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## Asilomar: A Historical Study of the Role of the YWCA in Women's Leadership Development as an Absent Narrative in the History of HRD

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# Human Resource Development Review

## **Asilomar: A Historical Study of the Role of the YWCA in Women's Leadership Development As An Absent Narrative In The History of HRD**

Journal:	<i>Human Resource Development Review</i>
Manuscript ID	HRDR-21-0157.R2
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Keywords:	women's leadership development, Asilomar YWCA Conference Grounds, history of HRD in the US
Abstract:	<p>The dominant narrative on the history of training and development, especially in the United States, reflects entrenched gender bias with little acknowledgment of HRD designed for and delivered by women. The role of women's organizations as forces for social change, advocates for gender equality, and providers of leadership development are significant areas of HRD history largely ignored in the literature. This historical study considers archival records on the former YWCA Asilomar Conference Grounds, near Monterey, California which was the first conference training facility owned by a women's organization in the US. The study is focused on the years 1912-1951 when Asilomar hosted camps, conferences, meetings, and other events incorporating core elements of training, leadership development, and career coaching. The findings of substantial efforts directed to women's leadership development and training are presented along with discussion on the influence of overlooked narratives related to the history of HRD on research and practice.</p>

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ASILOMAR

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**Asilomar: A Historical Study of the Role of the YWCA in Women's Leadership Development As An Absent Narrative In The History of HRD**

Research on human resource development (HRD) has a noted lack of historical studies that further explore the origins and development of the field of scholarship and professional practice (Hughes & Gosney, 2016). Schaupp (2021) encouraged research to examine “the change and development of both the existing and the possible new forms of carrying out HRD” (p. 262). Historical studies and the application of research methods for history have been infrequently applied in HRD, although an acknowledged potential exists for this method to supplement more traditional research approaches (Hatcher, 2013). Callahan (2010) advocated for historical research in HRD and suggested that history provides a vehicle through which the field can reflect on its own practices. Truty (2007) urged HRD professionals and HRD scholars to become informed of related aspects of history. McLean (2016) and Cho (2021) have also noted the importance of history for theorizing in HRD. Yet, few historical studies have examined the early establishment and evolution of core practices, such as leadership development, as key influences on the development of the HRD field.

The historical setting and geographical context for this study is Asilomar, a 107-acre parcel of coastal land located in the central portion of the U.S. state of California. Asilomar is a state beach and conference center that together form a unit of the California State Park system. The park and all facilities are owned by the State of California, with the conference center run under concessionaire license. Today, Asilomar is largely known as a tourism destination, conference facility, and family-friendly resort located close to the many attractions of the Monterey Peninsula and nearby Big Sur Coast. Yet, Asilomar played a significant and largely unrecognized role in the history of HRD, and more specifically, women's leadership development during the period it operated as a conference and training center for the Young

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3 Women's Christian Association (YWCA). This study is focused on the years 1912-1951 when  
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5 Asilomar, the first conference training facility in the U.S. owned by a women's organization,  
6  
7 hosted camps, conferences, meetings, programs, and other events incorporating core elements of  
8  
9 training, leadership development, and career coaching.  
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11

12 In this paper we argue that the history of Asilomar is an overlooked, but important aspect  
13  
14 of the evolution and development of HRD practice. We examine the historic record related to  
15  
16 women's leadership development, training, and learning events at Asilomar to extend current  
17  
18 understanding of the definition and evolution of HRD theorizing on the evolution of the field,  
19  
20 especially in the context of the United States. This study adopted a critical perspective to critique  
21  
22 and challenge the dominant paradigm and narrative on the origins and historical influences of  
23  
24 HRD which tends to present a portrait where key developments are attributed to selected  
25  
26 contexts and gender biased actors (Swanson & Holton, 2009). The literature on the historical  
27  
28 record in the United States on development of the HRD field has produced a distorted, narrow-  
29  
30 focused, and limiting portrayal of structured learning, and more specifically, job related training,  
31  
32 as the core foundation.  
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38 Much of the existing literature on the origins and evolution of HRD has tended to favor  
39  
40 managerial or organizational perspectives to work-based training and development as the basis  
41  
42 for contemporary HRD at the exclusion of other forms of practice from non-corporate providers.  
43  
44 Further, the narrative on HRD history is further narrowed to focus on male-dominated contexts  
45  
46 of military and large, hierarchical, for-profit firms (Alagaraja & Dooley, 2003). For example,  
47  
48 Werner (2014) observed the progression toward a field of HRD was not driven by the adoption  
49  
50 of a humanistic learning philosophy or organizational performance concerns but rather, "an irony  
51  
52 of the field of training in the United States is that two of the greatest causes of growth for the  
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3 profession were World War I and World War II” (p. 128). Others report “the field of training and  
4  
5 development began to emerge in the US in the 1940s when large numbers of men were serving  
6  
7 in World War II and women were replacing them on the factory floors” (Marquardt et al., 2000,  
8  
9 p. 139). The Training Within Industry (TWI) program in the U.S. during World War Two  
10  
11 (Dooley, 2001) is presented as the pivotal historical moment in the history of HRD. Others such  
12  
13 as Dinero (2005) support the notion of an absence of learning events that would be recognizable  
14  
15 today as HRD with Ruona (2001) stating that “quite simply, before World War II and the efforts  
16  
17 of TWI, formal training beyond apprenticeship programs was negligible at best” (p. 120).  
18  
19 Further, as observed by Truty (2007), the history of the HRD field has privileged and  
20  
21 preferred examination of issues from the management perspective at the expense of concurrent  
22  
23 consideration of the worker, especially the working class employee point of view.  
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28  
29 The historiography of the origin and evolution of HRD in the US fails to acknowledge  
30  
31 the important role of women’s organizations as forces for social change, advocates for gender  
32  
33 equality, and providers of training and development. It has been stated that “although ubiquitous  
34  
35 in America’s past, women’s organizations were virtually invisible for a long time in scholarship”  
36  
37 (Knutfer & Woyshner, 2008, p.1). Despite the fact that the YWCA in the United States is an  
38  
39 organization with approximately 210,000 paid and volunteer staff providing a broad range of  
40  
41 services (World YWCA, 2019), studies in HRD on the multifaceted learning and development  
42  
43 roles provided by this global organization are limited. The role of the YWCA in providing open  
44  
45 learning opportunities for adults was described by Merriam (2000). A more detailed examination  
46  
47 was conducted by Boyce and Franklin (1996) who used the YWCA as the centerpiece for a case  
48  
49 study on organizational learning. However, the history of the YWCA as a provider of formal and  
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informal learning experiences for women's leadership development has – to date – been missing from our appreciation of the origins of HRD in the US.

### Method

The study of management history has focused attention on topics that include the evolution of individual organizations, both firms and business organizations and federations; business leaders; and management practices (Kipping & Üsdiken, 2014; Lamond, 2008). The increased acceptance, visibility, and number of historical studies has lead several authors to the label the emergence of “a historic turn in organization studies” (Rowlinson & Heller, 2020, p. 358) as the value of history as a research method is recognized. This now extends to an expanding range of related disciplines that detail the need and research methods for historical scholarship on management (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006), strategy (Argyres et al., 2019), and entrepreneurship (Wadhvani et al., 2020). HRD scholars argued relatively early on in management's historic turn that one was needed in our field (e.g. Hatcher, 1998; Lee, 2001; Truty, 2007; Callahan, 2010), but it has not – until now – captured the attention of the major HRD journals.

Discussion on application of sound methodologies to various data sources has attracted debate among historians of business and management (Cummings & Bridgman, 2016; van Fleet, 2008) which provides additional challenge to HRD scholars seeking clarity to conduct historical research. Notably, it is usually not expected for business historians to “produce a methodological justification for their work” (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006, p. 9). In the absence of a HRD specific discussion as to appropriate historical method, we followed an adapted version of the three-step process described by Smith and Lux (1993): (1) investigation method for the discovery and

## ASILOMAR

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3 identification of historical facts; (2) synthesis of findings; and (3) interpretation to address the  
4  
5 implications of the narrative for the research question.  
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7  
8 The lack of a centralized and complete archive related to Asilomar required step one, our  
9  
10 investigation method, to consider a broad range of data sources that included books, newspaper  
11  
12 articles, and published documents including pamphlets, promotional materials, letters, and  
13  
14 reports. Asilomar State Park houses archive files from the establishment to the current operation,  
15  
16 including documentation from the YWCA era. As King (2016) noted, archives are central to the  
17  
18 methods and disciplinary identity for historians. Yet, questions of what constitutes an archive,  
19  
20 how these have been created and maintained, and the approaches to work within, against, or  
21  
22 around the limits of archival sources become major issues for researchers to consider. Therefore,  
23  
24 our data sources extended beyond the on-site Asilomar archive files. This included review of  
25  
26 historic informational interpretative signs and displays placed within buildings and around the  
27  
28 property for visitors.  
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33 Many original documents related to the operation of Asilomar have been digitized and  
34  
35 access was provided by a wide range of academic, community organizations, and local public  
36  
37 libraries. Site visits were made to the archives of local public libraries in Monterey County, CA  
38  
39 to search for original copies of newspapers, pamphlets, unpublished histories, and annual reports  
40  
41 held in their collections. Press accounts highlight key stages of development of the Asilomar  
42  
43 property as well as reports of special events, noted guests, and programs organized for the local  
44  
45 community. Documentation was further sourced from the online archives of the YWCA housed  
46  
47 at Smith College, Massachusetts and the YMCA archives held by the University of Minnesota.  
48  
49 These archives included first person letters, annual reports, and various meeting minutes, reports,  
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and descriptions of business and program operations with specific mention of Asilomar. A total of 1,037 secondary source materials were reviewed comprising over 11,500 pages.

Application of the second step for historical studies, as described by Smith and Lux (1993), involved synthesis of findings from the various data sources to construct a narrative of training and leadership development activity at Asilomar. This was arranged around several emergent themes rather than time-sequenced. Our synthesis of findings document attended to concerns from management and organizational theorists wary of documentary historical research that is limited to timeline of events (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006). The third and final step included interpretation of this narrative to address the research question. In keeping with the suggestion, and urging, of business historians (Godfrey et al., 2016; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Rowlinson & Heller, 2020) we avoided a narrative history of Asilomar and rather see the contribution as consideration of the historic case of Asilomar to challenge the dominant historiography of the HRD field.

### **YWCA – History and Evolution**

Today, YWCA USA is an organization with over 200 associations that combined annually serve more than 2.3 million women, girls, and their families in the United States (YWCA USA, n.d.). The YWCA USA is also part of an international movement called World YWCA serving 25 million people and 20,000 local communities in over 120 countries (World YWCA, n.d.). Originally founded as the Young Women's Christian Association, the name was changed in 2014 to reflect a diverse and inclusive mission. It is the largest women's organization in the world, and the second oldest organization of its kind (Seymour-Jones, 1994; World YWCA, n.d.; YWCA USA, n.d.). Today the global YWCA movement is a major provider of HRD with recent statistics showing that in 2019 they trained more than 6 million women and



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3 girls (World YWCA, 2019). Although a thorough review of the formation and evolution of the  
4  
5 YWCA is beyond the scope of this article (see Robertson, 2007; Seymour-Jones, 1994; Sims,  
6  
7 1936) a brief overview of key historical aspects of the organization are summarized to help  
8  
9  
10 frame this study.

11  
12 The origins of the YWCA began in England in 1855 when two initially separate  
13  
14 organizations were founded in London; the Prayer Union and the General Female Training  
15  
16 Institute. After rapid expansion to other parts of England, in 1877 they joined together as the  
17  
18 Young Women's Christian Association. The organizational model and mission of the YWCA  
19  
20 soon spread to other countries, including North America (Garner, 2004). Rapid changes in the  
21  
22 social and economic situation in the country at this time broadened traditional opportunities for  
23  
24 women to work (Wilson, 1916) with the expansion of industrialization and emergence of factory  
25  
26 work creating new occupations and avenues for women to be self-supporting. Despite gradual  
27  
28 improvement, post-secondary and higher education remained limited by gender, privilege, and  
29  
30 access (Parker, 2015). Many young unmarried or widowed women moved from rural areas to  
31  
32 cities to seek employment. The YWCA saw significant growth and expansion of individual  
33  
34 branches throughout the United States and by the early 1900s YWCA facilities, that included  
35  
36 temporary accommodation, were found in many large cities, then over the next two decades  
37  
38 these spread to smaller cities and towns, especially locations with a college or university.  
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45 Concurrently, the early 1900s saw the YWCA recognize an identified role to provide  
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47 organized camping experiences as part of the “great camp movement [occurring] throughout the  
48  
49 country” (Cole, 1919, p.118). The YWCA recognized that “if a girl did not camp with her  
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51 family, or at a private school camp, or at a settlement or mission camp of some sort, she missed  
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53 out on camp altogether” (Cole, 1919, p. 118). Going to camp as respite from life in busy,  
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3 industrialized cities and towns was viewed as an important aspect of healthy development and  
4 supported the egalitarian notion that vacations were for everybody, not just the wealthy.  
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7 Importantly, in addition to recreation, the YWCA promoted, “the program in such a camp ought  
8 to develop leaders for all kinds of social work” (Cole, 1919, p. 119) with recognition different  
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industrialized cities and towns was viewed as an important aspect of healthy development and supported the egalitarian notion that vacations were for everybody, not just the wealthy. Importantly, in addition to recreation, the YWCA promoted, “the program in such a camp ought to develop leaders for all kinds of social work” (Cole, 1919, p. 119) with recognition different camp structures and experiences were needed for business and professional women, for instance, compared to those in high school or college.

In 1906, a national association, called the National Board of the YWCA, was established with the merger of the various branches throughout in the US (Laville, 2006). With strategic direction now provided by the new national body, there appeared a stronger coalescence of YWCA goals to “draw together for mutual help, sympathy, and instruction Young Women [sic] of all classes [to] promote the moral, social and intellectual well-being of all” (Beaumont, 2014, p. 464). The “organization’s moral and evangelical tone became more secular and job training and placement programs, language courses, cafeteria services, and sports and recreation dominated its [more] modern agenda” (McNeill, 2012, p. 53). The YWCA increasingly saw its role in supporting the all-round development and improvement the social and economic conditions of young women with a recognition that leadership development was a vital component. There is evidence that this role was clearly apparent and acknowledged by young women – even after very little exposure to the YWCA.

### **Development of the YWCA Asilomar Conference Grounds and Programs**

From the early days of the YWCA in the United States, conferences were held to bring people together to share information, exchange ideas, and create communities of learning. Early YWCA conferences also offered practical opportunities for training in public speaking, group work, legislative action, and parliamentary procedure (Smith College, n.d.). In addition to

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3 national conferences held throughout the US, YWCA staff, students, and supporters met  
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5 periodically at Regional Leadership Conferences established for the same purposes as well as to  
6  
7 provide opportunities to discuss more locally focused women's issues and to find solutions, such  
8  
9 as breaking into career fields dominated by men. The first YWCA Western Regional Conference  
10  
11 in the United States was held in 1897 at Mills College in Oakland, California. Following a two-  
12  
13 year hiatus for the Spanish-American War (1898-1899), the conference moved for the next  
14  
15 several years (1900-1911) to a hotel near Santa Cruz until this was destroyed by fire early in  
16  
17 1912 (Hunt, 1963). Wealthy philanthropist and supporter of the Western Region YWCA, Mrs.  
18  
19 Phoebe Apperson Hearst then hosted the summer conference of 1912 on the grounds of her  
20  
21 estate in Pleasanton, near San Francisco with about 300 delegates in attendance accommodated  
22  
23 in a temporary tent city (Asilomar, 2007). During the event, Hearst proposed a permanent  
24  
25 “conference grounds” to hold future annual conferences and other programs.  
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31 With considerable influence from Hearst and several other wealthy women considered  
32  
33 patrons of the YWCA in the Western States, 30 acres of land in Pacific Grove were acquired  
34  
35 through donation with the stipulation that the organization make “land and buildings  
36  
37 improvements of \$30,000 within the next 10 years” (Luedtke, 1994, p. 40). Hearst had  
38  
39 previously worked with architect Julia Morgan and encouraged the YWCA to have her design  
40  
41 the facilities for the conference grounds (Quacchia, 2005). Morgan would have many  
42  
43 commissions for the YWCA throughout her career (Brandimarte, 2008) designing facilities and  
44  
45 buildings in several cities, although Asilomar remains somewhat unique in several ways.  
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47  
48

49 The selection of Julia Morgan, born in San Francisco in 1872, as architect for Asilomar  
50  
51 was both strategic and symbolic. Morgan completed a civil engineering degree from the  
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53 University of California, Berkeley as with no architecture program then in existence, this was the  
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3 closest related discipline. Following her graduation she became the first woman to attend and  
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5 graduated in 1902, from the E'cole des Beaux Arts in Paris, France, then regarded as the worlds'  
6  
7 premier architectural design school (Wilson, 2007). On her return to California, she worked for  
8  
9 two years with the renowned architect John Howard who is reported to have once told a  
10  
11 colleague that Morgan was "an excellent draftsman whom I have to pay almost nothing, as it  
12  
13 [sic] is a woman" (Boutelle, 1996, p. 22). As Brandimarte (2008) noted, Morgan became one of  
14  
15 the most prolific architects of her generation, opening her own firm in 1904, which became  
16  
17 highly profitable with the significant rebuilding following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake.  
18  
19 Over her career Morgan designed an estimated 700 building including residences, churches,  
20  
21 university buildings, hospitals, and hotels, primarily on the West Coast. Morgan designed many  
22  
23 buildings for the YWCA across the country with architectural historian Boutelle (1981)  
24  
25 observing that she "understood women's organizations, their goals and their limitations, not just  
26  
27 because of her gender but also because she shared their determination to improve the lives of  
28  
29 individuals and groups who could not take social action on their own" (p. 91). Morgan utilized a  
30  
31 simple unifying architectural Arts and Crafts style design that adopted principles and  
32  
33 construction practices to create a nature informed built environment to facilitate the learning and  
34  
35 spiritual developmental purpose of Asilomar (Quacchia, 2005; Wilson, 2007).  
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42 In 1916, Ellen Browning Scripps <sup>1</sup> (see Footnote 1) visited Asilomar and after purchased  
43  
44 an additional 20 acres for the facility. As donations continued, more Morgan designed buildings  
45  
46 and structures were completed. The temporary tent houses were replaced with permeant  
47  
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50  
51 <sup>1</sup> Ellen Browning Scripps (October 18, 1836 – August 3, 1932) was an American journalist and  
52 philanthropist who was the founding donor of several major institutions in Southern California. She and  
53 her half-brother E. W. Scripps created America's largest chain of newspapers. She donated millions of  
54 dollars to organizations worldwide that promised to advance democratic principles and women's  
55 education.  
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3 accommodation buildings and other new construction occurred as funds allowed so that by 1921,  
4  
5 Asilomar was able to accommodate up to 500 people. Julia Morgan designed her last and most  
6  
7 well-known Asilomar building, Merrill Hall, in 1928 to provide a multipurpose space that could  
8  
9 seat 1,000 for conference lectures, seminars, and graduations, as well as musical and theatrical  
10  
11 performances (Hunt, 1963; Wilson, 2007). Overall, Morgan designed 16 rustic buildings  
12  
13 between 1913 and 1928 for Asilomar, of which 11 remain today.  
14  
15

**Operation and Programs at YWCA Asilomar Conference Grounds**

16  
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19 The opening conference session for Asilomar was held during the last week of July,  
20  
21 1913. Conferences featured classes and lectures, on topics ranging from the international work of  
22  
23 the YWCA to the power of American common schools. Some of the week was devoted to Bible  
24  
25 study and training for missionary work, although there were also a wide variety of formal  
26  
27 lectures and informal talks from women in leadership positions as well as ample time scheduled  
28  
29 for recreation and social activities (Hunt, 1963). Another goal of conferences was to facilitate the  
30  
31 “expansion of feminine discourse” (McNeill, 2012, p. 68), which was one of the reasons that  
32  
33 communal spaces inside and outside Asilomar buildings were considered an important  
34  
35 architectural design element.  
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40 As the acreage and accommodation capacity increased, Asilomar continued to host the  
41  
42 annual conference as well as several summer camps attracting women from both professions and  
43  
44 university. The core purpose of YWCA conferences at Asilomar was to train women in Christian  
45  
46 leadership focused on “spiritual development and moral uplift” (Meyerowitz, 1997, p. xi). “The  
47  
48 association was conceived as an intergenerational meeting place where leaders would guide  
49  
50 younger members by promoting their spiritual, intellectual, social, and physical welfare”  
51  
52 (Bottorff, 2018, p. 122). This broadly defined aim did not considered these as distinct areas of  
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3 emphasis, but rather a balanced set of ideals to prepare young women for broadened life roles  
4  
5 infused with leadership and service opportunities. Formal skill-based training included typing,  
6  
7 managing personal finances, driving a car, and “other good survival skills for young women  
8  
9 seeking economic independence” (Asilomar, 2007, p. 15). Asilomar conference events provided  
10  
11 women with informal networking and job information sessions that helped with identification of  
12  
13 work opportunities. Lectures and group discussions of current events and literature were  
14  
15 scheduled and offered leaders who had attended higher education institutions an opportunity to  
16  
17 share their interests, knowledge, and advice with younger members (Bottorff, 2018).  
18  
19 Recreational activities focused on skill acquisition and development of good health and well-  
20  
21 being including sports often limited to female participation such as swimming, tennis, and  
22  
23 baseball as well as theatrical and musical performances.  
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28  
29 The Girl Reserve Movement, a branch of the YWCA for girls aged 14-16, held summer  
30  
31 conferences at Asilomar that also included an emphasis on leadership development (Jones,  
32  
33 1924). A 1916 Asilomar report noted that many of the 117 participants of the recently concluded  
34  
35 Girl’s Camp had written to the YWCA Western Regional Office to express their thanks and  
36  
37 recollections. “From the mothers, from pastors and from friends have come words of the lasting  
38  
39 impression and ideals which the girls received” (Moore, 1916). The *Pacific Coast News*,  
40  
41 published monthly by the YWCA Pacific Coast Field Committee, January 1921 issue contains  
42  
43 letters from Girl’s Club camps the previous summer that provide insight into the recollections of  
44  
45 participants. Anne Guthrie recalled the background of her fellow campers were:  
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49 From duties of every kind: some accustomed to keeping books and pounding the  
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51 typewriter; some to packing or canning fruit; several made the cans in which to take care  
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53 of that fruit; others from laundries, from school rooms, from stores. But though from a  
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3 variety of interests we gathered, one common bond of friendship held us together there  
4  
5 and the intangible spirit of Asilomar made us feel at home very quickly. (p.3)  
6

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8 She further reflected that the daily “discussion classes gave inspiration to carry back to our  
9  
10 every-day living.” In the same issue of the *Pacific Coast News*, Gertie Reddy, describing herself  
11  
12 as “an American Can Company girl<sup>2</sup>” (see Footnote 2) reported prior to her Asilomar experience  
13  
14 she “had no conception of what the YWCA could accomplish, and what a big force for good in  
15  
16 the world they were. I only hope I can carry back a message from that wonderful spot that will  
17  
18 help other girls realize what a joy this vacation has been” (p. 3)  
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21  
22 As the 1920’s progressed, the number of conferences and camps held at Asilomar  
23  
24 increased to provide leisure and learning opportunities for young women from an expanding  
25  
26 range of backgrounds. The YWCA of this era adopted a broad education strategy “to instill their  
27  
28 values in the general populace, create potential space for new ideas among professional women,  
29  
30 and provide the tools for agitation as well as for upward mobility desired by working women”  
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32 (Dilg, 2003, p. 176).  
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### 35 **Evidence of Learning**

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38 The archives, as well as numerous reports in local newspapers and letters published in  
39  
40 various YWCA publications contained many examples of first-person narratives related to  
41  
42 training, learning, and leadership development from those attending events at Asilomar. Letters  
43  
44 from campers, recollections both recent and years after, as well as articles from visiting  
45  
46 newspaper reporters described many aspects of powerful learning experiences. For example, the  
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52 <sup>2</sup> The American Can Company was a manufacturer of tin cans with facilities across the  
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54 U.S., primarily located in proximity to industrial cities for commodities such as paint as well as  
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56 locations near fruit, crop, and harvest areas in California and other Western states for  
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58 convenience foods.  
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## ASILOMAR

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3 *Pacific Coast News* of August 31, 1921 contained an article titled “One associations reaction to  
4 Asilomar” summarizing recent Asilomar events that included grateful acknowledgement from a  
5 young business woman: “I was especially impressed how willing the leaders were, all very busy  
6 men and women, to give their time to help any group or individual who might need  
7 encouragement or advice’ (p. 1). The summer of 1931 featured a large Girl Reserve camp  
8 organized on the theme “A modern girl in a modern world”. Local newspaper reporter Ingels  
9 (1931), described how this theme will be taken up by the conference groups and all discussions  
10 will be based on this idea. The college newspaper of San Jose State College (now known as San  
11 Jose State University) reported an article titled “YWCA ends conference held at Asilomar” that  
12 in July 1932, 15 students had returned from the annual YWCA college conference at Asilomar  
13 “inspired and prepared to live effectively in an upset world” (p. 3).  
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28 The learning, training, and leadership development were not limited to those attending  
29 conferences and camps at Asilomar. The leadership development opportunities embedded in the  
30 planning and administration of YWCA conferences have long been recognized as an example of  
31 adult education in the US. Writing in 1945, Height noted:  
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37 In all parts of the country business and industrial girls come together each year to face the  
38 basic issues confronting young workers. Leadership training is a specific program  
39 objective. One of the strongest assets of the YWCA is the experience it gives in policy  
40 making to women serving on its boards, councils and committees. Such experience  
41 contributes to the development of woman's sense of citizenship responsibility and in the  
42 skills needed to carry that responsibility. (p. 391)  
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51 The encouragement for camp administrators to view their responsibilities as having the  
52 opportunity to impact future work and life roles was described by Allen (1930):  
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## ASILOMAR

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3 Executive relationships, executive decisions, executive actions are brimming with their  
4 own dramatic possibilities. In this realm, as in any other, educationally speaking, the  
5 stage must be set according to the best known technical and psychological laws. The  
6 executive channel and the program channel are both full of potential satisfactions. (p. 2-  
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12 3)

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15 Clearly, the learning experiences, both formal and informal, available to YWCA campers along  
16 with their volunteer and paid staff were recognized and valued aspects of programs at Asilomar.

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18  
19 Initially Asilomar, like the other ten YWCA conference ground camps in the US, was  
20 operated over the summer season and on selected weekends but in 1921 it commenced year-  
21 round operations although “despite every effort on the part of the YWCA, expenses continued to  
22 outweigh income” (Hunt, 1963, p. 11). It soon returned to a summer season from mid-June to  
23 late-August of YWCA camps for leadership conferences and the YWCA Girl Reserve summer  
24 camp. Most camps lasted an average of ten days. Other organizations, usually religiously  
25 affiliated and in sympathy with the ideals of the YWCA (Quacchia, 2005) were encouraged and  
26 welcome to rent the conference grounds for their own camps usually relying on YWCA  
27 Asilomar staff. An amusing incident is reported in the minutes of the Annual Meeting of the  
28 Conference Grounds Committee (1915) which noted at the end of May the grounds were rented  
29 by the YMCA for a conference of their male staff:

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31  
32 They [YMCA] had 323 in attendance, and this was the most critical crowd we had to deal  
33 with, as they expected the conference grounds run by women to be filled with faults and  
34 inconveniences, and it was fun to watch their unwilling admiration of Asilomar overcome  
35 the prejudice the average man has for a business, run by women. (p. 3).

## ASILOMAR

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3 Despite attempts to expand usage with outside organizations, Asilomar was never  
4 financially self-supporting and with the deepening Great Depression the National Board of the  
5 YWCA voted to close Asilomar on January 24, 1934. With financial pressure to liquidate some  
6 of its assets, the YWCA hoped to sell Asilomar to an organization that would continue the goal  
7 of providing “a safe haven for people to exchange ideas and learn new things” (Asilomar, 2007,  
8 p. 15) but a buyer for the property could not be found.  
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12 The YWCA once again began operating Asilomar as a full-service conference facility  
13 1947, after it was requisitioned for army accommodation during WWII, while efforts to sell the  
14 entire property continued. Adjacent land was purchased in 1949 by California State Parks. A  
15 local “Save Asilomar” committee was established by the community to preserve the historic  
16 buildings and property. On July 1, 1956 Asilomar became a unit in California’s State Park  
17 system. In 1987 United States Department of the Interior National Park Service added the  
18 Asilomar Conference Grounds to the National Register of Historic Places Inventory. The  
19 designation was given to Asilomar in recognition of both the architectural achievement of Julia  
20 Morgan and the noteworthy efforts of the “YWCA’s on behalf of recreational and educational  
21 opportunities for women” (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1986, p. 691). While it is important  
22 that Asilomar receive recognition as an architectural site with buildings and structures worthy of  
23 preservation, it is the role of Asilomar in women’s leadership development that is important to  
24 acknowledge as part of the history of women’s specific routes to development in HRD.  
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### 46 Discussion and Conclusion

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49 Women’s leadership development activity at Asilomar is absent, invisible, and outside  
50 established narratives to describe the formative years of HRD. Bierema (2016) has noted that  
51 “women in the paid workforce experience a context that collides with patriarchal notions,  
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## ASILOMAR

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3 cultures, industries, politics, and history” (p. 120) and this would appear to be the case with  
4  
5 programs related to training and women’s leadership development at Asilomar prior to 1940.  
6  
7 Asilomar warrants its place in the narrative of HRD in the US based on the support of women for  
8  
9 women’s development, its conscious choice to seek out professional women in its design, and its  
10  
11 focus on skills training and developmental opportunities in a period where women lacked ready  
12  
13 access to both. Asilomar emphasizes the need for theorizing efforts to (re)consider the told and  
14  
15 absent narratives on the history and evolution of the HRD field. History offers scholars access to  
16  
17 unique forms of theorizing to connect time, context, and change (Wadhvani, et al., 2020). The  
18  
19 potential for history to “enrich and transform our understanding of contemporary organizations  
20  
21 and organizational theory remains unfulfilled” (Maclean et al., 2016, p. 609). Future theorizing  
22  
23 and research on the role of dominant narratives of the historic origins and evolution of the HRD  
24  
25 field are needed. Such efforts must be conducted with recognition of what the Haitian history  
26  
27 scholar Trouillot (2015) detailed as the many ways in which knowledge and the production of  
28  
29 history involves power. In his study of silences in historical narratives, Trouillot (2015) showed  
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31 that what is omitted and what is recorded, what is remembered and what is forgotten reveal the  
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33 inequalities of power.  
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40 Concepts of masculinity have dominated theorizing and research on the origins and  
41  
42 evolution of HRD, training, and leadership development. The extent to which those who learn of  
43  
44 the biased historical origins of HRD in colleges and universities are influenced to shape current  
45  
46 practice is an area worthy of future study. Historians, such as Perriton (2009) are starting to make  
47  
48 important contributions to highlight the significant, yet largely under acknowledged or  
49  
50 overlooked role of women’s organizations as providers of training and development in the pre-  
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52 Second World War period. Our findings support the position advocated by Bierema (2009) and  
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ASILOMAR

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3 others (e.g. Gedro & Mizzi, 2014) to reject contemporary “HRD’s narrow masculine rational  
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5 orientation that is endangering the field’s relevance and impact” (Bierema, 2009, p. 86) to  
6  
7 consider a broader perspective of the development of human resources within a specific  
8  
9 historical and cultural context.  
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12 Women’s voluntary associations have been called invisible (Scott, 1990) and their role,  
13  
14 impact, and legacy as providers of training and development marginalized. The YWCA in the  
15  
16 United States had strong roots within an evangelical Christian culture, but by the early twentieth  
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18 century, at the time Asilomar was established, their efforts focused on the rights of women in  
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20 work and social issues spanning across racial, religious, economic, and cultural boundaries  
21  
22 (Karabağ, 2021). They were, and remain, a significant provider of women’s training and  
23  
24 development. However, historical research in management, organizational sciences, and HRD  
25  
26 has largely avoided the complex intersectionality of women from diverse backgrounds engaged  
27  
28 with leadership development for work, family, and social spheres of life. More future research is  
29  
30 this direction is needed.  
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35 Acknowledgement of non-equal treatment to women, women’s volunteer organizations,  
36  
37 and women’s leadership in the narratives on the history of the field of HRD is required to  
38  
39 address ongoing inequalities. The history of Asilomar questions the existing focus on military  
40  
41 and for-profit firms as the originators and innovators in practices that shaped the philosophies of  
42  
43 HRD. Application of poststructuralists and feminist theory to the historical record of Asilomar  
44  
45 underscores many additional examples of gendered representations spanning literature domains  
46  
47 of leadership development, philanthropy, and architecture. Specifically, the history of  
48  
49 philanthropy in the U.S. has tended to focus on men such as Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius  
50  
51 Vanderbilt, J. D. Rockefeller Sr., to the exclusion of women such as Phoebe Hearst, Grace  
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## ASILOMAR

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3 Dodge, and Mary Crocker who used their wealth and influence to advance causes related to  
4 women and their education, specifically in this case with the foundation of Asilomar (Nickliss,  
5 2002). Indeed, the idea, location, and development of Asilomar are all directly related to the  
6 vision, energy, influence, and generosity of women from California and other western states to  
7 create a place of learning and leadership development for women. Taken holistically, our  
8 findings on the historical story of Asilomar lead us to advocate for a needed revision of the  
9 history of HRD.  
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19 A revised historiography of HRD in the United States would not only acknowledge, but  
20 celebrate gender, volunteer associations, working-class education and development outside of  
21 formal higher education systems, and the non-workplace or organizational context for learning,  
22 training, and leadership development. This would stand in stark contrast to the masculinist,  
23 militarized, and product of a performative war production orientation that dominates the existing  
24 history. Such a revised history would ensure that the women who had the vision to create,  
25 support, and sustain Asilomar, as well as the many other historical examples of women's training  
26 and leadership development programs yet to be studied, cannot be discounted or ignored in the  
27 future. As HRD continues to seek ways to define scholarship and practice from more diverse and  
28 inclusive frames, perhaps no stronger statement can be made for the field to embrace an accurate  
29 historical understanding of when training and development opportunities were provided to  
30 benefit society, and not just the economy, by women for women.  
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