SORORITY

Marilyn Monroe, Kim Novak, Ayn Rand, and Rita Moreno all called it home.

of

***Cari Beauchamp** uncovers the lost history of L.A.'s women-only Hollywood Studio Club—a safe haven for aspiring celebrities*

STARS

ROOMS OF THEIR OWN A 1950s view of the Hollywood Studio Club courtyard. Residents had to be 18 to 35—and men were prohibited above the first floor.

For more than a century in Hollywood,

young women have learned in horrendous ways that men in power often consider them goods to be bartered or simply consumed. There is little new about #MeToo, but what *is* new is that women are shattering their isolation by speaking out and finding strength and community as a result. Yet for nearly 60 years there was a residence that housed women (10,000 in all) in a protected and supportive environment. And though few people remember the Hollywood Studio Club, a recounting of its neglected history reveals how little has changed—and how powerful female friendships can be.

Beginning in the early 1910s, as the movies made Southern California their base of operations, young women flocked to Hollywood, hoping to be a part of it. Fan magazines urged them to stay home. A speech by the world's highest-paid actress, Mary Pickford, warned them to keep away. It didn't work. They flocked west because the movies made the movies look pretty darn good.

Films opened a whole new world. Young women sat in darkened theaters, and the adventurous, independent female spirits on the screen sparked their imagination. How were you going to keep them down on the farm after they'd been to the local cinema?

In 1915, a librarian named Eleanor Jones noticed a group of young women meeting regularly in the basement of the Hollywood Library to read Ibsen aloud to one another. Jones approached the YWCA about providing a more conducive venue, and with financial help from local business groups, a three-bedroom house was leased at 6129 Carlos Way, near Vine, to create a gathering place for women who aspired to work in film.

Then Pickford went further. She pointed out the lack of available housing for those women. She had taken under her wing an unknown movie extra, ZaSu Pitts, and was about to give her a featured role in *A Little Princess*. Pitts needed a safe and affordable room to let. Soon, sleeping quarters for 10 women were arranged. Pitts was joined by Anne Bauchens, who would become Cecil B. DeMille's film editor, along with Marjorie Daw and Julanne Johnston, both of whom would go on to play opposite Pickford's husband-to-be, Douglas Fairbanks. Budding screenwriters Sarah Y. Mason (later to win an Oscar for her adaptation of *Little Women*) and Agnes Johnston (who wrote scripts for Mickey Rooney's Andy Hardy pictures) moved in, as did future publicist Margaret Ettinger, a cousin of gossip-column doyenne Louella Parsons.

Scores of women would drop by each week for acting lessons, exercise classes, Sunday teas, and dances. There were other benefits too, such as the bins of hand-me-down clothes from the likes of actress Alla Nazimova. Satin dresses and leopard-skin coats were prized for parties, and cast-off frocks and gowns proved crucial, given the fact that an actress, to land a part, was often required to supply her own wardrobe.

By 1922, 22 women were squeezed into the house, with some sleeping in the basement, on porches, and in the garage. Constance DeMille, wife of filmmaker Cecil B., along with Pickford and several studio executives' wives, campaigned to raise $150,000 to build a new, modern Hollywood Studio Club. (Unmentioned in the flurry of publicity surrounding the HSC was the irony that Cecil B. DeMille, along with certain directors and studio chiefs, had a reputation as the very sort of man that the club was supposed *to protect these women from*.)

The Hollywood Studio Club found an outspoken advocate in Will Hays. Today he is best known for mandating the Motion Picture Production Code of the 1930s, a set of strict moral guidelines for motion picture content. But in the early '20s he was filmdom's "movie czar," hired by studio heads, who feared their industry was in crisis. They had been rocked by calls for censorship and by a series of very public scandals, including the sordid Fatty Arbuckle sexual-assault-and-manslaughter trial, the unsolved murder of director William Desmond Taylor, and the drug addiction of matinee idol Wallace Reid. Hays, a proven Republican strategist, directed his lobbying skills toward minimizing bad-news stories (about lecherous casting agents or gin-fueled orgies) and touted the Hollywood Studio Club as a shining example of how the business was proactively protecting its young and virtuous women.

Hays's $20,000 pledge to the building fund was one of the HSC's largest single gifts. The studios followed his lead. The YWCA donated a parcel of land south of Sunset, in Hollywood, and hired Julia Morgan, the renowned California architect, already acclaimed for her public buildings and her work on publisher William Randolph Hearst's ever expanding "castle" at San Simeon.

Morgan's multiarched structure, designed in the Italian Renaissance Revival style, opened to much fanfare in 1926. The first floor featured a spacious lobby, writing rooms, a library, a large dining area, and a stage. The two upper stories consisted of single, double, and triple rooms to house 100 women—each paying 10 to 15 dollars a week for lodging and two meals a day. They were indirectly inspired by Hollywood luminaries such as Gloria Swanson, Jackie Coogan, and Frances Marion, whose names appeared on small brass plaques above the bedroom doors. (Each had donated $1,000 to the club. Norma Talmadge had pitched in $5,000.) The rules of the house were simple: You had to be working or seeking work in show business, be between 18 and 35 years old, and not stay longer than three years. Men were prohibited above the first floor.

To run the HSC, the Y hired the college-educated Marjorie Williams to supervise an all-female administrative staff. There were daily classes, a weekly newsletter, and a bulletin board posting job openings and perks such as free tickets to events. Ayn Rand, then an aspiring writer, arrived from Chicago soon after the new

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THE PLAY'S THEIR THING
The Studio Club had several common areas that doubled as performance spaces.

building opened. Cast as an extra in DeMille's *The King of Kings,* she was considered so destitute that when a donor offered $50 for the neediest resident, Williams chose Rand to receive it. The story goes that she spent it all on black lingerie and then became one of the first (but far from the last) HSC residents to depart for marriage.

The transactional nature of the film business was something most women learned sooner or later. The former child star Cora Sue Collins, today a vital and vibrant 92, still remembers the moment she realized that sex with the bosses was the norm. She was all of eight in 1935 when, as she stood waiting outside Louis B. Mayer's office, the door opened to reveal a woman yelling back at Mayer, "Don't tell *me*! I fucked every one of you bastards on the way up." Collins immediately recognized her as Norma Shearer, the wife of MGM production head Irving Thalberg. (It would be years before Cora Sue learned the meaning of the word *fuck*.)

Before her 17th birthday, Collins would appear as a child in dozens of films, including *Queen Christina* with Greta Garbo. It was then that the prominent MGM screenwriter Harry Ruskin, whom she considered her mentor, offered her a breakout role if she slept with him. Collins ran out of his office, cried until there were no more tears, and then sought out her other father figure, Mayer. He greeted her happily, assuming, as he put it, "Harry gave you the good news." When she protested, Mayer put his hand "with those stubby little fingers" on her shoulder and softly informed her, "You'll get used to it."

Again Collins fled, this time to her mother. But her mother didn't believe her, saying, "Oh, Mr. Ruskin would never do anything like that. What did *you* do to *him*?"—and insisting her daughter return to "apologize" to both men. She did no such thing. Instead, she left the business, believing her situation was unique. But over the years Collins distinctly recalls discussing what happened with five other actresses; all had had similar stories, most had acquiesced to the demands, and none of their mothers had believed them.

The heartbreaking self-doubt, self-loathing, and shame they experienced sounds much like the #MeToo encounters of today. Collins, who has told others this story anonymously, is allowing her name to be used for the first time

STUDIO CLUB

because finally—after 75 years—she has shed the last remnants of blaming herself. That hidden reality gives new reason to appreciate the existence of the Hollywood Studio Club. In interview after interview, former residents speak of the relief of finding a place that encouraged opportunities while providing an oasis of protection.

From the '30s onward, the HSC drew the attention of magazines and newspapers with headlines that ranged from "A Haven for Hopefuls" to "Boarding House of Broken Hearts." The articles gave editors a great excuse to run cheesecake photo spreads in which the young big-screen wannabes were generally depicted as happy, enthusiastic, and collegial. The stories evoked the film *Stage Door* on steroids, with women waiting for the phone to ring with a job offer or young suitors arriving to meet their dates, who dramatically descended the club's staircase. Many of the accounts stressed that men were not allowed above the ground floor—even though outside the premises, all limits were off. A veteran director was quoted as saying: "I remember that place. You had to get your blow jobs in the car."

Almost everyone heard abortion horror stories: someone who was hospitalized with massive bleeding, was made sterile, or died. At the time there was no dependable birth control, and abortions were illegal but readily available, with varying degrees of safety and hygiene. One woman remembers that during the '40s, "I took three different friends to three different places for their abortions. Two of them went on to have children, so there wasn't permanent physical damage." When the press mentioned that someone was sidelined by an "appendectomy," it was often assumed to be code for a terminated pregnancy.

When America entered World War II, the HSC, like most other Hollywood social centers, joined the war effort. Dances for servicemen were held on Saturday nights. Residents knitted slippers and blankets in the library and volunteered at the Hollywood Canteen.

In 1945, Marjorie Williams, the club's director for a generation, retired, to be eventually replaced by Florence Williams (no relation). One resident remembers the second "Miss Williams" as being "right out of central casting; she always wore a cardigan and her hair in a bun. She was so very proper." Miss Williams was often the one at the front desk and, by all accounts, really "knew her girls," particularly those who needed a little extra attention.

And the ingenues kept arriving. Actresses Barbara Hale, Donna Reed, Dorothy Malone, Ann B. Davis, and Marie Windsor all called the HSC home when they first moved to Hollywood. There was usually a long waiting list, but if a major studio called, you went to the head of the line. That's what happened to Barbara Rush, who, less than two weeks after coming to town, found herself in the office of Adolph Zukor, chairman of the board at Paramount. "He asked where I was living, and when I told him I hadn't settled anywhere yet," Rush remembers, "he told me, 'You will be at the Studio Club.' It made sense: It was close to Paramount, and they could keep an eye on me."

"Kim Novak would just take off her shirt as she was walking down the hall."

Today, the fellow resident Rush remembers best is Marilyn Monroe: "She wasn't a bombshell then, and was so sweet with that whispery voice." Robert Wagner, who, along with Monroe, was under contract at Twentieth Century Fox, recalls dropping off Monroe at the HSC and thinking "the concept of the place was just fantastic," especially for someone like her, who "everybody loved and felt protective of."

In late 1949, Monroe secured a part in John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle*. While she had had small roles at Fox, Monroe would later say that she so needed $50 in 1949 that she agreed to pose for what would become her infamous nude calendar. Even if the HSC suffered negative backlash as a result, house director Florence Williams fondly remembered Monroe. When asked who was the most stunning woman she ever encountered there, Williams answered, "Marilyn Monroe, because she was even beautiful first thing in the morning."

Williams was also fond of another breathtaking resident, Kim Novak. When Columbia chief Harry Cohn put Novak under contract, he had insisted that she stay at the HSC. Not that there was any love lost between them, but Cohn wanted to totally control her private life, going so far as to hire private security to keep tabs on her.

Yet Cohn wasn't very successful, according to Novak's fellow boarder Betty Kelly, a radio and TV staffer at CBS who, for a time, was the house's official social chair. Later on, says Kelly today, "Cohn ordered her to stay out of Sammy Davis Jr.'s bed, but Kim did whatever she wanted. She stopped traffic. She was a model for a CONTINUED ON PAGE 131

BANNER YEAR
Actress Lois Lee at the original building in 1922, when planning began for an all-new facility.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 128 couple of minutes, and then she was a star."

While many speak of the solidarity found at the HSC, Kelly remembers it as cliquish: "The other girls were mean to Kim because they were jealous of her success." Kim also stood out for her platinum hair with a purple hue and because "she had great boobs. She'd just take off her shirt as she was walking down the hall."

"Kim never wore a bra—I was astonished," confirms the acting and dance legend Rita Moreno, who had left her mother's home for her own apartment but couldn't afford the rent. "I heard there was this place for girls in show business who hadn't made it yet and you got two meals a day for $15 a week," so she and her friend Louise Martinson moved in. After some initial professional ups and downs "playing a lot of little Indian maidens," Moreno signed a contract with Fox. Today, Moreno, 87, marvels at how naive she was, even after being raped by her first agent. She also relates some very close calls with a persistent Buddy Adler, then head of production at Fox, and meeting Cohn at a party, where he told her, "'I'd like to fuck you,'" in the same "tone you might use to remark on the weather."

Sparks flashed when Moreno met Marlon Brando on the Fox lot. Soon, she was taking his calls on the hallway phone, grabbing her nail polish on the way because, she says, "he was on the phone for hours at a time." Curled up on the floor with the receiver on her shoulder and the cord stretched as far as it would go, she gave herself a manipedi. "All the girls wanted to know what happened on my dates with him, so Louise said, 'Let's write down your whole experience and read it out loud.'" One night they did just that, and their bedroom was packed as Moreno recounted accompanying Brando to an Actors Studio party in the Valley—where she met Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, and James Dean.

As her romance with Brando intensified, Moreno found living at the HSC restrictive. As soon as she felt secure with her studio contract, "Louise and I poached two other girls from the Club and got our own little house."

Model and actress Sharon Tate was another nascent star who found shelter at the HSC, as was Barbara Eden, who, despite her innocence (the other girls derisively referred to her as "the Virgin"), took a job as a hostess at Ciro's nightclub. "I didn't last long," she remembers. Her career soon took off, though, boosted by Lucille Ball's encouragement after Eden was cast in one of the last episodes of *I Love Lucy*. She kept at it, going on to star in *I Dream of Jeannie*. "I wouldn't be here today," she contends, "if it wasn't for the Hollywood Studio Club."

Of the thousands of women who lived at the HSC over the decades, only a small percentage found stardom. Many worked as support staff at studios or in ancillary businesses before they either married or just moved on. It wasn't for lack of trying, but as Moreno found when watching one too many a showcase, there were also "some seriously untalented girls" there.

By the early 1960s, there was no waiting list. Vacancies were common, and the occupants were from more diverse backgrounds. "I remember coming down for breakfast that first morning," says Nancy Kwan, who at 18 had been discovered by producer Ray Stark to star in *The World of Suzie Wong*. "I had never seen so many beautiful young women in one place. They were from all over the world, all different colors, and they were speaking different languages. It was wonderful." Nancy's father, back in Hong Kong, only let her come to Hollywood because Stark promised him the city had a secure women's boarding house.

That was the same reason Sally Struthers ended up at the HSC several years later: "Mom heard it was run by the YWCA, and that was good enough for her." To pay the rent, Struthers worked at the Wiltern theater, selling popcorn and cleaning the women's bathroom. When her roommate told her she needed an agent, she started dialing numbers they found listed in the yellow pages hanging near the hallway phone. Struthers got an appointment, but it turned out to be with a modeling agent—Nina Blanchard. When the five-foot-tall Struthers showed up, Blanchard took pity on her and sent her down the hall, where they were casting commercials. That job led to dozens of others and eventually stardom in *All in the Family*. Says Struthers, "I've been working ever since."

As the '60s and '70s brought about enormous culture shifts, the number of residents dwindled to the point that the Hollywood Studio Club was no longer financially sustainable. The doors were closed in 1975 and the furnishings were auctioned off. Several years later, the building was added to the National Register of Historic Places and continued to be maintained by the Y. In the fall of 2018, Faye Washington, CEO of the YWCA Greater Los Angeles, announced a new partnership with PATH (People Assisting the Homeless) to provide transitional housing for about 60 homeless women at the HSC. One of the rules: Residents, like the starry-eyed women of years past, would be allowed to stay for a maximum of three years.

Kwan appreciates this echo and sense of mission, pleased that the architectural jewel will offer a transformative life for a new group of women in the 21st century. "Many of my friends today are women I met at the Studio Club," she says, adding that in her time there she learned what the women of the #MeToo movement have since discovered: "You are never alone when you feel like a part of a larger community."

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