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Storming Politics: San Jose Women in the "Feminist Capital", 1975-2006

Danelle Moon
San Jose University
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In this paper I will present some of the results from my oral history project documenting the political experiences of second wave feminists working in Santa Clara County, California. As office holders and social lobbyists, these women directly transformed the political and social fabric of society. Some of these women played a key role as the first recognized political figures in the region, while others worked to document and write about the female experience and built academic programs around feminism and women's history. Others worked as activists and lobbyists for a variety of causes including the Equal Rights Amendment, the environment, women's legal rights, and pay equity.

This research began with a university research grant, which enabled me to hire four graduate students to conduct research and to assist in the oral interview questions and the interviews. By combining oral history methodology with traditional archival research, I will demonstrate the importance of oral history in preserving second wave experiences. I will briefly describe the historical political climate in San Jose and from there explain the rise of as the "Feminist Capital," in San Jose and Santa Clara Valley. Following this brief overview, I will provide snapshot biographies of the some of the women I have interviewed.

Historical Political Environment:

San Jose and the Clara Valley's history have deep agricultural roots. Fruit production led the regions economic base from the early 1870s to the early 1970s, but during the post-war years, the region began to make its mark as the technology leader of the nation.¹ San Jose experienced a steady population boom from the 1930s to the present. In the 1930s the city leaders recognized that they needed more industry than

¹ Glenna Mathews, *Silicon Valley, Women, and the California Dream* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 13-31, 45-47; Janet A. Flammang, *Women's Political Voice: How women are Transforming the Practice and Study of Politics* (Temple University Press, 1997), 3538; Danelle Moon, "Educational Housekeepers: Female Reformers and the California Americanization Program, 1900-1927" *California History: A Topical Approach*, Edited by Gordon Morris Bakken (Harlan Davidson, 2003)108-112.

agriculture to sustain the local economy. This became particularly true following post-war boom, and the city leaders looking toward the future, created a Master Plan to put San Jose on the map in it's own right, rather than being resigned to a county out-post of San Francisco. The 1958 San Jose Master Plan accurately predicted that the region would become one of the most important centers in the West. Between 1950 and 1970 the population increased in size from 95,280 to 445,779.² As the population boom continued, pro-development became a dominant theme in city government. Pro-development led the City to secure premium strips of land, by annexing large pieces of land away from the county and other competing cities. Annexation resulted in a controversial land-grab, which strained municipal services and birth to the anti-growth and environmental movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Today San Jose is the 10th largest city in the United States, boasting a population over one million. Environmental and land development issues continue to dominate policymaking in this region.³

In 1962 the first anti-growth grassroots campaign challenged City Hall for the first time in its history. Local neighborhood organizations supported the anti-incumbent platform, resulting in the election of the first councilwoman, Virginia Shafffer. Shaffer's success and those following her can be traced the city's failure to provide adequate municipal services to the growing population, from water, police and fire, schools, pollution, and the continued loss of open spaces and parks. Homeowner and neighborhood groups, largely comprised of activist homemakers, spearheaded slow-growth and smart planning, which opened the door for the "Feminist Capital". The next generation of women office holders launched their political careers by endorsing slow-growth and smart planning.⁴

In the early 1970s Bay Area women, and particularly South Bay women, made giant inroads into politics. Jane Gray Hayes became the first elected female mayor in the United States of a city of 500,000. Her political success represented a watershed for

² Philip J. Trounstine and Terry Christensen, *Movers and Shakers: The Study of Community Power* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1982), 79.

³ *Ibid.*, 91-108.

⁴ Matthews, 95-103; Janet A. Flammang, "Female Officials in the Feminist Capital: The Case of Santa Clara County," *Women's Political Quarterly* 38 no. 1 (March 1985), 38-41; Trounstine & Christensen, 99-101.

female office holders in the U.S., and in San Jose this key victory opened a floodgate for female participation in almost every level of California government, from the Mayor's office to the California Assembly, and eventually Congress. As a result the city of San Jose and the Santa Clara Valley became known as the "feminist capital of the nation," and the Bay Area became an "incubator" for female office holding.⁵

Feminist Capital Profile

Historian Glenna Matthews and Political Scientist Janet Flammang in their studies on female political activism point to the economic conditions that transformed San Jose politics. Flammang remarked that the majority of these women benefited from their own affluence, high level of education, strong community and women's networks, and the "clean government" mentality of South Bay residents. All of the women I have interviewed, with the exception of Blanca Alvarado came to San Jose during the early wave of the aero-space and engineering boom. Alvarado, who is now serving her third term on the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, did not come from the upwardly mobile middleclass and continues to make her home in the Hispanic barrio of East San Jose. In contrast, Janet Gray Hayes and Susanne Wilson came from upwardly mobile middleclass neighborhoods. Gray Hayes' husband was a doctor, while Wilson's husband worked for IBM. Blanca Alvarado's socio-economic position and ethnic identity sharply contrast to the affluence of Gray Hayes and Wilson, and serves to highlight the economic disparity between the middle class and the working class and ethnic minorities in this region. Race and class clearly marked the political opportunities for women and minorities, and the institutionalization of district elections combined with grassroots activism created the stage for the "Feminist Capital of the Nation." The birth of the Silicon Valley forever changed the agricultural glory days of the region, yet behind this backdrop, San Jose became the heartland of labor unionism from the farm workers strikes, city and county worker strikes, to high-tech industry organizing. Women worked on both sides of the political spectrum. Female office holders worked to support pay equity, formed and ran the Commission on the Status of Women, while working women

⁵ Jim Puzzanghera, "The Bay Area's Old Girls' Network is Thriving," SJMN, February 17, 2002, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, SJSU.

went out on the picket line demanding equal pay for equal work, or in the case of the electronic workers demand for public health and environmental standards in high-tech industries.⁶

By the 1970s women had made clear inroads into mainstream politics as office holders and as activists. Modern women faced an uphill battle as they entered politics, and despite gender discrimination, female office holders offered a fresh choice to voters. Many women focused on improving family and community life through slow-growth initiatives, smart planning, and environmental and public health policies. According to political scientist Terry Christensen, women had a clear advantage as candidates, because they were “clean and were outside the pockets of developers.” In the 1974 “Survey of Voter Attitudes in the City of San Jose,” prepared for the Janet Gray Hayes election campaign for mayor confirmed the view that women were more honest and less corruptible than men. The majority of those polled (57%) stated that it made no difference whether the mayor was male or female, and 47% felt that more women were needed on the City Council. Voter perceptions and the momentum of the women’s movement, combined with the economic prosperity of the Silicon Valley produced a climate extremely favorable to female office holders.⁷

Janet Gray Hayes

Janet Gray Hayes grew up in a politically active Republican family in Rushville Indiana. She graduated from Indian University in 1948, and went on to the University of Chicago where she earned an MA in social work. She married Kenneth Hayes, a native of San Jose, and they have four children. Prior to their move to California, Gray Hayes worked as a psychiatric social worker with the Jewish Family Service Agency, while her husband attended medical school. She became involved with the PTA, and the League of Women Voters and served as the president of the San Jose branch before entering political life.

Gray Hayes’s appointment to the San Jose Redevelopment Agency launched her political

⁶ Janet Flammang, “Female Officials in the Feminist Capital: The Case of Santa Clara County,” *Women’s Political Quarterly* 38 no. 1 (March 1985), 44-49, 94-118; Matthews, 102-111.

⁷ Flammang, *Women’s Political Voices*,” 40-42; Philip J. Trownstine and Terry Christensen, *Movers and Shakers; The Study of Community Power* (St. Martin’s Press, 1982), 103-108; “A Survey of Voter Attitudes in the City of San Jose, August 17-26, 1974, Prepared for the Janet Gray Hayes for Mayor Campaign, Robert Mang, Campaign Manager, by Diridon Research Corporation, September 19, 1974, Janet Gray Hayes Papers, SJSU.

career. Prior to running for city council, Gray Hayes became the first female chairperson of this agency before entering city politics (1975-1982); Appointment to this agency has served as a springboard for many other women in local politics.

Gray Hayes received tremendous publicity as the first female mayor of San Jose, and nationally as Santa Clara County edged into the political national landscape as the “Feminist Capital of the world.” This combined with the success of other female candidates across the U.S. led a number of national magazines to run stories on the role of women, feminism, and politics. *Time*, *People*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and even some international papers carried stories highlighting the success of these female candidates. Gray Hayes was featured in a number of articles, alongside Diane Feinstein of San Francisco, Jane Byrne of Chicago, Isabella Cannon of Raleigh, North Carolina, Carole McCellan of Austin, Texas, and Margaret Hance of Phoenix, Arizona. In 1979 the *U.S. News and World Report* ran a story highlighting the recent victories of women in politics across the U.S. According to this report 750 cities had female mayors out of 18,800 municipalities—women were making clear inroads into politics at all levels. From 1975 to 1979 the number of women in public office increased from 4.7% to 10.9%, with the largest increase at the local and state levels.⁸

As the first female mayor Gray Hayes faced an up-hill battle breaking down gender stereotypes and discrimination for male office holders in San Jose and across the nation. During her first election campaign she was frequently characterized as an “argumentative housewife,” while her male opponent was described as assertive. She won the election but the newspaper coverage continued to focus on her role as housewife, and ignored her experience on the San Jose Redevelopment Commission and the City Council. Her first experience at a U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting illustrates the difficulties she faced as the lone female in a sea of male politicians: “I was the only woman, and this mayor -- fortunately I forget his name -- turned to me and said, “Oh, and whose secretary are you, dearie?”⁹ And I said, “I’m the mayor of San Jose, California.” She added, “They weren’t used to women being at the same table.” She repeated this

⁸ “In More Big Cities, it’s “Her Honor the Mayor,” *U.S. News and World Report*, July 16, 1979, 53; Joan Libman, “What Makes Janet Run?,” *Family Circle* (February 19, 1980)

⁹ Janet Gray Hayes, “The Bay Area’s Old Girls’ Network; Ex-SJ mayor got most from pioneering post,” *San Jose Mercury News*, February 17, 2002; Janet Gray Hayes, Oral History Interview, April 12, 2006, Interviewed by Danelle Moon, San Jose State University.

story in several newspaper interviews, and frequently referred to the problem as the “Dick and Jane mentality.” After her first election she contacted Katharine Graham of the *Washington Post* and asked her advice on how to deal with the constant stream of sexist comments. Graham responded: “[you] she needed them as they need [you] her and to forget about it.” She took her advice and instead of dwelling on the criticism she focused on getting the job done. At the same time, she was always mindful of the responsibility she carried as the first woman in this position, and understood that her actions were being used to evaluate whether women were capable of political leadership. As the first female mayor in San Jose, she used her position to cultivate and encourage female candidates, helped them campaign through her endorsements, and promoted the appointment of women administrators in city government.¹⁰

During her first election bid in 1974, she ran her campaign on the slogan “Make San Jose Better not Bigger,” and promised to deal with the urban sprawl confronting the city. She won by a small margin, but by her second election she won by a landslide victory, capturing 70% of the vote after a bitter campaign with fellow Councilman, Al Garza. She identified urban sprawl as the most significant issues she faced during her eight years in office. She also faced frequent hostility and gender discrimination from her male peers, but most of her problems had little to do with gender and more to do with planning and development. The city council consisted of 6 members and the mayor. She and the minority council members (Susanne Wilson and Jim Self) faced -off with the “fearsome foursome”— Joe Colla, Al Garza, Larry Pegram, and David Runyon—who supported pro-growth and were in the pockets of developers.¹¹

While urban sprawl and the environment dominated policy making during this time period, Gray Hayes faced other significant social issues from high crime in the city, gang violence, gay rights, ERA, and comparable worth strikes. Gray Hayes tied her success to the connections she held with female organizations like the LWV, NOW, and

¹⁰ “Chicago’s Jane Byrne et al prove the old male mayor ain’t what he used to be,” *People Magazine*, March 19, 1979; Gray Hayes, “Ex-SJ Mayor,” *San Jose Mercury News*, February 17, 2002.

¹¹ Mayor Hayes’ meteoric rise to prominence,” *SF Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, Jan. 1, 1978; “Mayor Hayes; Out to Pasture or off to the Races,” Harry Farrell, *California Today, The Magazine of the San Jose Mercury News*, March 30, 1980, 10-11; S.J. Council nears growth issue showdown,” *San Jose Mercury News*, July 23, 1978, pg. 1, 3A; “Her honor; San Jose Mayor fights urban sprawl in “feminist capital of United States,” *The Arizona Republic*, September 1, 1981, SL16; S.J. Council nears growth issue showdown,” *San Jose Mercury News*, July 23, 1978, 1 & 3a

the NWPC; the later two organizations played an important role in her election campaigns. Gray Hayes was also a champion in using publicity appearances to draw attention to the issues, which served her well in her reelection bid. She succeeded in drawing national and international attention to San Jose as the “Feminist Capital of the world.” In full measure, she spent most of her time promoting slow-growth public policy, environmental issues, and balancing the budget, but in between she also served on the U.S. Conference of Mayors Task Force for the ERA, and she was a strong advocate for comparable worth.¹²

After her retirement in 1982, she continued to promote environmental causes, and is currently active with the community group Citizens Against Air Pollution. Gray Hayes did not run for higher office because the right position never presented itself, but her decision also hinged on her commitment to her family. Over the course of eight years as Mayor of San Jose, she proved that women were more than capable in politics, and she earned the reputation as a pragmatic and tough politician. She also felt a heavy responsibility to excel, knowing that her success would lead to future opportunities for women. In her words: “ I felt...a ...heavy responsibility when I was the only woman on a board to do a good job so that they would appreciate what I was trying to do for the organization so that I could leave...with at least as many women or more than when I started.”¹³ As the first female mayor of San Jose, her success marked the beginning of an era of female politicians in the Bay Area.¹⁴

Susanne Wilson

Susanne (Susie) Wilson had the distinction of being the third woman elected to the San Jose City Council. Similar to Janet Gray Hayes, she lived a classic middle class life as the wife of an IBM engineer, and held membership in a number of organizations, including the PTA, YWCA, and became a key leader of the local branch of the NWPC and California Elected Women’s Association for Education and Research

¹² Farrell, “Mayor Hayes; Out to Pasture or Off o the Races,” SJMN; Matthews, 193-196; Flammang, 166, 184-187.

¹³ Cited in Flammang, *Women’s Political Voice*, 187.

¹⁴ Ibid, 166; Farrell, “Mayor Hayes; Out to Pasture or Off o the Races,” SJMN; Rosalie Nicols, “S. J. Mayor Hayes turns in Gavel,” *Your Paper* (Published in Santa Clara County by Our Projects Inc.), Vol. 1, no. 9, December 22, 1982, p.3; Janet Gray Hayes Interview with Author.

(CEWAER). Wilson grew up in Gonzalez, Texas and her experience living under segregation had an enormous impact on her development as a social activist and later as an office holder.¹⁵ Shortly after moving to San Jose in 1960 Wilson joined the YWCA, one of most progressive and socially responsive organizations in the county. As the momentum of civil rights increased, the local YWCA worked hard to increase minority representation on it's board, which Wilson played a key role. From 1967-1970 Wilson served as the President of YW before running for city council. As biographer of the YWCA, Fran Smith described: "In 1973, at age 44, she ran for office for the San Jose City Council. She didn't have lifelong old-boy ties but she had feisty Texas charm, and her YW years taught her how to court power brokers, cut deals, and raise money," and the grassroots groups helped her work the precincts, knocked on doors, stuffed envelopes, and helped propel her into office."¹⁶

Typical of most of the women who entered early politics in this region, Wilson identified as a volunteer/homemaker, but she also became an outspoken feminist, though a very charming and diplomatic one. She has not lost her fire for politics, and though she has retired from public life, she is one of the primary political powerbrokers in San Jose. Ironically, Janet Gray Hayes did not initially endorse her for the city council because she felt that Wilson was too soft. Once elected, Gray Hayes fully supported her and the two became good friends and allies, though each had very different political styles. Reflecting on some of the differences, Wilson recalled that Janet Gray was very methodical in how she approached decision-making on specific issues. In contrast, Wilson made clear that all of her decisions were based on her core values, which focused on advancing the opportunities for women and minorities.

Janet Gray and I had very different styles. And she was really good at telling voters that this was policy and this was how you do things, and I remember one time we had an interview together, and she explained how she evaluated [policy] and she said I'm a League of Women Voters and I look at the issue and I just find the pros over here, and I find the cons over here, and I make what I hope is a wise decision. And I looked at her and said, that's not the way I do it, and a reporter joined in and I said, I have a commitment to certain things and they've got to fit into what my core values are. I'd like to open up the system for women and

¹⁵ Flammang, *Women in Politics*, 41-42; Matthews, 193-197;

¹⁶ Fran Smith, *Breaking Ground; The Daring Women of the YWCA in Santa Clara Valley, 1905-2005* (YWCA if Silicon Valley, printed by The Press, San Jose, California, 2005), 68-69.

minorities, and so my position coming first is -- does it meet the core values that I have. So, I wasn't going to go and evaluate things."¹⁷

Newspaper accounts and constituent letters confirm Wilson's political conscience and core values to support issues that improved the lives of women, families, and minorities.

As a councilwoman Wilson also had to focus her energies on development, but when possible, she promoted gender equality. For example, she worked on the behalf of the YWCA to get the police to provide sensitivity training for police officers working with rape victims. Today the Police Department works collaboratively with the YWCA and the YWCA rape crisis center is one of the best organized in the county. Wilson also supported gay rights, and worked hard to address low-income housing and childcare issues.¹⁸ After serving two terms on the City Council and ending her final term as Vice Mayor, she won a seat on the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors (District 1); a position that she held from 1978-1990.

During Wilson's tenure on the Board of Supervisors, the "Feminist Capital" took on real meaning as more women won elections and were appointed to various government offices in the region. As a footnote, Iola Williams replaced Wilson on the council and earned the distinction as the first African American and minority women elected to the council. In less than two years following Wilson's tenure on the City Council, seven women were elected to the Council, representing an unprecedented female majority. Wilson became the second woman elected to the Board of Supervisors, and during her term of office, Zoe Lofgren (1980), Becky Morgan (1982) and Dianne Mckenna (1985) joined her on the Board, and Sally Reed (1982) served as County Executive. Santa Clara County women made significant inroads into politics and into high-level professional positions, including Gail Fullerton, the first female president of San Jose State University. South Bay voters clearly accepted women as equals with men in the political realm. Zoe Lofgren put it well when she said: "Ronald Reagan won the election, but maybe the women in Santa Clara County won a lot more." As Flammang demonstrated, the success of these women was striking compared to the national average.

¹⁷ Susanne Wilson Oral History, Interviewed by Danelle Moon, April 10, 2006, San Jose, California.

¹⁸ Matthews, 193-195.

In Santa Clara County women represented the majority on the San Jose City Council and the Board of Supervisors, compared to the national average; 6% of women held county positions, while 13% served at that municipal level.¹⁹

For the majority of female office holders, the Feminist Capital provided a venue to promote feminist issues from pay equity, rape counseling services, domestic violence, childcare and children's shelters. The Board of Supervisors confronted all of these issues, as well other primary urban service issues. The board members voted as individuals, but they frequently worked together to support specific policies, and in a few circumstances the female majority united. The jail controversy, which pitted the Board of Supervisor's against the County Sheriff who controlled the management of the jail-system, is a good illustration of the power of female solidarity and control of county politics. The controversy began in the 1980s when the county jail was full beyond measure and the courts ordered the County to build a new facility. The County agreed that the system needed an overhaul, but they also faced serious budget cuts. In 1988, The Board of Supervisors challenged the Sheriff, resulting in a voter referendum through Measure A and F. Susanne Wilson, Zoe Lofgren, and Dianne McKenna drafted Measure A to address the mismanagement of the County Sheriff in maintaining his budget. The Board pointed to the mismanagement by the Sheriff's budget, which jumped 116%, but failed to address the increase inmates (34%). Measure A proposed to change the County Charter and to transfer the operations of the jail to a Department of Corrections. Through Measure F the Sheriff's union countered the Supervisor's intent to change the charter, and asked the voters to support the Sheriff's sole control and jurisdiction of the jail system. Supervisors McKenna, Wilson, and Lofgren personally funded and launched a publicity campaign to support Measure A. This publicity campaign focused on the responsibilities of the Board in maintaining spending priorities, which included balancing the budget, addressing social service issues, criminal justice and transportation. In one example they brought home some of the tough decisions they faced: "We face the homeless, the elderly, the sick. We respond to people who want additional services, we hear from angry commuters, and we are responsible for how our criminal justice system

¹⁹ Muriel Dobbin, "San Jose turns to female leadership," *Dallas Times Herald*, November 23, 1980; "Iola Williams First Black council member," *Almaden Cambrian Sun*, January 10, 1979. See also Flammang, *Political Women*, 53

is run.”²⁰ In the end, their ballot campaign paid off and Measure A passed. For Wilson and McKenna this event was one of their most memorable because it created a feeling of feminist solidarity, and rare experience in the larger scheme of policymaking in the county.²¹

Dianne McKenna

Dianne McKenna, a native of Pennsylvania, moved to the Silicon Valley in the 1960's. In 1977, she received her Master's Degree in Urban and Regional Planning from San Jose State University. In that same year, McKenna was elected to the Sunnyvale City Council, where she served until 1984 and in 1985 successfully ran for the Santa Clara Board of Supervisors. When asked what the “Feminist Capital” meant to her, she described Janet Gray Hayes’ role in promoting this idea. She did not see herself in this light, but in actuality she served as Mayor of Sunnyvale during the height of the Feminist Capital, and her contributions to the County Board of Supervisors was indeed part of the Feminist Capital.²²

Unlike the mayor of San Jose, the Sunnyvale mayor is not elected but appointed by the city council. McKenna served less than 8 years before being asked to serve as the Mayor. She had fond memories of her time on the council and said that it was a lot of fun. In 1985 she successfully ran for the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and served two terms (1985-1996). In 1985, the Board of Supervisors served a population of 1,365, 100. In contrast Sunnyvale had a population base of 111,090. Moving from city politics to county government was a big step, but McKenna brought her experience in municipal government and her background in urban planning served her well. She worked on a number of planning committees that related to open-space issues and other master planning projects. She initiated recycling efforts as the Chair of the Solid Waste Commission of Santa Clara County, and in 1994 she led the General Plan Review

²⁰ Zoe Lofgren, Susanne Wilson, Dianne McKenna, “County jails: on trail; Yes on Measure A: Corrections department will save tax dollars.” SJMN May 22, 1988; Measure A Publicity Flyer, “Before you decide how to vote on the Jail, take a look at the issue from out point of view,” Supervisor Dianne McKenna, Supervisor Susanne Wilson, Supervisor Zoe Lofgren (1988).

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²² Dianne McKenna Papers Inventory, San Jose State University; Dianne McKenna Oral Interview, April 5, 2006.

Advisory Committee to complete its work of reviewing and updating land use plans and policies. She also led the successful merger of the Congestion Management Agency and the Transit District Board, which served as a guide for regional projects for the Metropolitan Transportation Commission. The cities and the county had to balance planning and development with the environmental concerns of the population. This is especially true at the county level, where the supervisors are charged with the responsibility to address the social and economic needs of the county. McKenna became a leader in promoting child welfare and was a founding member of “Kids in Common”, a collaborative children's advocacy program, a member of the Board of Trustees for the Children's Shelter, and chair of the Children and Youth Services Joint Conference Committee.

In contrast to Gray Hayes and Wilson, McKenna never experienced any personal sexual discrimination while in office. She once heard a male colleague make disparaging comments about the “housewife turned politician.” As she described in her oral history, a male colleague made a snide comment that the San Jose City Council was run by a bunch of housewives (referring to Susan Hammer, mayor of San Jose). In response she made it clear that the majority of women in politics held jobs as well as were wives and mothers. She said: ““Wait a minute. I don't hear you comment that you're a bunch of husbands, or the male on the council.”²³

A committed and confident feminist, McKenna made clear her opinion that women have an important role to play in politics and that they bring different values and qualities to the political process. She believes that Congress would be a very different place if women held 50% of the positions. In her experience she found “...that women...will take -- a difficult position and take a side of courage on an issue.” This was true in her experience working with Wilson and Lofgren on the jail issue, and in other cases the three women banded together to vote according to their conscience, when the two male members did not. “When push comes to shove...she said... I tend to find the women willing to stand up and say, “No, this is the right way to go, even though it was a difficult position.” She also remarked that the perception that women only think about social issues like education and healthcare is only half of the picture, and that women

²³ Dianne McKenna Oral Interview

who serve in municipal government also have to deal with urban growth, transportation, and the criminal justice system.²⁴

Susan Hammer

Susan Hammer has the distinction of serving as the second female mayor of San Jose. Hammer's background follows the same pattern as Gray Hayes, Wilson, and McKenna. A native of Southern California, she met her husband Phil Hammer while they were students at U.C. Berkeley. In 1960 they traveled to Washington DC to work for the Kennedy presidential campaign, and both worked in positions to promote the "New Frontier." Susan Hammer found a position working for the Peace Corps administration, while Phil Hammer worked for the Human Rights Commission. In 1964 they returned to San Jose to raise their family and settled into middle class life. Their experiences working for Civil Rights and the New Frontier provided an important foundation for their social and political work. While she raised three children, Susan Hammer worked on California Assemblymen, John Vasconcellos' first campaign in 1966, and from 1976-1980 she sat on the County Juvenile Justice Commission and served as president of the Board of the San Jose Museum of Art (while self-described as a house-wife). The Hammers and Hayes' were neighbors and friends, and in 1978 Janet Gray Hayes asked her to serve as her co-chair for her reelection bid, and in 1980, she was encouraged to apply for a city council vacancy and was appointed. In 1982 she was elected to San Jose City Council (district 3), served as Vice-Mayor for two-terms, and in 1990 she became the second female mayor of San Jose, serving two terms from 1990-1998.²⁵

Prior to running for mayor, Hammer studied the issues confronting the city, which included affordable housing, homelessness, gang violence, childcare and the arts. Hammer received important support from women, Hispanics, Asians, and blacks in her election bid, and she launched Project Diversity to promote minority representation boards and committees that reported to the city council. She received national attention for the city's "Greenline Initiative"—a growth-control policy and for her promotion of ethnic diversity. Glenna Matthews described Hammer as a visionary for her outreach to

²⁴ Dianne McKenna Oral Interview.

²⁵ Susan Hammer Papers, San Jose State University; Susan Hammer Oral Interview, July 11, 2006; Flammang, *Women in Politics*, 178.

the Hispanic community, and for her sensitivity to issues of diversity. Her model of governance, which she articulated in 1998, can sum up hammer's political philosophy:

open government "because we have nothing to hide": governing "by consensus, rather than by divisive politics; respect for people and embracement of diversity; a "fundamental commitment to investment, especially in our young people,"; and a desire to innovate "at every turn, which is intrinsic to the Silicon Valley culture."²⁶

During her tenure in office she left a lasting imprint on the arts and education in the city, most significantly the Repertory Theater (which is currently facing economic woes) and the merger of the San Jose State University Library and the San Jose Public Library. She also promoted youth programs that provided homework centers, after school programs, and created an anti-gang task force. At the national level, Hammer was appointed by President Clinton to serve as the first public official and first woman to chair the Advisory Committee for Trade Policy and Negotiations in 1994, and in 1995 at the beginning of her second term, was encouraged by President Clinton, Barbara Boxer, and Dianne Feinstein to run for Norman Mineta's congressional seat. Newspaper reports suggested that she could potentially seek a state office seat, but in the end she stayed in San Jose and did not run for higher office. While flattered by the attention she received from Clinton and other high profile democrats, her commitment to a high quality family took precedent over a high-powered political career. Similar to Hayes, McKenna, and Wilson, she found her niche in local politics and did not want to have a bi-coastal life.²⁷

Blanca Alvarado

Prior to the 1990s the composition of the Feminist Capital was largely defined by white, middle-class, and college educated women. Iola Williams who served on San Jose

²⁶ Barry Witt, "She Meant Business San Jose Mayor Leaves a Legacy of Growth, some of which can be credited to her focus on economic development," *San Jose Mercury News*, December 27, 1998, 1A; "The Beauty of a Greenline," *San Jose Mercury News*, November 14, 1996, 1B; Matthews, 216.

²⁷ Matthews, 171, 216-217, 252-253; Flammang, *Women in Politics*, 173, 178, 173-184, 187, and 249-50; Nick Anderson, "Hammer to Lead Key Trade Panel," May 10, 1994, SJMN, pg. 1A; "Clinton Nudging Hammer—Mineta Seat: San Jose Mayor Urged to Run as Campbell Announces House Bid," SJMN, September 15, 1995, 1A-3-4; Mary Ann Ostrum, "Hammer Eyes State Options Analysis: S.J. Mayor would need Millions, Increased Name Recognition," SJMN, September 21, 1995, 1B; Susan Hammer Oral History, July 11, 2006.

City Council from 1979 to 1990, and Blanca Alvarado who served on the Council from 1981-1994, and is currently in her third term on the Board of Supervisors (1996-).

Alvarado's ties her trajectory into politics to her Hispanic family and community roots.

Born in Cokedale, Colorado in 1930, Alvarado was the youngest of twelve siblings. Her father worked in the coal mines and became a leader in the local miners' union. When the coal mining industry collapsed in the 1940s the family moved to California, eventually settling in San Jose. Alvarado's father did not attend school past the third grade, but he taught himself to read and became the treasurer of the miners' union. He saved enough money to move his large family of twelve to California, and after one season working for the McClay Ranch, was offered a job as the ranch foreman, which provided a very stable family life that would not have been possible had they been forced to work as migrant farm workers. While Alvarado and her eleven siblings worked the fields in the summer, her parents made sure that their children went to school. Alvarado attended San Jose High School and helped form (1948-1949) Club Tapatío, a Latino social club, which organized food and clothing drives for the poor. In 1953 she married José Alvarado, a very prominent Latino leader (23 years her senior) and popular radio personality. Alvarado used his radio show as a platform to promote civic participation and higher education in the community. He also talked about the issues that oppressed the community, which led to accusations of communism, and later cancellation of his contract because he refused to give up his political activities on air.²⁸

During the Civil Rights era the minority community and particularly the Latino community began pressing the white establishment to share city resources and demanded access to politics. In 1970 Hispanics represented 22% of the population. A 1973 Rand report pointed out the disparity between the minority and white populations. In contrast to the pristine neighborhoods in Willow Glen and the Rose Garden, the Hispanic neighborhoods were poor, dilapidated, which created a system of defacto segregation. Despite the lack of Hispanic representation in city politics, the War on Poverty campaign brought federal funds to the city to address the problems in the barrio, and the city received Model Cities funds to make significant improvements. As Terry Christensen

²⁸ Blanca Alvarado Oral History, August __, 2006; "A Person of Great Faith": Blanca Alvarado's Story." *El Andar: Voces*, March 1996.

noted, these programs did little to improve the blighted neighborhoods, but the community activism that resulted from this program produced a new generation of minority leaders like Alvarado. At the same time, Cesar Chavez mobilized the Latino community to support farm workers' rights. The convergence of Civil Rights issues directly influenced Alvarado's community activism. In one example she helped organize the Spanish speaking community to force the local Catholic Church to add a Spanish mass, but she also worked with Chavez and other leaders and demanded "fair representation, fair housing, and reforms in police practices." And in another she and her children supported Chavez during his various hunger strikes through organized community vigils.²⁹

Commenting on her political trajectory, she said "my arrival in politics in the 1980s came from standing on the shoulders of those people who influenced me." Namely her father, mother, and husband shaped her values and goals to address social, economic and political justice for the Latino community. In 1965 she divorced her husband and raised her five children on her own. During this time period she was a welfare recipient, where she received medical benefits and food stamps, while she was working. Without these benefits she could not have accomplished what she did, and later worked for the welfare office. Alvarado struggled to make ends meet as she raised her family, and unlike all of the other women in "Feminist Capital" she did not have a spouse to help support her family while she worked for very low wages as a Councilwoman. Lacking a second income, she was mortgaged her house twice and worked part-time in her tax business, while working on the city council.³⁰

Alvarado's entrance into politics evolved from her community activism, which included service as president of the local chapter of the Mexican American Political Association (MAPA). Janet Gray Hayes recognized her leadership and appointed to her to serve on the Bicentennial Committee and the Charter Review Committee in the late 1970s. By 1978 movement was underfoot by a growing coalition of minority, feminist, labor and neighborhood groups to change the city charter, and introduce district elections. The Latino community was particularly outspoken by the lack of representation of their

²⁹ Blanca Alvarado Oral History; Trounstein and Christensen, *Movers and Shakers*, 100-103.

³⁰ Blanca Alvarado Oral History

community. The voters agreed and the city charter was changed, which opened new doors to women and minorities to pursue elective office. The city council increased from six council members to eleven, which opened the door to minority women like Alvarado.³¹

From 1981-1994 she served as the first Latina on the city council, and in 1996 she was appointed to serve out Zoe Lofgren's unexpired term, and in 1998 she became the first Latina chairperson in the county's history. True to her community roots she spearheaded the clean up of "Poco Way", one of the worst slums in San Jose. Reflecting on this project, she said that "Poco Way" is a good example of why politics matters you can use the system to improve people's lives." Throughout her nearly 28 years in office, she has supported issues, sat on committees, and drafted policy to support quality family life in the county. As a Latina feminist she has promoted issues that directly benefit her ethnic community, but her contributions have resulted in programs that benefit the entire county. To her credit, she established the Office of Women's Advocacy in 1998, which promotes programs to encourage women and girls to succeed at all levels, co-chairs the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Network, oversees and founded the Early Childhood Development Collaborative, and supported the Girls for Change 2003. She also worked on restorative justice projects, juvenile detention reform, drug rehabilitation, domestic violence, and low-income housing.³²

In October of 2005, she summed up her philosophy of government during a celebration marking her 25 years of public service:

"Those same democratic traditions, inculcated in me by my coal miner father, encouraged me to seek a seat on the City Council in 1980 and when I took office in 1981, while I was not given a road map to governance, I quickly learned that the politics we do reflect ones ideals and who we are, and I have tried to remain faithful to a past that has provided me with a sense of purpose - with a firm belief that social transformation is not the work of a day - that it is not a task for those seeking quick gratification - that social problem solving is not only slow-it is often untidy, and that purposeful social change occurs through a long and disorderly process with obstacles along the way."³³

³¹ Blanca Alvarado Oral History; Trounstine & Christensen, *Movers and Shakers*, 103-106.

³² Blanca Alvarado Oral History; Blanca Alvarado Biography, Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors, 2nd District, retrieved on 9/24/2006 from <http://www.blancaalvarado.org/bio/bio.html>.

³³ Blanca Alvarado, "Blanca's 25 Year Public Service Celebration," retrieved on 9/24/2006 from Santa Clara Board of Supervisors, Blanca Alvarado Speeches, <http://www.blancaalvarado.org/speech/speech.html>.

Conclusion:

San Jose and Santa Clara County rightfully earned the distinction as the “Feminist Capital”. The groundswell of female office holders and female activists in the 1980s and into the 1990s is an important chapter in the larger history of modern feminism. It is clear that a number of factors from location, middle-class affluence, higher education, urban expansion and a commitment to a clean and healthy environment produced a remarkable cadre of female activists and office holders. In 1980 Santa Clara County had one the highest median incomes in the nation, had over 6000 PhD’s, and had one the highest voter registration and voter turn-out, at 71% and 79% respectively. The Silicon Valley and the success of the Feminist Capital during this time period laid the groundwork for female activism at all levels of government. The legacy of this time period has created an environment where women play a direct role in policy making through a variety of organizations. Today, women do not hold a majority as office holders in this region, but they dominate as grassroots activists, serve on a variety of city and county committees, including the Commission on the Status of Women, and all of the programs that undergird social services. The “Feminist Capital” underscores the significance of grassroots activism in the political process and the role that women play in the political process.

Oral histories of this kind document the experiences of some of these important leaders, and add depth to our understanding of the impact of modern feminism on social and political society. Women have made significant contributions to the development of American political life from the early 20th century to the present. The history of Modern Feminism and the battle for ERA has been well documented at the national level, and the growing body of literature supports the need to document regional political activism, which in turn, will enrich the historical narrative. The contributions of South Bay Area women is significant, and their stories document the rich history of female political activism in the region and in the U.S., and most importantly tell the story of strength, perseverance, and commitment to gender and racial equality.