

On a sunny spring day in 1924, people packed the shores of Orlando's Lake Eola Park for a gala occasion. The Sentinel spared few superlatives in describing the occasion: the dedication of the park's new bandstand. The crowd was the largest ever at Lake Eola, the writer declared, effusing over every aspect of the event, from the William Tell overture to the dedicatory speech - which, reading between the lines, was blessedly brief.

But what of the structure itself - a remarkable creation that actually appeared to sit on the lake, connected to the shore by a bridge? The uncredited reporter told readers more about the speaker, longtime Orlandoan W.R. O'Neal, than about the structure O'Neal was dedicating, and I have to wonder what its architects, Ida Annah Ryan and **Isabel Roberts**, thought about that.

'A very liberated woman'

I first learned about Ryan and **Roberts** at least a decade ago when I stumbled across a 1981 article about Ryan in Orange County Regional History archives. It quoted someone who described her as "quite a woman ... a very liberated woman." I had to know more.

Ryan had come to Orlando in 1917 - the first woman to receive a master's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and, in fact, the first woman to receive a master's in architecture anywhere in the United States. She was also the eighth woman to be admitted to the American Institute of Architects.

About 1920, Ryan formed a partnership in Orlando with **Isabel Roberts**, and their architectural works included that 1924 bandstand at Lake Eola (torn down about 1957). Ryan died in 1950; **Roberts**, in 1955. Further details seemed scarce.

Then, thanks to Central Floridian John A. Dalles, a scholar of architecture as well as a Presbyterian minister, I learned much more about these remarkable women.

Dalles has done considerable research on Ryan and **Roberts**, including their surviving works, several of which are in St. Cloud. Perhaps the most accessible is the 1922 Veterans Memorial Library building, home to the St. Cloud Heritage Museum.

Wright resemblance

It's "a little Prairie style gem that strongly resembles banks in the upper Midwest designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and his mentor, Louis Sullivan," Dalles says about the St. Cloud building.

The Wright resemblance should come as no surprise. Before **Roberts** moved to Orlando and her partnership with Ryan, she worked for Wright as a draftsman-architect.

Wright's assistants, two women and five men, "wore flowing ties and smocks," Wright's son John wrote in his book "My Father: Frank Lloyd Wright." Each made "valuable contributions to the pioneering of modern American architecture."

Born in 1871, **Roberts** grew up in South Bend, Indiana, and was hired by Wright after three years of study in Manhattan. Her partner, Ryan, was born in 1873. In addition to Ryan's other "firsts," she was also the first woman at MIT to receive a traveling fellowship in architecture, which allowed her to travel in Europe in 1907-08. A decade later, she moved to Florida in part because her career in Waltham, Massachusetts, was stalled "when building came to a standstill upon U.S. entrance into World War I," Dalles writes.

Ryan and **Roberts** faced immense career obstacles solely because they were women. (As recently as 2020, an article on the AIA website noted that women made up only 17 percent of registered architects.) Ryan's efforts to join the Boston chapter of AIA were always rebuffed, although she did become a member of the Florida chapter. She was the group's secretary in 1923, described as among the leaders of the annual Florida AIA

meeting at the Angebilt Hotel in Orlando.

Roberts applied for AIA membership but never gained it despite recommendations from three leading Chicago architects, including Wright.

While their business flourished during the 1920s boom, Ryan and **Roberts** designed several landmarks of an earlier Orlando, now demolished. In addition to the 1924 Lake Eola bandstand, they included the First Unitarian Church's Unity Chapel at Rosalind Avenue and Central Boulevard and the Amherst Apartments on West Colonial Drive.

Other Ryan and **Roberts** structures have survived, including the Veterans Memorial Library building in St. Cloud and the chapel at the historic Fisk Funeral Home in St. Cloud. Like other fans of these important women trailblazers, I hope more about their work and their lives might come to light as time goes on.

To learn more

You can learn more about Ryan and **Roberts** in an essay by Orlando architect Gregory Stock at OrlandoArchitecture.org, the website of the Orlando Foundation for Architecture (click on "architects" under the OFAPedia tab). For more on John A. Dalles' work on Ryan and **Roberts**, visit his blog at TransformationsandWhispers.blogspot.com.

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