

The First: Ruth Rogers and the Hayward City Council

Written by HAHS Staff

If you look at Hayward City Council in 2020, it is majority women, 4-3. Do you know the last time the Hayward City Council was majority women? The answer is never. The current Hayward City Council is the first time this has happened in the history of the city.

So, who was the first woman to serve on the Hayward City Council? The answer is Ruth Le Boyd Rogers. And she served a lot earlier than you might have guessed.

Ruth Rogers came to Hayward in 1906 with her husband Conway Rogers, a minister at the First Presbyterian Church. Ruth quickly joined the local Hill and Valley Club (an all-women's organization) and was very active in Hayward's social scene.

In 1922, four years after her husband's death, Ruth ran for a seat on the Hayward City Council and won. She was 52 years old at the time. We don't have very much information regarding her initial election, but we do know that she received 426 votes and won out over two men running for the same seat. She knew how to mobilize her resources well: the Hill and Valley Club meeting minutes for April 24, 1922, include a note suggesting a committee be formed to attend the council meetings in support of Ruth.

Ruth quickly assumed her duties on the council, with special attention to public health issues. She pushed for the enforcement of Prohibition laws, as well as for the vaccination of dogs to prevent the spread of rabies. A variety of newspaper articles praised Ruth for her work ethic and dedication as a City Council member. She won reelection in 1926 and continued on with the work of improving the city.

Her accomplishments included helping to tear down a dangerous old pavilion in Memorial Park, voting in favor of the construction of a new City Hall (the building currently on Mission Boulevard), and securing funding for the planting of over 100 trees throughout the city. She also worked very closely with the Health Department, especially on issues related to child welfare. By all accounts, it seems that Ruth was a respected member of the council and community. As a woman, however, there were limits to what Ruth could do.

Prior to the 1960s, the Hayward City Council would choose a mayor from among its members every year. In her eight years on the council, Ruth Rogers was never chosen as mayor. Based on council records, it doesn't appear to have ever even have been considered. In her campaigns, however, Ruth used the fact that she was a woman to her advantage. As a mother, her campaign literature is filled with references to homemaking and motherhood, and the moral authority that comes with it. This was a common argument in women's suffragette materials of the time, as an attempt to expand women's traditional caretaking role into the public sphere. While running for reelection in 1930, her pamphlet to voters stated: "A WOMAN'S PLACE is in the home, but her home means her city as well as her house, and there is municipal housekeeping to be done which can be done better by a woman than a man." In other words, if

women had to accept an argument of inferiority on some issues, then obviously men must accept it for others.

To the Women Voters of Hayward:

Hayward, April 10, 1930.

Dear Madam:—

Don't fail in your duty as a citizen to vote in the election on Monday, April 14, when two members of the City Council are to be chosen.

A WOMAN'S PLACE is in the home, but her home means her city as well as her house, and there is municipal housekeeping to be done which can be done better by a woman than a man.

We should have at least one woman on the city council. Mrs. Ruth Rogers, who for eight years has demonstrated her unselfish willingness to sacrifice time and private means for the benefit of beautifying and cleaning up Hayward, is up for reelection.

A pamphlet from Ruth's 1930 reelection campaign.

While the local newspapers consistently endorsed Ruth for reelection, they continued to do so using these same ideas. They emphasized that, as a homemaker and mother, Ruth could nurture certain projects, but they appreciated that she still had enough "common sense" to work with the rest of the council—aka the boys club. So while Ruth was accepted in Hayward politics, she was accepted as *the* voice for women, not all of Hayward and certainly not its men.

This level of condescension continued through her eight years on the council. Perhaps most striking is when Ruth filled in for the mayor who was out of town for one council meeting. The headline in the *Hayward Review* read: "Hayward Ruled by Lady Mayor for Single Hour". The headline made light of the situation and made sure to note that the male members of the council were okay with the temporary arrangement and even joked about it. It is uncertain how Ruth felt about headlines like this, but the newspaper comments are reflective of male attitudes toward women at the time. Reading them today, they sound outright sexist.

Regardless, Ruth was a savvy politician, using voter's preconceived notions about womanhood to get elected twice, which is a remarkable accomplishment for the 1920s. Remember, women's

suffrage came to California in 1911 and wasn't nationwide until 1920. All of this is more remarkable considering that the next woman elected to the Hayward City Council would be Ilene Weinreb in 1968— almost thirty years later.

The *Hayward Journal* noted after her loss in the 1930 election that “the City of Hayward owes [Ruth Rogers] a vote of thanks for her many civic improvements which have aided in beauty. But someone had to lose as is the usual procedure in all elections.”

Ruth spent the rest of her life in Hayward. She died in August of 1956, still having been the only woman to serve on the Hayward City Council at that time.



The Hill and Valley Club posing at the home of Edith Park, July 26, 1912. Ruth Rogers is believed to be the woman seated in the front row, third from the left. This photo was taken ten years before her election to the council.

We wonder what Ruth would have thought of today's City Council, and of current two-term Mayor Barbara Halliday? We hope she would be proud.



The 2020 Hayward City Council, courtesy of the City of Hayward. Back row, left to right: Mark Salinas, Al Mendall, Francisco Zermeño. Front row, left to right: Sara Lamnin, Aisha Wahab, Barbara Halliday, Elisa Márquez.