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## Kudos for Unsinkable Lucy Hupp Williams, Orinda Historian

By Victor Ryerson



Lucy Hupp Williams Photo Ohlen Alexander

"I like talking about the old stuff," said Orinda historian Lucy Hupp Williams with uncharacteristic understatement, explaining why she became active in the Orinda Historical Society. But it is not like her to memorize dates and places. "I'm interested in what happened, and ... (whether it is) something we can use now."

Hupp Williams' tireless promotion of Orinda's history earned her the 2008 Orinda Volunteer of the Year Award in recognition of getting OHS's permanent office established in the Orinda Library with the help of \$50,000 in grants, gifts and endowments she secured on behalf of the organization. More recently, the Orinda City Council awarded her a Certificate of Recognition for her outstanding contribution to OHS.

Although she has lived in San Mateo County since 1969, she has logged thousands of miles crossing the Bay to serve in her capacity as president of OHS for 10 years, and has spent countless hours organizing, cataloging, and preserving Orinda's history because she thinks the effort is worth it. These efforts are all the more remarkable because they represent only one facet of her life, much of which has involved staring down adversity time and again.

Born in Downers Grove, Ill., she and her family departed for California in 1948 on doctor's orders. Hupp Williams - who was born with an autoimmune disease - contracted strep throat and rheumatic fever, and the family physician said it was imperative to move somewhere with a more equable climate to keep her alive. She, her brother, and her parents took off in the family station wagon, heading west. Her father had worked in San Francisco and was familiar with Orinda, and that is where the family settled.

When she was a 15-year-old freshman at Acalanes High School, Hupp Williams contracted polio, a fearsome childhood disease that often proved fatal, just one year before the Salk vaccine began to be administered to children nationwide. At first she thought polio was going to end her life, but she noticed that there were two types of patients: victims and survivors. She vowed to become one of the latter. Always determined and energetic as a child, she attributes her subsequent devotion to public service to surviving the illness.

At that time Hupp Williams owned a horse, as did many children in Orinda, which she paid for by delivering the Oakland Tribune newspaper on horseback. When polio struck, she begged her parents to let her keep the horse so she could still ride, and they acquiesced. Her horse was "my guiding light," she said. Combined with a regimen of modern dance classes at Acalanes, riding her horse was the key to her rehabilitation. She was a March of Dimes Poster Child, raising consciousness about survivors of the disease, but contrary to her pediatrician's discouraging predictions, she earned a degree at UC Berkeley, worked as an administrator at Stanford University for 19 years, and met her husband Buz as a "Dramateur" at the Town Hall Theatre in Lafayette.

It was another misfortune that brought an end to her working career. While walking to a meeting on the Stanford campus in 1989, she was struck by a truck, suffering severe head and

other injuries. The accident put her on permanent disability, but spurred her to step up her volunteer activities. "I can't stand to be idle," she said.

Not only did she begin a second career of volunteerism that eventually led her to take over the helm at OHS after its president, Sarge Littlehale, died in 2004, but she also became deeply involved in youth sports, women's issues and disability rights advocacy, and controversially held a high profile position as the first female Police Athletic League vice commissioner for the Peninsula region. She was inducted into the San Mateo County Women's Hall of Fame in 2009 in recognition of her achievements.

It may be no accident that Hupp Williams has been, in her own words, a "driven type A" in the aftermath of misfortune. Her parents, James and Lucie Hupp, were social activists who "expected family members to be involved in social action," she said. They are remembered in Orinda for crusading for various causes before the city council and other agencies, and for Jim Hupp's take-no-prisoners approach to community issues. "They were called Orinda's oldest hippies," chuckled Hupp Williams.

So what are Hupp Williams' views about the current issues involving Orinda's history? The Moraga Adobe, she believes, is very important, and she thinks Pleasanton's actions to preserve the Alviso adobe are an example of what should be done. "I would like to see the [Moraga Adobe] developer say, 'Here, you take this; it's too much trouble for us,'" she said. And as far as OHS is concerned, don't call its quarters in the Library an office. "It's a museum," she stated emphatically, but you need to make an appointment to view the treasures within. Too many papers and artifacts, some of which she had donated, have been discarded or simply disappeared.

Vice Mayor Victoria Smith, who encountered Hupp Williams as a frequent public speaker when she was serving on the Planning Commission, summed it all up at the recent award ceremony: "She is always forward thinking," but at the same time has an eye on history.

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