

History of Openwood Plantation Garden Club Vicksburg, Mississippi

In the spring of 1818, a Methodist minister, the Reverend Newit Vick, his wife and thirteen children migrated westward from Virginia. Just before they reached the mighty Mississippi River, they came upon an area cleared by the Choctaw Indians as ceremonial ground. The Indians called it "Ombala", which meant "opening in the woods". The Vicks decided to settle there. The United States Government held the nearby area east of High Ridge (known as Oak Ridge) and the Choctaws inhabited the area on top of the ridge.



On May 19, 1819, Vick entered and recorded a claim to the property on which his family was living and to the land on the ridge occupied by the Indians. It was approximately 1500 acres which he called Openwood Plantation. Vick became ill with yellow fever soon after he acquired the land. On his sick bed he drew-up a plat of land along the river-front, which later became the town of Vicksburg. Both Vick and his wife died from the fever and their graves are located in a small plot of land one-half mile west of Openwood Plantation.

The Vick heirs held the property until 1846. Evidently the Vick children did not manage the property very well. They became indebted to two brothers, Mr. A.T.B. Merrit and Mr. William Merrit and lost the family property. The Merrits owned the property until 1860 when Mr. T.A. Marshall, a wealthy slave owner, purchased it. The following year the Civil War began and General Sherman and his troops used the area as headquarters, calling it "Marshall's Place".

After the Civil War, federal troops patrolled the area for several months. The war was devastating to the Marshall family. They ended up with no money, silver, slaves or any other valuable possessions and had to sell their land to survive. Records indicate that Mr. Philip H. Feld paid \$6,800.00 for 1300 acres of land at the close of the War. Not too much is known about the Feld family other than they owned the property from 1891 until 1921 when it was transferred to Lawrence C. Biedenharn.

Mr. Biedenharn was a member of the family that first bottled Coca-Cola in 1894 in Vicksburg. They were fondly known in the area as the "Coca-Cola Biedenharns" and several members of the family still reside in Vicksburg. He built a family home and planted a large pecan orchard during the twenty-five years that the family lived on the property.

In 1947, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Bragg of Kansas City, Kansas, moved south and bought the property from Mr. Biedenharn. The Braggs operated a successful cattle ranch on the property for twenty years.

Mr. Johnny Jabour bought most of the property from Mrs. Bragg in 1967. She kept thirty acres for her personal use and lived there until her death. Mr. Jabour developed one of the largest planned subdivisions in the area from the property and called it Openwood Plantation. A small country club and 18-hole golf course were located adjacent to the subdivision. Before his death in 2002, Mr. Jabour sold the country club and undeveloped land to Mr. Bill Harris. Mr. Harris developed the residential area known today as "Fairways" subdivision from the land.

In 1968, one year after the first houses in the Openwood subdivision were built, the Openwood Garden Club was organized. Those first twenty families were proud of their beautiful new homes and wanted to learn how to enhance and care for their landscapes and the old pecan trees under which their homes were constructed. The idea of a garden club was discussed and the wives of most of the residents wanted to participate. Mrs. J. Harold Whatley (Jan) was the first President of the organization. In 1974, under the leadership of Mrs. Jack Boykin, the club sought and obtained membership in the National Council of Garden Clubs, Inc., The Garden Clubs of Mississippi and the Vicksburg Council of Garden Clubs.

Over the years, hundreds of women have been members of Openwood Garden Club and their accomplishments have been many. Not only have they been interested in their own home gardens, they have encouraged others in the area to beautify and maintain their properties by awarding a monthly "Yard of the Month" consistently for over three decades. Education of others as well as a need to raise money for projects prompted the popular annual Plant Sale featuring plants grown in member's gardens. For many years, the club sponsored a Junior Garden Club and sent grammar age children to the state Youth Nature Camp. Several are Master Gardeners and readily share their gardening knowledge with fellow members and the community. Plantings and annual upkeep of the central medians and planter box leading into the subdivision are an ongoing project. In the mid-seventies, the Annual Santa's Ride and Christmas Decorating Contest was initiated that has delighted children and adults each holiday season ever since. Members have planted bird friendly horticulture, created native habitats in many of their own gardens and established bluebird trails at the Raworth YMCA and arboretum at Waterways Experiment Station. Garden Therapy led them to work with residents of Magnolia Manor Apartments for senior citizens who look forward to the plants and activities associated with their visits. Members have taken field trips to nearby gardens across the state and Alabama over the years.

From 1974 until 1996 Openwood members assisted in activities involving Planters Hall, the historic bank building that was the Vicksburg Council of Garden Clubs headquarters since 1956. Openwood Garden Club maintained the library parlor, planted and maintained outdoor gardens on the property, brought in fresh flowers for events and served as docents for Pilgrimages and State meetings hosted by the Vicksburg Council. Two Council Presidents and numerous Council Board Officers were elected from the Openwood membership before the Vicksburg Council of Garden Clubs disbanded in 2006. The club shared the cost and served on the committee responsible for the waterfront mural featuring Planters Hall in commemoration of the many contributions made by garden club members from 1931-2008.