

Segment 6: Dr. Mayor Julia Platt and the Chicken War

Traveling south by train from San Francisco in 1899, on the way to Monterey, the visitor rode around the great curve of Monterey Bay, mile after mile of broad sand beaches edged by steep hillsides covered with dark pine trees. The bay itself was dark, topped by a rolling fog like gray spun sugar that wisped into the coastal forests. Crossing the Salinas River, her glance inland from the lurching passenger car would have revealed a completely different scene: the stark blue sky of late California summer, heat waves shimmering off hills covered with brittle dried grass, the tan landscape relieved only by the narrow, green belt of the winding river.

So it would have appeared to Julia Platt, coming into the tiny train station at Monterey. But she did not stop there. Instead, she kept traveling south a bit, perhaps in a horse-drawn carriage popular among tourists, past a string of Monterey beaches and rocky outcrops that within decades would sprout a dense clot of canneries. The biggest outcrop of them all, China Point, in 1899 still held a bustling Chinese village, home to hundreds of people tending acres of drying squid. A new arrival such as Julia would never before have seen such a sight. But the marine biologist in her would have recognized the squid: *Loligo opalescens*, a close relative of the squid that Julia knew from her research years in Massachusetts.

Educating Julia

Julia Platt was a tall, 42-year-old woman who favored long purple velvet dresses, often highlighted with a blue sunbonnet and yellow gauntlets. Julia probably knew she would stand out in staid Pacific Grove. “She had come, unchaperoned, to study zoology,” sputtered the local journal *What’s Doing*. Few of the men, and none of the women, held a university degree, as Julia did. And few PaGroviens (as the townspeople call themselves) could stand up to Julia’s incisive intelligence.

Julia had entered the University of Vermont in 1879, a year when established society in New England didn’t know what to make of women at a university. Afterward, Harvard welcomed her into the Museum of Comparative Zoology—but not as a graduate student. Still, she pursued her studies with vigor and innovation.

Summer research at the Marine Biological Labs in Woods Hole, Massachusetts allowed her to delve into marine biology, a career she was determined to pursue. But throughout her training, Julia’s ambitions continued to bump against the glass ceiling of academia. A woman could not pursue a zoology Ph.D. in the United States in the late 1800s. However, the University of Freiburg in Baden, Germany offered her a chance to pursue an advanced degree, and she was one of the first women to obtain a zoological Ph.D. there. Though Julia’s scientific accomplishments were well known in marine biology and she worked with some of the world’s most influential zoologists, the academic market for women was narrowly focused on women’s colleges. The strictures she faced and the difficulty of finding a job loomed over her.

Julia moved permanently to Pacific Grove in 1899, “attracted by the little city’s world-wide fame in the field of biological research”. Stanford University’s first president, eminent fish biologist David Starr Jordan, had established the Hopkins Seaside Station in Pacific Grove in 1892 as the first marine biological laboratory on the West Coast. Julia attended a Pacific Grove lecture given in 1899 by Jordan himself. She followed with a June 2 letter seeking advice on how to secure a faculty position. After searching for an academic position for more than a year, Julia perhaps admitted her only major defeat. And she followed her own advice, given in the final paragraph of her 1899 letter to Jordan: “Without work, life isn’t worth living. If I cannot obtain the work I wish, then I must take up with the next best.”

Chicken Wars and Civic Activism

Next best? Civic leader, innovative thinker, and rabble rouser in tiny, conservative Pacific Grove. As the town grew and transformed from a summer tent camp to a permanent community, Julia quickly established herself as one of the more flamboyant characters around. As an unmarried scientist who discussed the details of reproduction alongside unchaperoned male colleagues, Julia shook the narrow world of Pacific Grove. The local populace was aghast because Julia was working “among a group of men, many of whom being scientists and therefore presumably unhampered by the fear of God, were doubtless of unhampered morals.”

Julia’s career was hardly the only controversy. Pictures from that time, taken from a hot air balloon floating above the town, depict a checkerboard of tiny house lots and orderly streets. But photos also show a booming tourist enterprise cradling a bustling bathhouse on the beach, with glass-bottom boats and an oceanfront full of visitors being delivered by a small rail line. Here was a town just entering maturity, but there were many conflicts between the new business of tourism and the staid life of a church camp. Bathing beaches were fairly scandalous, and Pacific Grove quickly demanded a strict beach dress code. People needed to be covered up, with double-crotch swimming costumes “with skirts of ample size to cover the buttocks.” And there could be no “corrupting” dance styles such as the “tango, turkey-trot, bunny-hug or shimmie.”

In this environment, Julia soon learned how to shake things up. Her love of science’s implacable logic and rejection of religious conformity combined to create a natural gift for igniting small-town controversy. Gardening was an acceptable woman’s pursuit in a conservative town, and Julia was often seen carrying a market basket or pushing a wheelbarrow around the public gardens. She started the Pacific Grove Women’s Civic Improvement Club in 1903. But gardening quietly and keeping her opinions under a wide-brimmed hat did not seem to suit Julia’s temperament, especially because she suffered a persistent problem with her neighbor’s chickens. Livestock of all sorts lived a frontier existence in Pacific Grove, wandering through town unmolested and, from Julia’s Vermontish perspective, poorly disciplined. She fumed at the damage done to her precious home garden by chickens from next door, but she found that her penchant for detailed debate and convincing rhetoric, amply displayed at city council meetings, didn’t work on these chickens or their owners.

Then out came a handgun, and the chicken problem ascended to a new level. Julia shot every bird that came into her yard. When the smoke cleared, she found that her

problem was town uproar rather than chicken wanderings. “Lives of the passing public have been endangered,” cried Julia’s neighbors. “People within their thin-walled cottages were not safe.” The town constable was called in. Julia was thrown on the defensive. Here her academic skills came to the rescue, and in the ensuing confrontation with the town police and the city council, Julia insisted that a modern town simply couldn’t let animals run wild. Other residents pointed out that there was no town ordinance that restricted animals from wandering about. Julia quickly seized upon the obvious solution and achieved her first triumph of civic activism in 1902 by writing a city zoning ordinance that limited domestic fowl to particular areas.

Julia attacks a fence

Julia’s first lesson in civic affairs started with a gun and some chickens and ended with a city ordinance. In this exercise she found that there was a huge difference between getting attention and getting her way. In Pacific Grove, the first came very easy for Julia. The second took some experience. From then on, around town Julia became an agent of change. “You could call her an early-day conservationist,” mused Helen Spangenberg in a 1968 *Monterey Herald* memoir of Pacific Grove. Julia purchased a new home just at the base of Lovers Point, with a living room adorned by “big windows, commanding a broad expanse of bay.” She planted the gardens that now occupy Lovers Point and drew up plans for seaside plantings and walkways along the shore from China Point to Lovers Point (the drawings are housed at the Pacific Grove Museum of Natural History). Her association with the ocean had shifted from that of avid researcher to avid protector, and when commerce around Monterey Bay swung away from tourism and toward the fishing industry, Julia’s unease grew.

But she had also found the garden of city government to be fertile territory, and from the time of the chicken incident forward, Julia’s level of involvement in the machinations of city management accelerated. She attended city council meetings and spoke with fervor and sharp clarity about anything she regarded as needing improvement. According to a city council member, “There was a packed house every time the council met in those days, everyone would come to hear what Julia Platt would have to say. She never hesitated to disagree and always spoke excitedly what was in her mind, but it certainly made people take an interest.”

Finding the management of the city too capricious, Julia argued long and hard for a complete revision in the way the city operated. She drafted a new town charter, establishing for the first time a professional city manager, taking city administration out of the hands of the city council. The charter serves as the city’s legal backbone today, and although it has been revised extensively, it still contains phrases and stipulations that sound as if they had come directly out of the mouth of Julia Platt. And it includes some of the tools of city government that Julia used later to help to bring the sea back to life. In particular, Article 5 of the Pacific Grove Charter reads, “The rights of the City in and to its waterfront, *lands under water*, and such public wharves, docks and landings as may be hereafter thereon constructed are hereby declared inalienable.” This declaration puts the

protection of the sea firmly in the hands of the town of Pacific Grove, a responsibility that Julia pursued single-mindedly throughout the last decade of her life.

An Axe to Grind

Julia's most famous battle erupted in the first weeks of 1931 around the principle that public access to the sea could not be blocked by private landowners. The Bath House at Lovers Point had just been acquired by Mrs. J. E. McDougall. On January 16, 1931, in defiance of the property deed, custom, and decades of public use, she erected a gate that blocked access to the beach. Immediately Julia decried the action: The way to the sea was supposed to be open to everyone. Julia tried to cross the barrier but was "molested" by Mr. McDougall. She pointedly reminded Mrs. McDougall that in California, beaches are public land from the high tide mark down to the sea, going so far as to unearth and brandish the original property deed, which guaranteed public right of way to the beach. McDougall was nonplussed, countering that the level of moral values had deteriorated so severely in Pacific Grove that she considered the original deed, crafted back in the church retreat days when windows were always undraped, null and void. No amount of the famous Platt argument, no elaborate public rhetoric, would move Mrs. McDougall. The fence would stay. The beach was closed.

Julia would not have it so. On January 17, 1931, while the town argument still raged, Julia decided that a hammer and crowbar would have to do what her arguments could not. She destroyed the gate padlock and opened the beach to everyone. But Mrs. McDougall simply replaced it. Once more, Julia smashed open the lock. Once more, Mrs. McDougall put it back. Undeterred, Julia decided to tear down the fence once and for all. Dressed in her trademark hat and wearing a workman-like vest, she brought a ladder and a hammer and an axe and demolished the hated barrier between her and the sea. "Twice in succession she filed off padlocks that barred the entrance and then, when the gate was nailed shut, resorted to the axe." Did she sneak in during the dark of night and act anonymously? No, Julia acted in full light of the town's citizenry. Photographers were even on hand to chronicle Julia atop her ladder dismantling the fence.

And to make sure everyone knew that it was not just Mrs. McDougall who bore blame, Julia had prepared a printed placard that she tacked to the gate's remains (Figure 5.1). "Opened by Julia B. Platt. This entrance to the beach must be left open at all hours when the public might reasonably wish to pass through. I act in the matter because the Council and Police Department of Pacific Grove are men and possibly somewhat timid."

The fence stayed down.

Mayor Platt

Town meetings were chaotic during this time. Julia's issues and methods dominated, but the city council continued to think that it, not Julia, was elected to run the place. An exasperated council told her, "If you want to run everything, why don't you become Mayor?" At first, Julia preferred to find someone else to be mayor, but no one stepped up. So she announced her candidacy on March 6, 1931, stating that "neither age nor sex can be considered important in these days of political, social and economic equality." Her election campaign, as biting as her civic opinions, proclaimed, "It will take a good man to beat me."

Palumbi and Sotka, Serialization of Death and Life of Monterey Bay

None did, and she was elected by a 2:1 margin on April 11, 1931.