

## Western Association of Women Historians Meets in San Diego

by Kathleen Sheldon

The Western Association of Women Historians (WAWH, [www.wawh.org](http://www.wawh.org)) held their annual meeting on the first weekend in May at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice ([peace.sandiego.edu](http://peace.sandiego.edu)) at the University of San Diego. Inspired by the beautiful hilltop setting, the 160 attendees enjoyed a variety of panels and social occasions. One of the pleasures of WAWH meetings is the frequent opportunity for conversation and conviviality, and this year the organized venues included two receptions, lunch on both Friday and Saturday, a light supper on Friday, and the awards banquet on Saturday. This year was also the first time that a book exhibit was included.

The keynote lecture was presented by Asunción Lavrin of Arizona State University, speaking on her new project that investigates "Femininity and Masculinity Through the Prism of Religion: Mexico 1550-1800." She demonstrated the contradictory and changing ideals of feminine and masculine behavior with rarely seen images and texts produced in Mexico concerning male and female clergy and members of religious orders.

UCLA participants at this year's meeting included Natalie Joy, a UCLA graduate student who presented a paper on women's activism in the antislavery and anti-Indian removal movements, Donna Schuele, a CSW Research Scholar who was the discussant for a panel on women, business, and ethnicity in California, 1850-1960, and Susannah Baxendale, an associate at UCLA's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, who presented the award for the Barbara "Penny" Kanner Award for bibliography at the dinner on Saturday evening (for all the prize winners, see the WAWH website). Penny Kanner, who endowed that book award, is a long time supporter of CSW as well. In addition, the WAWH website has been recently upgraded with the assistance of Susan Kullman, a CSW Research Scholar, and the incoming president is Carole Srole, who received her Ph.D. in history at UCLA and now teaches at California State University, Los Angeles.



I presented a paper about my great-aunt Sylvia Thankful Eddy, who was a nurse missionary in Turkey in the early twentieth century and who left a diary of her first two years in Turkey in 1919-1920. My participation was supported by a Tillie Olsen Award from the Center for the Study of Women (see page 19). I was particularly pleased to be part of a panel on women's travel diaries, which included two other fascinating papers. Tory Swim, who will begin graduate studies at UC Santa Barbara in the fall, talked about the diaries left by a steamship stewardess who traveled on small ships across the Pacific in the 1890s, recounting her encounters with Chinese travelers and American prostitutes. Kate Davis of San Jose State University imparted information about a pioneering botanist, Ynes Mexia, who traveled extensively throughout Latin America in the 1920s and 1930s, collecting tens of thousands of plant specimens and recording wonderful details about what she observed

Though we three presenters did not previously know about our parallel work, Elizabeth Pryor, our discussant from UC Santa Barbara, noted some common areas in the experiences of the women we profiled. All were working internationally and outside the usual conventions of American women's lives, they were self-supporting, and all three were directly involved in encounters across ethnic and racial boundaries. In addition, the three diaries which we are using as our primary sources were lost or hidden until recently, and they provide new evidence about the varieties of female experience in history.

I cannot report on all of the panels, which were generally very interesting and wide-ranging (the program is available at the WAWH website). I particularly enjoyed an entertaining panel on beauty in postwar America that included papers on African-American beauty culture and political ideas about integration, the legacy of the Miss America protests, the role of Jewish sororities in pushing forward Jewish ideas of beauty and identity, and the contrasting and changing expectations of American and Soviet stewardesses in the Cold War; all the papers benefited from the comments of Lois Banner, a pioneer in writing about feminism and American views about beauty. A panel on women's organizations included papers on Guatemalan women's associations in the early twentieth century, the intersection of Arizona women's clubs and Indian welfare, and the role of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom in Mexico in the 1930s. Three papers on the panel on "Nurses Across Borders" brought forward the stories of Australian nurses as prisoners of war in World War II, nurses in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Montana in the 1930s, and the role of local midwives and government nurses in New Mexico, 1930-1950. Francesca Miller was honored with a panel that included remembrances of her leadership in developing the field of Latin American women's history.

Many papers focused on histories of the American West as well as the broader Pacific Rim, while others ranged farther afield with research on religious relics in Europe, artists and intellectuals in Spain, marriage in seventeenth and eighteenth century Boston, and family politics in Renaissance Florence, seventeenth-century Portugal, and France under Louis XIV. Still other panels looked at such nuts and bolts topics as the usefulness of local archives and how to combine motherhood and graduate studies. With many other presentations not mentioned here, the conference provided a range of fascinating papers and a glimpse of important research being done by women historians in the western United States and beyond.

Next year WAWH will be celebrating its fortieth anniversary at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. With over 500 members, the organization offers four prizes that recognize the accomplishments of graduate students, books, and articles. Continuing its tradition as an organization that prides itself on the support given to feminist historians, Karen Blair and the program committee will welcome submissions for that meeting until November 1, 2007. Plan to join us and keynote speaker Merry Wiesner-Hanks on May 15-18, 2008 in Vancouver.

including local societies as well as plant and animal life.

**Kathleen Sheldon** has been a CSW Research Scholar since 1989. Sheldon received her Ph.D. in history from UCLA in 1988 with a dissertation on "Working Women in Beira, Mozambique." She had previously completed an M.A. in African Area Studies, UCLA, 1977, with a concentration in history and political science. She was honored with the 1999 Catherine Prelinger Scholarship Award for independent scholars pursuing women's history from the Coordinating Council for Women in History, for work on *Pounders of Grain: A History of Women, Work, and Politics in Mozambique* (published in 2002). In 2003 she was awarded a research grant from the National Coalition of Independent Scholars for her work on the *Historical Dictionary of Women in Sub-Saharan Africa*, which was published in 2005.

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