

## **Women's History Month: Elizabeth Lowrie, Pioneer of Washington Township**

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*for the Washington Township Museum of Local History*

Born in Newark in 1880, Elizabeth Lowrie was the youngest and the last surviving member of her immediate pioneering family from Washington Township (now Fremont, Newark and Union City). Her father, George Lowrie was born in Scotland in 1832, immigrated to the United States in 1847 and settled in Washington Township in 1853. He worked as a farm hand and cook (with a specialty in bread making) between Newark and Alvarado and settled in Irvington. George was known for his ability to spin long, comical yarns -- a trait that he passed on to his youngest daughter. In 1871, he married Harriet Thompson. Together they had five children.

Hay baling was intense, with most of the work done by manpower. The men jumped and trampled on the hay to pack it into solid bales. Typically, farm hands consumed five meals a day. On top of his regular duties, together George and Harriet prepared and served food to the workers. This was the family that Elizabeth was born into.

She spent her adolescence going to school, working and playing on the family farm, and exploring with her siblings. From the ages of 25-35 (1905 – 1915), Elizabeth lived in the Mission hills with her sister, Phoebe, who suffered from tuberculosis. The two women first lived in a tent near Calaveras and Alameda Creeks and then near the Overacker house on Mill Creek Road. The second year, their brother David built them a small cabin to live in.

During their time in the Mission hills, the women worked to build and organize their home. They also explored the hills and looked for ways to earn their way. Wild pigs invaded their food supply, so they gathered wild plum branches from the Linda Vista farm over the hill (Ohlone College today) and made baskets, which they used and sold for an income. Next, Elizabeth and Phoebe collected butterflies to earn money. They had a mentor who came from San Francisco to teach them the trade. The entrepreneurs subscribed to the journal *The Butterfly Farmer*, and their brother helped them construct cages and stretching boards to raise and preserve the best specimens. They connected with the most prestigious collector in the nation, Dr. William Barnes and worked “on assignment”, collecting and raising various butterfly and moth species and shipping them to him via train from Irvington Station. At the time, Barnes paid them up to \$5 per butterfly or moth, a relatively large sum for the period. He even named a moth, *Tolype Lowrieii* in their honor. The entire collection of Dr. Barnes was donated to the Smithsonian Institute after his death. It is still part of their archives today.

Imagine for a moment how the area of Elizabeth’s youth has changed. For the first seven years of her life, the family lived on property near Patterson house, which is still there today. This is where her father built a small two-story house and near where Elizabeth and her siblings collected Native American artifacts. The house was later moved to just across the railroad tracks from the entrance of the Ardenwood Historic Farm (in a housing development near the corner of Roxie and Tupelo Terrace). The Lowrie's next move was to the Marshall house - close to today’s Fremont Bart station and Walnut Avenue. There they lived next to a lake, the remnants of which include part of today’s Tule Pond. Elizabeth recalled the pond freezing in the winter and ducks sliding across the ice when trying to land. From this home, the Lowrie children walked to school where Centerville Junior High School is today. Next, the family moved to the Mowry farm, close to today’s Irvington High School. Her father managed the farm there and Elizabeth rode her

horse to Washington Public School (Irvington) at the corner of Lincoln and Union Streets. After George retired, the Lowrie's bought a home on Main Street (Fremont Blvd. today), between Carol Street and Blacow Road.

Elizabeth Lowrie was a jack-of-all-trades. When Phoebe and Elizabeth returned to live in Irvington, Elizabeth needed to earn a living while she cared for her ailing mother and sister. She took a course in millinery (in Oakland) and opened a shop in Irvington catering to Portuguese clients who needed new hats for the annual Portuguese festivals. She ran the shop for ten years. Elizabeth was also an accomplished organist and donated her time to several local churches. Later, Elizabeth wrote verses, which she sold to national greeting card companies, as well as two short stories for children. She also worked as the Irvington librarian (first for the County Free Library, and later for Alameda County Library) from 1938 – 1962, retiring at age 82. Many people who grew up in Irvington during this time remember her as their first librarian who demanded a quiet and clean library.

Her instinct to collect was again awakened during her time as a librarian. In 1948, she compiled a collection of over 1600 buttons, making her collection books by hand and exhibiting them in various displays and shows throughout the area.

Her work at the library was demanding. In 1959, she recalled some of her time there, writing, "From July '57 to July '58, I circulated 13,285 books without assistance." Elizabeth went on to note the inequality of pay, writing, "[I was] paid by the month – about 30 cents per hour. [The] boy who mopped [the] floor and washed windows received 75 cents per hour. [I] used to wonder if it wouldn't be better to trade jobs." Finally, she noted, "Still [receiving] the same pay per hour as received six years ago. May starve, can't earn enough to pay taxes." She was a witty woman in her own right.

In 1971, Elizabeth described herself as "tougher than a boiled owl", and she proved it to be true many times throughout her long life. Neither she nor any of her siblings ever married. She passed away in 1979, just two days' shy of her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. She is fondly remembered as a true pioneer in Washington Township and someone worth celebrating during Women's History Month!

Elizabeth's story is illustrated in a display at the Washington Township Museum of Local History (190 Anza St in Fremont) and at the Fremont Main Library, Maurice Marks Center for Local and California History (2400 Stevenson Blvd, 2nd floor) through April 30<sup>th</sup>. Stop by during open hours to learn more and explore her button collection in person. Additionally, view a PowerPoint on her life story by visiting the museum website at <http://museumoflocalhistory.org/special-exhibits/>.