republic gave twenty-five year old Clara Driscoll the credit for raising the first payment-- advancing more than \$17,000 of her own money and signing notes herself for the remainder. In 1905 the State of Texas reimbursed her and she turned the property over to the State. In preparation for the San Antonio Bicentennial in 1932 and the Texas Centennial in 1936 money was appropriated for restoration and acquisition of land east and south of the chapel. Not enough money was available and Clara Driscoll came forward with \$65,000 to enable the purchase. Because of her generosity, the 38th Legislature authorized a portrait of her to be painted by Wayman Adams and hung in the Senate Chamber. She sat for this in the Elizabeth Ney

studio. The portrait now hangs in the Senate Finance Room. She was only the second woman so honored, the first being Rebecca Fisher.

There is a story that Clara spied Henry Hulme Sevier on the floor of the House during the many hearings in the Legislature and asked to meet him. Henry Sevier was editor and publisher of the Sabinal Sentinel before he was elected in 1902 to the first of two terms in the Legislature, succeeding John Nance Garner. Clara Driscoll and Henry Sevier were married July 31, 1906 in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, followed by a wedding supper at the old Waldorf. Her brother, Robert, was quoted as saying after the wedding, "I thought she'd never make it. Now I hope I'll not have to be her valet anymore." The Seviers sailed on the Hamburg American liner "Amerika" for a two month honeymoon in Europe.

After returning to New York, Henry Sevier became the financial editor of the New York Sun, a position he held until 1911. Clara became active in New York and a New York newspaper dated December 15, 1909 described Mrs. Sevier "as one of the most delightful women to be met anywhere."

Although active in clubs, the newspaper credited her with being intensely interested in all movements of all classes of society. Asked if she was a woman suffragist, she replied, "No, not yet".

In 1913 the Seviers moved to a one hundred thirty acre homestead on Oyster Bay, adjacent to one owned by former President Theodore Roosevelt. She was quoted in one paper as saying, "You know I was born and reared in Texas with its boundless prairies and its glorious air. New York is great and I have enjoyed my life here, but in my veins there flows the love of the great outdoors. "I am going to get all my animals from Texas, my own pony and dogs and a faithful cow or two."

In 1914 her father died and the Seviers returned permanently to Texas. She moved between Corpus Christi, San Antonio and Austin. In 1915 Mr. Sevier founded a morning paper in Austin, the "American", which he sold a year later.

The Seviers had bought the point of land at the foot of what was then called Bull Creek Road that had been the desired homesite of Stephen F. Austin. In an interview, her long time gardener, Galvan, said Clara Sevier had commissioned a house to be built, was away when it was being constructed, returned, didn't like it, had it torn down and began the present building. Lying at the foot of Mount Bonnell, heavily wooded with live oaks and native shrubs, the site was opened up for an Italianate villa with gardens in the same taste. In an old "Gossip" she tells of blasting out holes for the planting of Italian Cypress, poplars and palm trees, then using the rocks dislodged for walls, walks, and steps. Soil was brought in by the hundreds of loads to make the terraces. She loved crepe myrtle and planted it in masses. Somehow, in the basement of the Capitol, she came across a pair of old iron gates, used at one time to close the Capitol grounds, and they became her front gates. Italian statuary of the four seasons came from Florence Mansbende and the stone lions came from Rome. Peter Mansbendel carved her living room table and the frieze over the mantle from wood from the Alamo. It was rumored the house and grounds cost \$100,000.

The Seviers entertained elaborately and hospitably. A party given in honor of Governor and Mrs. Pat Neff and the Legislature had a guest list of 1,000 persons. Upon her settling in Austin, Clara Sevier became active in many organizations including the Daughters of the Republic of Texas who made her a life president. In 1922 she founded the Austin Pan American Round Table and in 1924 she was instrumental in the start of the Violet Crown Garden Club. She was a charter member and president of the

Austin Open Forum, and was appointed to many quasi-governmental commissions and committees. Politics soon became one of her greatest interests. In 1928 she was named national committeewoman from Texas and was eventually made a vice-chairman of the Democratic National Executive Committee. There are two pictures of Mrs. Sevier as a politician: the Corpus Christi paper describes her thus, " She is small, dainty, gracious always, with a sensitive mouth and eyes that twinkle on the slightest provocation. She doesn't drive, she inspires. She is conversationally alert, discussing politics, analyzing the European war situation with rare objectiveness." The other picture comes from Time magazine, "...politicians respected her because she could drink, battle, cuss and connive with the best of them, and outspend practically all of them."

Two of Clara Sevier's gifts were of particular interest to Austinites. In the late 1930's, the Texas Federated Women's Clubs were faced with foreclosure of a \$92,000 debt on their headquarters here in Austin. Mrs. Sevier was approached by a board member to loan the organization the money with all affiliated clubs pledging to repay her. She agreed to do so, at very lenient terms. Then, almost at once, she announced she was canceling the loan, making an outright gift of the money. A day of celebration was held by the club in honor of Mrs. Sevier and Governor O'Daniel proclaimed October 3, 1939 as Clara Driscoll Day. In 1943 she announced her gift of Laguna Gloria to the Texas Fine Arts Association. She gave Stephen F. Austin's letter and map describing the site, and \$5,000 as a beginning of an art gallery fund, saying that "I have always felt that Austin, being the capital and a city of beauty, is a logical place where something of that kind should be established. We perhaps forget that the founders of Texas were men of education and taste.

Mary Lasswell, the writer, describes her as "Without exception the most beautifully and becomingly dressed woman I have ever seen, anywhere, any time. Her sense of style and fashion were almost psychic. She loved harmony and softness in her dress and often wore hats and shoes all the same color as her dresses. She was extremely fond of soft fabrics, chiffon, and the georgette crepe of the period. Her reddish black hair and indescribable brown eyes, deep almost reddish brown amber eyes, liquid and lovely with friendliness, sometimes lit with flashes of heat lightening, were like the eyes of a Marie Laurencin painting against her delicate fine-textured white skin... No portrait or photograph that I have ever seen resembles her in the least. Her mercurial temperament changed faster than a cloud can obscure the sun. I know she was a woman of quick sympathy with little tolerance for stupidity or bigotry. She was exceedingly outspoken and always in terms that could easily be understood. As the Mexicans say in describing plain-speaking 'She had no hairs on her tongue'.

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