



Eleanor Bedell, March 1922

ELEANOR BURT, NÉE BEDELL

**CONDUCTED BY
ALICE STONE**

August 11, 1978

**ARCHIVES
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
Pasadena, California**



Preface to the Caltech Women's Club History Project Interviews

The interview with Eleanor Bedell Burt was done as part of a series of oral histories conducted by Alice Stone in 1978 to document the early history of the Caltech Women's Club and social life of the campus. They capture the observations and perspectives of the times.

Subject area

Caltech Women's Club, physics

Abstract

An interview on August 11, 1978 with Eleanor Bedell Burt, wife of Robert C. Burt, research and teaching fellow, 1921-1927, and alumnus, receiving his PhD from Caltech in 1926.

Administrative information

Access

The interview is unrestricted.

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CALTECH WOMEN'S CLUB
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH ELEANOR BURT, NÉE BEDELL
PRESIDENT OF THE CALTECH WOMEN'S CLUB 1924-1925

[WIFE OF ROBERT BURT, CALTECH ALUMNUS AND RESEARCH/TEACHING FELLOW]

CONDUCTED BY ALICE STONE

AUGUST 11, 1978

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**WOMEN'S CLUB
OF THE
CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
HISTORY PROJECT**

Interviews with Club Presidents serving from 1916 to 1931

1979

INTRODUCTION

When Roxana Anson was president of the Caltech Women's Club in 1977-1978, she noticed that though the Club was founded in 1916, there were no records dating before 1931. She asked me to establish some form of historical record for that period.

We decided to limit ourselves to informal interviews of women who served as president from 1916 to 1931. Tapes or notes would be transcribed, and excerpts published in the monthly Club *Bulletin*. To ensure continuity of possession of at least one copy of the Project, the Caltech Archives agreed to become the primary repository, with a duplicate to remain in the Club files.

The Project assumed a pattern and identity stemming directly from the Women's Club, which was formed as a purely social organization and still sees itself as such. In this context, it seemed inappropriate to ask for personal details that were not volunteered and to pursue apparent inaccuracies.

Caveats should be noted. First, not all the living 1916-1931 presidents are included. Hazel Bates (Mrs. Stuart J. Bates, Chemistry), was unable to complete her interview because of illness, though it is hoped she will be able to at some later date. Second, we interviewed a gracious lady we mistakenly believed to have been the first Women's Club president, Mrs. Walter Adams. Unfortunately, the first Mrs. Adams died shortly after she served as president, and we were unaware of Mr. Adams' second marriage until after the interview appeared in the *Bulletin*. Third, the Project has been completed without the benefit of several pairs of eyes checking for errors. Therefore, there are probably many, and are all mine.

We hope the Project will be viewed as being both complementary and complimentary: complementary in that it concentrates on the Institute's social—as opposed to scientific life—through memories of faculty wives; and complimentary in that through the Project we spent some time with—and thus paid homage to—those women who established traditions of helpfulness and friendliness that make our lives more pleasant.

Alice Stone



Eleanor Bedell, March 1922

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INTERVIEW WITH ELEANOR BEDELL BURT

President of the Caltech Women's Club 1924-1925

[wife of Robert Burt, Caltech alumnus and research/teaching fellow]

**Conducted by Alice Stone
August 11, 1978**

ELEANOR BURT SPEAKING:

Looking back over [5] 6 years of a life closely associated with the California Institute of Technology and the Women's Club—which was then known as the Faculty Women's Club—many, many memories flood back.

When I arrived in January of 1922 as the first secretary of the Norman Bridge Laboratory of Physics under the direction of Dr. R. A. Millikan, Caltech was already on its way to becoming one of the outstanding research institutions of the United States.

In 1891 Amos G. Throop, a Chicago businessman with an ambition to contribute to the education of young men and women, founded Throop University, becoming Throop Polytechnic University one year later, coeducational with grades from kindergarten through college. Charles A. Keyes became president, with an enrollment of 630 students. The buildings were at Chestnut and Fair Oaks in Pasadena.

In 1908 the far visioned Board of Trustees moved the campus to its present site, renamed it Throop College of Technology, made it a non-coeducational institution and dropped the elementary grades. Dr. George Ellery Hale, the great astronomer, and Arthur Fleming began the development of a school to provide the best in engineering and science. World War I intervened as it trained men for active war duty.

But in 1920 a new step was taken, and it was renamed the California Institute of Technology, expanding into a great research institution. The original Throop Hall was followed by the Gates Chemical Laboratory, and in 1922 by the Norman Bridge Laboratory of Physics. Dr. Robert A. Millikan of Chicago was persuaded to come west to head the Physics Department and become the president of the Executive Council—he never would use the name President—succeeding Dr. James A. B. Scherer, who had been president since 1910 of the old college. Dr. Arthur A. Noyes came from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at much the same time to head the Chemistry

Department in the Gates Laboratory. With Noyes, Millikan and Hale, the fame of Caltech soon spread worldwide.

Visiting lecturers [came], notably A. Joffe, the Russian physicist; [Vilhelm] Bjerknes of Norway; [Paul] Ehrenfest; and the famous Dutch physicist, H. A. Lorentz, followed later by Albert Einstein. They came from abroad and the graduate school became of utmost importance. Dr. John P. Buwalda, geologist, and Dr. Thomas Hunt Morgan, biologist, added new departments and new prestige.

Dabney Hall of the Humanities was soon built to further the cultural training of these young students and engineers. Dr. and Mrs. Millikan always felt strongly that the cultural aspect of life should not be neglected, and it was for that reason that she had the young wives of the Faculty Women's Club come over for her Sunday teas and invited the undergraduate students so that they might learn proper manners.

Serving first under President Scherer, and then under Dr. Millikan, were, as I remember, E. C. Barrett, Secretary, whose wife was active in the Faculty [Women's] Club; Van Buskirk as Treasurer; Miss Inga Howard as private secretary to the president; and Miss Spinning as Librarian, all at Throop in the beginning. Professor Franklin Thomas headed the Civil Engineering Department and Dr. Royal Sorensen headed the Electrical Engineering Department.

In the early days, the wives of those men were really the nucleus of the Caltech Faculty Women's Club. When I first came in 1922, they were the ones that I remember helping me and calling on me and being of great assistance. They were very much beloved, and of course Grace Sorensen is still living. She is in her high nineties and I talk to her and see her often. She is in a little apartment of her own up on Villa, just east of Lake.

You asked how Bob and I happened to come to Caltech. Bob had accepted a research fellowship from Dr. Millikan of Chicago after his graduation from Cornell in 1921. Dr. Millikan wrote him and said that he was going to a new college in California called the California Institute of Technology, and if he wished to take his PhD under him, Bob could transfer to Caltech. Bob said that he just wanted to study under Dr. Millikan, so he applied for the same research fellowship in physics at Caltech. Incidentally, he received the huge sum of \$900 a year. The regular teaching fellows only got \$600 a year,

so we were all on minimum budget. And I see in two or three references [that] Mrs. Millikan tried to dress simply when she invited the wives because she knew they were all on a budget, which I thought was a joke.

Dr. Millikan asked Bob to drive his car, an old Essex, to California while he and Mrs. Millikan came out by train shortly after. So, Bob set out from Chicago with Glenn Millikan, then about fourteen, and Ira Sprague Bowen—later head of Mt. Wilson-Palomar Observatories, and before that, assistant to Dr. Millikan at the Norman Bridge Laboratory, and, incidentally, a roommate of Bob's.

Neither Glenn nor Ike Bowen could drive, so Bob had the sole responsibility of driving the old Essex by himself all the way from Chicago to Pasadena over dirt roads. The last pavement ended in Chicago and started again in San Bernardino. Bob soon found out that the car was, to say the least, a little dilapidated. On desert stretches and mountains, every time they came down a hill they had to stop and get out and clean all the spark plugs. I think Ike helped on that problem. But they made it and they came out, somewhat bedraggled with beards, a little before the Millikans and left the car at the Millikans' home on Palmetto Drive, where they first lived.

I don't know when the Faculty [Women's] Club came officially into being. When I came out as Dr. Millikan's secretary in January 1922, in the Norman Bridge Laboratory, faculty wives were meeting informally in the homes of various wives. Active in this group, which was then named the Faculty Women's Club of the California Institute of Technology, were, as I remember, Mrs. R. R. Sorensen (Grace), Mrs. Franklin Thomas, Mrs. E. C. Barrett, Mrs. Walter Whitney, Mrs. Van Buskirk, Mrs. R. R. Martel, and the newly arrived Mrs. R. A. Millikan, among others. Mrs. Lucian Gilmore, Mrs. Clapp, and Mrs. Hinrichs were also active.

For many years the Faculty Women's Club met regularly on the first [Wednesday] of every month at 3 pm for tea, from October through June, in members' homes; then in Culbertson Hall basement, or sometimes up above if we had lecturers. And finally, after the Athenaeum was built in 1930, we met there. It was the custom also to have one midwinter dinner, either catered in the basement of Culbertson Hall or at one of the famous hotels—the old Vista del Arroyo, the Huntington, or the old Maryland Hotel. I well remember a dinner at the old Maryland in the winter of 1925 when I was

president of the club and had to introduce Dr. Millikan as our speaker a short time before our son, Frederick, was born; and I was trying to look very slim and unconcerned wearing a ruffled jabot [decorative ruffle], but I'm afraid I didn't fool anyone.

In those days of the 1920s it was considered essential to wear gloves, hat, and veil to the teas. And in October, no matter how hot it might be, we had to appear in our new heavy fall dark clothes! Maggie Laing, Mrs. Graham Laing, was the only one strong-minded enough to refuse to wear hat, gloves, or much less a veil, and wore her hair cropped short long before we dared to do such things. Mrs. [Greta] Millikan was very positive about faculty wives having proper dress.

Mrs. Millikan was really remarkable. Soon after her arrival in the fall of 1921, she instituted Sunday teas at her home for the students, inviting some of us young wives to give them, as she said, proper cultural training. She was active in the Faculty Women's Club. I remember picking out cutlery and dishes for our dinners with her in the basement of Culbertson Hall, and also her interest in Pasadena community affairs. She became the third president of the Pasadena College Women's Club, from 1923 to 1925—Mrs. Frederick W. Hinrichs of Caltech was the first president. Mrs. Millikan threw herself into assisting Gilmor Brown in developing the Pasadena Community Playhouse, getting Caltech students to take part and to assist in raising funds to move the old Playhouse from the old theatre on North Fair Oaks, with its rickety folding chairs, to the beautiful new Playhouse on South El Molino, which became the official playhouse of the State of California and a training center for many of the old movie stars. In those days Pasadena had only about 50,000 [population]. We all flocked to the Playhouse and enjoyed coffee in the patio during the intermission while we visited with many of our Caltech friends.

You asked about the organization of the old Faculty Women's Club. As I remember, it was very informal; and I doubt we had a constitution in those days. When we met in members' homes, we sat and talked, knitted and sewed, and had tea without a formal program. Then as programs developed later, I doubt that our speaker was paid; and I know our dues were very low—I rather think a dollar a year just to cover mailing costs. When notices of meetings were mailed in the 1920s postcards were sent for 1¢.

I remember the older faculty wives also made formal calls on us new brides—Myrtle Kurth, Irene DuMond, and later Mrs. Linus Pauling, and Mrs. William Houston, and others. I remember May Thomas—Mrs. Franklin [Thomas]—always drove her smart little electric car with its crystal vase sporting a flower. In those days we were always very close and friendly and knew all the faculty wives. It was a small, intimate group. I do not recall any particularly famous speakers. The emphasis was on good fellowship and social things.

Our parties in the evening were always gay but without liquor. For a number of years, we had special ones like the circus at Culbertson Hall with all the professors in costume; and, of course, our regular Christmas parties each year with dinner, games, stunts, musical chairs, and dancing followed by Christmas carols and a late pancake supper with the professors tossing the pancakes. Even the Millikans entered into the spirit. We should badly miss that traditional party were it to be discontinued. I'd hate to see it go. And I can still remember breaking a few chairs while we were doing musical chairs till finally the Athenaeum said, "No more musical chairs!" I happened to be chairman of their parties for a number of years and ran all those.

You also asked about my working at the Institute before marriage. As I remember I received about \$100 a month as secretary of the Physics Department. I do remember definitely when I was secretary of the Graduate School at Cornell that I did receive \$100 a month. And that brings up the subject of why I came. My father, Dr. Frederick Bedell, and Dr. Millikan were exactly the same age. Father was at Cornell and was also a charter member of the American Physical Society and editor of the *Physical Review* for forty years and a very close friend of Millikan's. When he was on sabbatical and taking a trip around the United States, Dr. Millikan wrote my father and said, "Your daughter is secretary of the Graduate School at Cornell. Would she like to come out and open a new college, the California Institute of Technology?"

And so, I came out in January. Bob had already driven the Millikans' car out in October and the Millikans came a short time afterwards. After marriage, I doubt that I would have been accepted. In those days, wives did not work outside their homes; but we had plenty of bridge parties and social events for the wives.

One of the great events of the early 1930s [was] soon after the Athenaeum was built. The Allan Balchs [Allan and Janet Balch] gave a party at the Athenaeum to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary, inviting all the faculty and wives. It was a hot summer afternoon. We came in light clothes—our very best—to find the Balchs receiving in a golden bower with the Los Angeles Symphony Orchestra playing in the background and the Olive Walk festooned with gold leaves and lights. After we came, the Balchs asked us to stay for dinner and dancing afterwards. Tables with white cloths were stretched down the Olive Walk and it turned cold. And the wives, clad only in their light summer afternoon frock, had to take refuge from the cold at times in the beautiful new Athenaeum. Never was there such a party! At the end of about three hours, as I remember it, the Balchs were tired and gave up the receiving line, but they stood for nearly three hours receiving us coming in. In the evening they put down the dance floor and had a dance band to replace the symphony orchestra, so we were there from, say, four in the afternoon until ten or eleven at night.

I could go on and on; but you see [why] I have a special love in my heart for the Faculty Women's Club and Caltech and have never regretted staying in Pasadena.

[NOTE: Second part of tape jammed. Due to jam, Eleanor Burt's recollections recounted by Alice Stone.]

QUESTION: Eleanor, could you tell us a little about what Caltech was like when you first came in the 1920s, and what Pasadena was like then?

The winter of 1921/1922 was memorable not because of the arrival of a very timid Easterner, Eleanor Bedell, or even for the dedication of the Norman Bridge Laboratory of Physics, but for the record rainfall—well over 25 inches, as she remembers.

Eleanor, a bit tired and a bit grimy from three nights on the coal burning, jolting Santa Fe from Chicago, arrived on a beautiful sunny day in January 1922, fresh out of Smith College and Cornell University to become the first secretary of the new, still unfinished, Norman Bridge Laboratory at the invitation of Robert A. Millikan, a close friend of her father's, Frederick Bedell, a physicist at Cornell University.

Driving to her “boarding house,” a gracious old house, on South Euclid Avenue lined with magnificent pepper trees, dripping with red berries in January sunshine, Eleanor fell in love with Pasadena on the spot. What a contrast to her New England blizzards! Feeling a bit lonely and a long way from home, she was delighted to be invited that evening to attend a play at the Pasadena Playhouse on North Fair Oaks Avenue. [Everyone] sat on folding, wooden chairs and many of the Caltech students were in the cast of players. Under the direction of Gilmor Brown, the play was quite professional and lots of fun. Eleanor’s invitation that night came from the kindly, famous Dutch physicist, Dr. Hendrik A. Lorentz and his wife, who were staying at the same “boarding house” as he lectured that winter at Caltech.

ELEANOR BURT CONTINUES:

My first Sunday in Pasadena was unforgettable. Inga Howard invited me to explore the Arroyo Seco, then an unspoiled beauty spot. Leaving the car at the mouth of the canyon, taking a picnic lunch, we followed the winding, shady [stream], at times barely escaping a dunking as we hopped from rock to rock. Inga’s kindness helped me through those first days in the new Norman Bridge Laboratory. She had been secretary to the president of old Throop Polytechnic and was then Dr. Millikan’s indispensable secretary in Throop Hall.

Taking a rattling electric trolley car down Los Robles and out California Street—no boulevard then—to the end of the line and the end of the pavement at Tournament Park, I had my first glimpse of the new California Institute of Technology, then a small group of buildings: Throop Hall, Gates Chemical Laboratory, the new Norman Bridge Laboratory of Physics, and, way off at the corner of Wilson and California, Culbertson Hall, the auditorium with a small stage and folding chairs which, as I recall, was built largely by public donations and watched over most carefully by Arthur Fleming, a large contributor. In addition, there were some old World War I barracks; and off through the orange groves an old house then used by graduate students and instructors as a faculty club [the “Old Dorm”]. What fun they had in the informal, somewhat battered, old faculty club!

That first memorable morning [when] I walked into the Norman Bridge it was almost completely bare, the concrete still damp, and with little or no heat. Earnest Watson took me down the hall to a small office on the right with a desk, a file, a chair or two and little else and said, “Miss Bedell, you better go down to Vroman’s Bookstore and buy what office supplies you need.” He then took me to a room across the hall and pointing to a pile of catalogs stacked on the floor, said, “Please arrange and catalog these when we have some shelves.”

A short time later, Dr. Paul Epstein came into my office and said, “Miss Bedell, I want you to assist me in cataloging and arranging the physics library which will arrive soon.” He pointed to the room adjoining my office, almost completely bare except for a handsome old refectory table with matching chairs from an old Spanish monastery. So began my brief career as a secretary to Dr. Millikan in the Norman Bridge Laboratory!

I have vivid recollections of that winter and spring of 1922—rain and more rain, bridges on the San Gabriel [River] being swept away, flooded streets, and my struggle to keep warm, typing in my trusty fur coat, my feet on burlap sacks in a vain attempt to keep the cold from penetrating from the still damp concrete floors—as I remember, no heat! But also, the challenge of typing scientific papers and letters for the famous Dr. Millikan, and the fun of being the only girl in the building with half a dozen young graduate students asking for dates and dropping in for a morning cup of coffee which I brewed in the tiny room off my office. This in the days before “coffee breaks” were sanctioned!

One sunny spring day, the Norman Bridge Laboratory was formally dedicated in ceremonies on the steps of the Laboratory attended by Dr. Norman Bridge himself. One day all the staff of the laboratory, including Dr. Millikan and Dr. H. A. Lorentz, gathered on the steps for a photograph which, I think, still hangs on the landing of Norman Bridge between the first and second floors. It is easy to spot me in the photograph—the only girl. The beautiful collie dog in the front belonged to Bob Burt, my future husband. [The dog's] name was Buddy.



**Eleanor Bedell here with Caltech's physics faculty, March 1922
Seated in center, visiting lecturer Hendrik A. Lorentz**

The poppy fields of Altadena burst into bloom. You who have come in recent years have no idea of the blaze of poppy fields from Pasadena when they were in bloom, miles of them. We took the old Mt. Lowe incline from Rubio Canyon near the top of

Lake Avenue, changed to an electric trolley car and wound over canyons—often on a [trestle] hanging over the cliffs which terrified this eastern tenderfoot—to the Alpine Tavern, which later burned down, and then hiked several miles to the top of Mt. Lowe.

Another day Bob Burt and I took the [Pacific Electric's] Big Red Car [trolleys] to Azusa, walked to the stage station at the mouth of San Gabriel Canyon and took the stage, an old four wheel farm wagon with high seats to keep passengers' feet out of the water during the frequent river crossings. The water was so high it often came up to the floorboards and the horses' bellies. Rattlesnakes were just coming out from hibernation, and they *really* frightened me. After a long, hard trip up and back down the San Gabriel Canyon, I was delighted to accept a lift back to Pasadena in the auto of a fisherman we met on the stage. I still remember sinking into that comfortable seat! I don't think I could have made it otherwise.

We thought nothing of driving to Venice for an evening of dancing on the old Venice Pier and a ride on the scary Ferris wheel or an evening of fun and games on the old Long Beach Pike. These with my various dates, graduate students most of them from the Physics Department, but all of them from Caltech. One chilly evening in March, one of the graduate students invited me to drive down to the Pike in his open touring car. Being an Easterner, I forgot just how cold you can get on a chilly March evening in an open touring car. I wore my blue cape which was inadequate to say the least. By the time we reached the Long Beach Pike—called the Fun Zone—I was frozen. My date walked me up and down the full length of the Pike, never even asking me to go in for a cup of hot chocolate—and I being too polite to ask for it. We drove all the way back to Pasadena in near freezing weather. When I remember that my Bob received only \$900 a year as a Caltech research fellow, and others received only \$600, I don't wonder that our evenings' entertainment was inexpensive!

Bob Burt had acquired a stripped-down Stanley Steamer. Now, with the energy crisis [oil crisis of 1978], the Stanley is again in the news. One night he invited me to drive with him to the top of Lake Avenue to see the lights of the city below us. Conveniently, he had to stop to get more steam in the boilers. Residents apparently complained to the police about us and up drove a police car, questioned us, and told us to drive ahead of them all the way back to Caltech! They wouldn't believe us! An

ignominious ending to our evening in the Stanley Steamer! One time, Bob was taking another girl in his Stanley when it sprung a leak in the fire box, flooded with steam and coasted down across Colorado [Boulevard] in a cloud of steam, pausing only long enough to let out his date as he went. After that, he sometimes borrowed Lewis Mott-Smith's car, complete with "rumble seat," for our drives.

My first introduction to the Women's Faculty Club was a meeting at the home of Mrs. Walter Whitney. I remember some twenty or thirty faculty wives were sitting in a circle with their sewing and knitting. When they broke up for refreshments and all started chatting together, I felt very out of it; but in a moment many of them came over to greet me, and from that time on I felt very much a part of the Faculty Women's Club, meeting always the first Wednesday afternoon except for occasional dinners and special parties.

In June 1922, I left Pasadena to join my family in their Hupmobile [built from 1909 to 1939 by the Hupp Motor Car Company of Detroit] for a rugged camping trip through the National Parks of the West and back to Cornell, where I was married in June 1923 in the Cornell University Chapel to Robert Burt. By then I had resigned my job as secretary to Dr. Millikan to become the wife—and, as I soon found out—the permanent secretary of Bob Burt! The Physics Department presented us with a painting by Dr. Jesse DuMond's father, chosen by Mrs. Millikan and Art [Arthur L. ("Maj")] Klein, which we proudly hung over the mantel of our new home, which Bob had built on South Michigan, just across the street from the now Beckman parking lot.

Now I became a real member of the Faculty Women's Club—now the Women's Club—and a year later I became president. It was a year of rewarding work, and lots of fun. As I remember, we continued to meet in private homes for a while. One meeting was under [the] huge spreading English walnut tree in our garden. Elizabeth Swift and Ernest [Swift] lived nearby. So, when I needed to borrow extra chairs or silver, she was glad to lend them. We had some meetings in the basement of Culbertson Hall. It was so noisy with the clatter of dinner dishes and everyone talking at once that Bob, who was then testing acoustic plaster for a number of companies, offered to have the ceiling lined with acoustic plaster. It helped, but, of course, didn't compare with the magnificent Athenaeum where we later moved in 1930.

to a beautiful, level grassy spot and [we] promptly went to sleep. At 6 am next morning, we were awakened by a bugle call and to our horror found ourselves camped in the middle of a military parade ground in front of the fort! Bob and I were sleeping in our car, first in the line, the others on the ground. We scrambled for our clothes. In my haste I put my pants on backwards. The soldiers broke rank, marched up to us, stuck their heads in the window, said, "Buenos Dias!" and then disappeared into the bushes to answer the call of nature and then went back to the fort. We drove off in great disarray, hoping not to end up in a Mexican jail.

I could go on and on with other stories, but enough said. Now you know why we decided to stay in Pasadena and not move back east!



Eleanor and Robert Burt, ca 1973