

***Alice Ramsey: Driving in New Directions*****By Dr. Katherine Parkin****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v4i2.127>**

*Summering in Asbury Park in 1908 enabled Alice Ramsey to hone her motor skills as she drove 6,000 miles of Monmouth County roads. She developed skills to care for and maintain the car, with few services available to her. Her winning performances in endurance runs on Long Island and between New York City and Philadelphia caught the eye of a Maxwell-Briscoe car promoter who invited her to undertake a sponsored trip across the country. When she crossed the country in 1909, only a tiny percentage of women drove; there were few formal roads and very little guidance on how to navigate. While she was known throughout her life as Mrs. John R. Ramsey and had two children, after her husband's death in 1933, Alice Ramsey, under cover of her married name and her identity as mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, lived for 50 years with women she loved. Her wealth, presumptive heterosexuality, and notoriety as an automotive pioneer led newspapers and magazines in the 1960s and 1970s to cover her unconventional life.*

Heralded automotive pioneer Alice Huyler Ramsey, who drove from New York City to San Francisco in 1909, captured the imagination of Americans. With her jaunty cap and pluck, she charmed the public then and now with her fortitude, absolutely demanded by the trip. Her life's journey, however, proved to also be a remarkable one. Hidden until now by the cover of heterosexuality and maternity, and with the protection of socio-economic standing, Mrs. John Ramsey lived with and loved two women. While her matrimonial name and role as a mother gave the public social assurances, her consistent behavior suggests her commitment to and public acknowledgment of her long-standing relationships with women.

The earliest years of her life are documented by her own hand, and reveal that she met her future husband, John Rathbone Ramsey, when she was 16 years old and a senior in high school in Hackensack, New Jersey, as she “walked to school each morning.” She may also have spoken to him when she organized a 1901 petition to stop the local school board from starting school “a week earlier than usual,” with a local newspaper account heralding her as the “town’s petted beauty.”



**15-Year Old Girl Fights Hackensack School Board, 8 July 1901.**  
**News clipping held in the Alice Ramsey Collection, Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library.**

He was already 40 years old. He began to come around the house, reading the newspaper while she did her homework. She called him by the nickname “Bone” shortened from his middle name, Rathbone. As the conversation led toward marriage it was decided (perhaps responding to a growing sense of child marriage as being especially unfavorable for the financially wealthy) that she would delay their marriage by two years by attending college. After two years at

Vassar College, Alice left to prepare for her wedding. When they married in January 1906, she was 19 and he was 43.<sup>1</sup> Bone had been married once before, eight years earlier, but his wife died after just three months. He was an accomplished attorney from a prominent family, who went on

<sup>1</sup> Alice Huyler Ramsey, *Duster, Veil, and Tire Iron* (Covina, California: Castle Press, 1961), 8; “My dear Earluth” letter, 2 February 1980, from AHR to Earluth, page 1, Vassar archive; “My dear Earluth” letter, 10 November 1980, page 1, Vassar archive; Nicholas Syrett, *American Child Bride: A History of Minors and Marriage in the United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 145-6. Even at 19, Alice would have been among the 11-12 percent of 15-19 year olds marrying in this period (Syrett, 146-7).

to serve as a County Clerk and later as a Representative from New Jersey in the US House of Representatives. A year after their marriage, Alice gave birth to a son, named John Jr.<sup>2</sup>

Alice Ramsey's status as a married woman is central to the story of how she came to drive: her husband gifted her a car when the horse she was handling spooked. This story singlehandedly reassured the reader that the woman interested in driving was married and wealthy. The car was a gift that the couple discussed and thereby it came with the approval of her husband. These key elements made her embrace of the automobile acceptable to the skeptical public. Alice, however, later described herself as mechanically inclined and also attributed her interest to her father's support of technical training. She did not suggest that she needed permission or approval, and consistently advanced the notion that she was instantly a good, capable driver. She boasted that she mastered the operation of the car in two lessons from the Maxwell-Briscoe dealership.<sup>3</sup>



**The Maxwell roadster she took possession of in New Brunswick, New Jersey was a two seater (with an additional two in the jump seat) and had no windshield. In the postcard she had produced, with the cards a wildly popular trend at the time, she showcased herself behind the wheel. Postcard held in the Alice Ramsey Collection, Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library.**

<sup>2</sup> *Genealogical History of Hudson and Bergen Counties, New Jersey*, ed. Cornelius Burnham Harvey (New York: The New Jersey Genealogical Publishing Company, 1900), 146-7; "John Rathbone Ramsey," *Official Congressional Directory*, Vol. 65, 65; John Rathbone Ramsey biography, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=R000027> (accessed 16 June 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Alice Huyler Ramsey, *Duster, Veil, and Tire Iron* (Covina, California: Castle Press, 1961), 23; Louise Egan Steele, "I guess I've Always Been Liberated," *Star News* (Pasadena, California), 18 September 1977; Tom Mahoney, "Alice Huyler Ramsey: First of the 'weaker sex' to show driving superiority," *Cars & Parts* (June 1979): 22-3.



Movie reel (1904) and newspaper (*Asbury Park Press*, 30 August 1907) coverage of the Baby Parade suggest both the density of the city and the popularity of this form of entertainment. Thomas Edison filmed the parade in 1904, with the baby perambulators appearing at the :45 second mark: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5-CEs6jfy4>

traversing the countryside were plentiful and wide open. Ramsey reported driving 6,000 miles in Monmouth County that summer, taking guests with her in the modified backseat, regardless of the weather. She noted that while it was certainly uncomfortable to ride in the folding backseat and the car had no top, “the novelty of riding in automobile made up for a lot of inconvenience.”<sup>5</sup>

When Ramsey, her young son, and nursemaid moved down to Asbury Park in a rented house for the summer of 1908, she even got her son in on the action, entering his decorated stroller in the wildly popular Baby Parade in the “Baby Coach and Go-Cart Division.” Anticipating his mother’s coming prowess behind the wheel of her own vehicle, he was awarded third prize and won a “Bristol hotel gold watch.”<sup>4</sup>

Alice found herself in an ideal location for driving. Small cities like Asbury Park tended to be densely populated (especially in summer) and compactly designed, but the roads

<sup>4</sup> *Asbury Park Evening Press*, 30 August 1907; Janet H. Burgents, *Reflections of Asbury Park* (Xlibris, 2008), 25.

<sup>5</sup> “My dear Earluth,” 3 March 1980, Vassar archive; Alice Huyler Ramsey, *Duster, Veil, and Tire Iron* (Covina, California: Castle Press, 1961), 12.

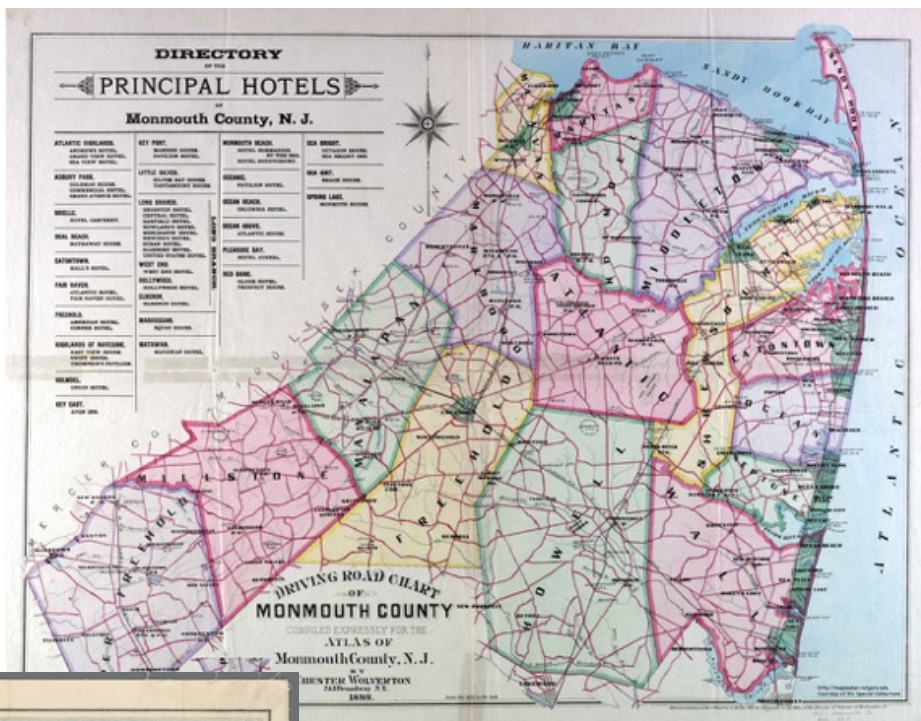


Right:

[Driving road chart of Monmouth County, compiled expressly for the Atlas of Monmouth County, N.J., 1889.](#) Courtesy Rutgers University Community Repository.

Bottom:

[Colton's road map of Monmouth County New Jersey, undated.](#) Courtesy New York Public Library.



In addition to all of that experience driving, Alice also reflected on the importance of the opportunity and necessity that she be able to take care of the car herself. She noted, “there were few garages and one had to be able to do many things oneself to keep going. No self-starters, no electric lights, no mechanics within reach. And don’t run out of gas or you walk many miles.” Alice, then aged 22,

was well prepared in the Fall of 1908 to participate in an endurance run out to Montauk, running the length of Long Island. She earned a perfect score in the two-day race.



**Left: Alice Ramsey behind the wheel, at Columbus Circle, NYC en route to Montauk Endurance Run, Fall 1908.**

**Right: Alice Ramsey, center, with two sisters-in-law, having completed the race.**

**Photos held in the Alice Ramsey Collection, Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library.**

Impressed by her Montauk performance, Cadwallader “Carl” Kelsey approached Alice to consider a cross-country trek to showcase the Maxwell car in a publicity stunt to attract female consumers. Her husband’s support is made clear in all of the retellings. One story that assured readers was that he suggested bringing his two 40-something year old sisters with her as chaperones, but in Alice’s own account, the women started to plan for the trip on the way back from Montauk, with Maggie wondering, ““We won’t be able to carry much luggage, will we?”” Hermine Jahns also made the trek to San Francisco, as she had proved her mettle in her role as



“mechanician” on Ramsey’s New York-Philadelphia Midwinter run in January 1909, where she won the Benjamin Briscoe Trophy in the two-day, all woman event.<sup>6</sup>



**Alice Ramsey and Hermine Jahns, 1909, New York-Philadelphia Midwinter Run.**

Photo courtesy Detroit Public Library’s [National Automotive History Collection](#).

The large Maxwell touring car held four people and it would have been more fun to have someone her own age. While news accounts (then and now) frequently reported Jahns’s age as 16 years old, the census reveals that she was 19. Newspaper reporting sometimes had errors, and Jahns tried to correct the accounts, noting to a reporter at an early stop in Syracuse that she was a Miss not

a Mrs., which was another commonly misreported aspect of the trip. The use of the married title, however, also served to assure readers of the respectability of all of the women traveling, as they appeared to be doing so without male supervision or protection.<sup>7</sup> It also assured observers who might have questioned the women sharing a bed at night, as the two married sisters roomed together as they traveled across the country. In her recounting, Alice noted, “Hermine and I shared the same room always and, of necessity, the same bed. We were both good sleepers, however, so

<sup>6</sup> Alice Huyler Ramsey, *Duster, Veil, and Tire Iron* (Covina, California: Castle Press, 1961), 7-9; Louise Egan Steele, “I guess I’ve Always Been Liberated,” *Star News* (Pasadena, California), 18 September 1977; Tom Mahoney, “Alice Huyler Ramsey: First of the ‘weaker sex’ to show driving superiority,” *Cars & Parts* (June 1979); Elsa A. Nystrom, *Mad for Speed: The Racing Life of Joan Newton Cuneo* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 103-4.

<sup>7</sup> Mahoney, “Alice Huyler Ramsey, 23; “To Coast Without a Man,” *The Syracuse Herald, Saturday Evening*, 12 June 1909, 5; “Women on Long Auto Trip,” *The Goshen Democrat* (Indiana), 11 June 1909; “Alice Ramsey’s Historic Transcontinental Road Trip,” NYC News, 9 June 2009, <https://www.wnyc.org/story/86970-alice-ramseys-historic-transcontinental-road-trip/>; Marina Koestler Ruben, “Alice Ramsey’s Historic Cross-Country Drive,” *Smithsonian.com*, 4 June 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/alice-ramseys-historic-cross-country-drive-29114570/>.

we managed all right.” Emphasizing her status as a married woman and the shortage of accommodations enabled the two women to escape scrutiny for their sleeping arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

Selling the ease of the trip also led Ramsey to suggest, “All of the party enjoyed excellent health on the trip.” She even noted, “Miss Jahns and I gained a little in weight.” Yet their arrival to San Francisco was delayed by Hermine’s illness. Celebrants expected them Sunday, August 1, but an article in the *Sacramento Union* noted that they had already been delayed. “Mrs. Ramsey has stopped a few miles beyond Reno, and will make no effort to continue her trip to the coast until her companion is fully recovered.” After Hermine recovered, the group arrived intact on August 7.<sup>9</sup>

### **“To Coast without a Man”**

The contemporaneous accounts of the cross-country trip, in fact, offered little detail about Ramsey herself, advancing a narrative that she was married, but leaving aside the fact that she left behind a young son to make the trip. Moreover, her husband’s presence was fairly amorphous. It was only after his death and in the subsequent retelling of the adventure in the 1960s and ‘70s that readers began to hear a modern sell, that had her leaving behind her young son in the capable hands of her own nursemaid, and perhaps even more shocking, the revelation that not only did her husband not drive, he did not even like to ride in cars. As Ramsey put it, “‘He always took one ride in each new automotive arrival ... he always asked ‘How do you stop this thing.’ She later noted of her own prowess behind the wheel, “‘Good driving has nothing to do with sex. It’s all above the collar.’” The contrast between their gender roles, with her at the wheel and him

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<sup>8</sup> Alice Huyler Ramsey, *Alice’s Drive: Republishing Veil, Duster, & Tire Iron* Annotated by Gregory M. Franzwa (Tucson, Arizona: The Patrice Press: 2005), 103, 180.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.; “Mrs. Ramsey Delayed by Friend’s Illness,” *Sacramento Union*, 31 July 1909; “Trailblazing Ride Made History,” *The Record* (Bergen, NJ), 22 March 2009, <http://www.hackensacknow.org/index.php?topic=848.0>.



unwilling even to enter the car, was used to showcase Ramsey's adventurous spirit, and did not leave the reader to linger on a man who did not drive.<sup>10</sup>

To foreclose any other interpretation, modern writers have interpreted Ramsey's nearly immediate return home as one of nearly desperate passion, with the evidence that nine months after her return her young son was soon joined by a baby girl, named for Alice herself. One 1997 account stated: "Lonely for her family, she spent only three days in California before returning home by train. Ramsey's daughter, Alice Valleau, was born nine months after the trip," while another in 2009 claimed to know her reunion was joyous, "because she had a baby nine months later." Moreover, Ramsey herself put forward no other interpretation than that she was anything other than Mrs. John Ramsey and in no interview or accounting does she have an unkind word to say about her husband.<sup>11</sup>

The 1909 trip is Ramsey's legacy, but beyond Ramsey herself, no one knew or remembered the trip until late in her life. On page 53 of the densely advertised Travel Section of the *New York Times*, buried deep in the paper, a story chronicling the adventure "From Hell Gate to Golden Gate – In 1909" appeared. Even this celebratory story, heralding the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the trip, acknowledged that "the ladies' tour went relatively unreported at the time" because most newspapers followed a cross-country race with men competing for a cash prize and a "solid gold cup" put up by M. Robert Guggenheim. Moreover, although it was the first made by a woman, Ramsey's was the 10<sup>th</sup> cross-country automobile trip. Cobbling together his reporting from

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<sup>10</sup> Alice Huyler Ramsey, *Duster, Veil, and Tire Iron* (Covina, California: Castle Press, 1961), 12; Susan Braudy and Mary Thom, "What a Thrill to Take the Wheel," *Ms.*, February 1975, 17; Marc Mappen, *There's More to New Jersey than the Sopranos* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rivergate Books, 2009), 120-4; Marina Koestler Ruben, "Alice Ramsey's Historic Cross-Country Drive," *Smithsonian.com*, 4 June 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/alice-ramseys-historic-cross-country-drive-29114570/>.

<sup>11</sup> Joan N. Burstyn, *Past and Promise: Lives of New Jersey Women* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 184; Marc Mappen, *There's More to New Jersey than the Sopranos* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rivergate Books, 2009), 120-4; Alice Ramsey collection, Vassar Archive.

contemporaneous accounts found in magazines and old record books, the author, Joseph Ingraham did, however, establish not only the difficulty of the trip but also the women's fortitude. He quoted an article in *Motor Print* magazine that concluded, "That the unavoidable hardships of so long a trip were endured and all difficulties conquered by a party of what we in the error of our masculine ways are accustomed to calling the weaker sex is all the more to the credit of the plucky little woman who piloted her car to success."<sup>12</sup>

In 1959, at the age of 72, Ramsey found herself the storyteller. At first working with an author, a manuscript about her life was initially rejected by several publishers. After re-writing it herself, Ramsey was able to land a deal with a local, independent publisher. Her book anticipated a car-loving public, as well as a growing women's movement and a culture that increasingly celebrated pioneers. With all the other participants deceased by time she wrote her book, *Duster, Veil, and Tire Iron*, Ramsey received accolades and conducted interviews until her death in 1983, at age 96. Most of the stories hewed closely to Ramsey's own telling, supplemented by her continued love of driving. Throughout her life she drove in Europe, drove in Australia, and was still driving across the United States until she was 90.<sup>13</sup>

Lost in many accounts, however, was that the root origin of the trip was to sell cars. Maxwell-Briscoe funded the trip as an elaborate publicity stunt and used the skill and determination of Ramsey to promote their cars. Ramsey fundamentally shared with the company a desire to present herself as entirely competent, she was the sole driver; and the trip as something

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph Ingraham, "From Hell Gate to Golden Gate – In 1909," *New York Times*, 7 June 1959; Marina Koestler Ruben, "Alice Ramsey's Historic Cross-Country Drive," *Smithsonian.com*, 4 June 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/alice-ramseys-historic-cross-country-drive-29114570/>.

<sup>13</sup> Alice Huyler Ramsey letter to "My dear Earluth," 2 February 1980, written on 3 March 1980; Alice Huyler Ramsey, *Duster, Veil, and Tire Iron* (Covina, California: Castle Press, 1961); Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991); Tom Mahoney, "Alice Huyler Ramsey: First of the 'Weaker Sex' to Show Driving Superiority," *Cars & Parts*, June 1979, 22-28; Marina Koestler Ruben, "Alice Ramsey's Historic Cross-Country Drive," *Smithsonian.com*, 4 June 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/alice-ramseys-historic-cross-country-drive-29114570/>.

difficult, but nothing she (and the car) couldn't handle. The advertisement that accompanied the August 8, 1909 *San Francisco Chronicle* article heralding them, "Pretty Women Motorists Arrive After Trip Across the Continent," proclaimed that "Mrs. Ramsey drove her Maxwell car from New York over the worst possible roads, over steep grades, and made the trip, one of the most gruelling (sic) imaginable, without a particle of car trouble." After the incredible trouble they experienced, the ad continued, unabashedly, "No gumbo too thick, no sand too deep for the Maxwell."<sup>14</sup> There were accounts in the 1970s that more clearly detailed all the ways that Ramsey not only had a "publicity man making arrangements ahead" of them, with "agents along the route," and "preceded by a pilot car," but that they also had help. When they were "really in trouble ... men with block and tackle were soon there to extricate" the car. The terrain west of the Mississippi proved to be brutal, with the state of Iowa alone taking 12 days in their 59-day trip.<sup>15</sup>

Even the purported length of the trip persisted as part of the sell. While Ramsey had expected it to take closer to a month, breakdowns of the car, the terrible condition of the Midwest roads, and then Hermine's illness all conspired to turn it into a considerably longer trip. While it was not a race, perhaps her pride did not allow for the reality of how long the trip took. Or perhaps there is truth in the fact that it took her 41 days of driving to cross the country, although the trip overall lasted 59 days. A 1979 quotes Alice as saying "'We had been almost two months struggling 3,800 miles, but because of mishaps, including a dozen flat tires, had driven only 41 days.'" In seeking to donate her mother's papers to Vassar her daughter asserted the 41 days, and a story in *Ms.* magazine used that smaller number, too.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> W.H.B. Fowler, "Pretty Women Motorists Arrive After Trip Across the Continent," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 8 August 1909.

<sup>15</sup> "She Retraces 1909 Continental Trip," *The Jefferson Bee* (Jefferson, Iowa), 20 October 1959; Louise Egan Steele, "'I guess I've Always Been Liberated,'" *Star News* (Pasadena, California), 18 September 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Tom Mahoney, "Alice Huyler Ramsey: First of the 'weaker sex' to show driving superiority," *Cars & Parts* (June 1979): 24; Susan Braudy and Mary Thom, "What a Thrill to Take the Wheel," *Ms.*, February 1975, 17;



### “A Very Happy Household”

With Alice Ramsey's return to the East Coast she settled in to domestic life, focused on raising her two children. She participated in the Women's Motor Corps in WWI and the local Women's Club. In the early 1930s, Alice Jr. graduated from Vassar and married, John Jr. started at the Episcopalian Seminary, and John Sr. died. When her husband died in April 1933, Alice divided their marital home at 325 Union Street in Hackensack, New Jersey into two apartments and wrote that Anna Graham Harris “was making her home with me.” By September of that same year, not five months later, a local newspaper in the finger lakes region of New York state reported the two women in town visiting friends.<sup>17</sup> Five years later the *New York Times* reported that the women had set sail for a trip to the North Cape, with both women identified as “Mrs.” even though Anna never married.<sup>18</sup> The 1938 ship manifest revealed them traveling together, and each listed the same address, 325 Union Street. The manifest also revealed that they were accompanied on the trip by her original travel companion Hermine Jahns Dudley and her daughter Margaret Purcell. According to Alice, they “spent several weeks via fjords and roads to Norway and Sweden.”<sup>19</sup>

Alice and Anna, or “Nan” and she called her, appear to have had a musical life together, as Alice played the piano and Harris, who performed with the New York Symphony in 1926 and 1927, served as the musical director of the Presbyterian Church of Hackensack for twenty years, as well as the musical director for the Women's Choral Club, which was created by the Hackensack

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Alice Ramsey Bruns letter to Lisa Brower, Vassar Archives, dated 11 April 1988; Marina Koestler Ruben, “Alice Ramsey's Historic Cross-Country Drive,” *Smithsonian.com*, 4 June 2009, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/alice-ramseys-historic-cross-country-drive-29114570/>.

<sup>17</sup> “Locals,” *The Daily Messenger* (Canandiaigua, New York), 1 September 1933.

<sup>18</sup> “Notes of Social Activities in New York and Elsewhere,” *NYT*, 29 July 1938.

<sup>19</sup> Mahoney, “Alice Huyler Ramsey,” 28; “Oslofjord” ship manifest, leaving Oslo, 1 Sept 1938 arriving New York City, 10 September 1938; Virginia Scharff, *Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991).

Women's Club. Radio listings across the country touted Anna's performances as a soprano and she worked in both New Jersey and California as a "private vocal teacher."<sup>20</sup>

After living together in Hackensack, Alice bought a new home at 263 Gateway Road in Ridgewood, New Jersey. The 1940 census listed them both as 53 years old. It recorded Anna as "lodger" and revealed that Alice had no income and did no paid work, but listed "other" income, presumably living on the inheritance of her own family as well as that of her deceased husband. There is little public record of their life together in Ridgewood, beyond the census, but in Alice's recollection it was in the later 1940s that she began to "commute" between Anna in New Jersey and California. After being forced to live apart by Anna's family and work demands, in 1950 in Alice's words "she rejoined me" in California.<sup>21</sup>

The local phone book, the Covina Directory, listed them by last name, with both living at 827 Chester Cove. Yet it was not necessary to make the deduction that they were living together, because it was announced in the local paper. Similar to an engagement or wedding announcement, the headline proclaimed: "Miss Harris Moves here from NY." The text revealed, "Miss Ann Graham Harris who came to southern California from New York City this spring, is now making her permanent home with her friend, Mrs. John R. Ramsey, 827 Chester Road." While informative and promotional, the second paragraph served also to distract from the import of the first. It read, "A voice teacher, Miss Harris, is a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing

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<sup>20</sup> "Studio Guild Performance," *Plainfield Courier-News*, 15 January 1927; "Josef Hofmann, Pianist, in Recital Tonight -- Operatic Stars to Sing," *New York Times*, 23 January 1927; Frances A. Westervelt, *History of Hackensack, N.J.* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., [1922?]), 32-3.

<sup>21</sup> "Alice Ramsey is Still Driving 68 Years After First Auto Trip," *Kokomo Tribune*, 9 February 1977; "My dear Earluth," 2 February 1980, page 2, Vassar archive; National Archives, 1940 census, <https://1940census.archives.gov/>.

**MISS HARRIS MOVES  
HERE FROM N. Y.**

Miss Anna Graham Harris who came to southern California from New York City this spring, is now making her permanent home with her friend, Mrs. John R. Ramsey, 827 Chester road.

A voice teacher, Miss Harris, is a member of the National Association of Teachers of Singing and maintained a studio in New York for a number of years. She expects to open studios in Pasadena and Covina some time this fall.

*Covina Argus Citizen, 18 August 1950*

and maintained a studio in New York for a number of years. She expects to open studios in Pasadena and Covina some time this fall.”<sup>22</sup>

Ramsey and Harris appear to have jumped in to the local community and in May 1952 Anna was part of a production team that put on a local play. That same day the couple held a tea in honor of Alice’s daughter who was visiting from New Jersey.<sup>23</sup> The newspaper reported that it was held by her mother and Anna, of Chester Road.

In both the tea and the two one act plays, Anna found herself working with Elizabeth Elliott and other women in their social circle.<sup>24</sup> While she appeared to be happily engaged with her new life with Alice in California, one year later Anna died. The obituary reported that she “had made her home here with Mrs. J.R. Ramsey,” and that Alice accompanied her body back home to Hackensack for burial. As Ramsey reflected on her loss of Anna late in her life, she wrote, that her early death “was a great sadness as she loved to garden in her leisure and our soil was superb.” While undoubtedly true, the metaphor for the richness of their life together cannot be lost either.<sup>25</sup>

In 1955, Alice undertook a 7,000 mile driving trip across Europe with Elizabeth Elliott and her family, whom she characterized as “my best friends in California.” She and Elizabeth “did all the driving.” She had entered in to her second known, long-term relationship with a woman. Elliott, a Covina native, daughter of the town founders, and a real estate agent, came from a

<sup>22</sup> “Miss Harris Moves Here from N.Y.,” *Covina Argus Citizen*, 18 August 1950.

<sup>23</sup> “Mrs. Bruns, Honor Guest at Tea,” *Covina Argus Citizen*, 16 May 1952.

<sup>24</sup> “Local Talent Present Program at Woman’s Club Final Tea,” *Covina Argus Citizen*, 16 May 1952.

<sup>25</sup> “Services Held for Anna Graham Harris,” *Covina Argus Citizen*, 28 May 1953.



comfortable background. When she entered into her relationship with Ramsey, Elizabeth was likely in her early 50s and Alice was twenty years her senior. A few years later as she retraced her 1909 trip, a newspaper reported that Mrs. Ramey was accompanied by “her companion Miss Elizabeth Elliott of Covina, Calif.”. According to Alice’s account, she did not move in with her until both her “Mother and Aunt had passed away.” She reflected at 94, “I have been here almost 12 years now and we have a very happy household.”<sup>26</sup>

Nor was this a private reflection. Alice’s public notoriety in the 1960s and 1970s made consistent mention of Elizabeth Elliott. The feat of driving across the country had gone unnoticed for 50 years, but as she crisscrossed the country to give talks and receive awards from automotive societies and to visit friends and family, Elizabeth was by her side. A 1969 account of one of these “Coast-to-Coast” trips, for example, indicated that “Accompanied by Miss Elizabeth Elliott, Mrs. Ramsey made the trip.” At age 83, she traveled to her college reunion at Vassar College, and visited each of her children, her son an ordained minister and her married daughter.<sup>27</sup>

Most accounts of Alice’s exploits focused on her 22-year old experience, leaving her identity trapped in time and place as Mrs. John Ramsey. One unusual telling blurred the past and the present when the reporter asked Ramsey why her husband permitted her to undertake the adventure. She answered “in the living room of the cheery, tasteful house she now shares with a friend, Elizabeth Elliott, on a wooded hilltop in Covina Highlands.” As with so many of the tellings of her “more than 35” travels across the country, she was anticipating trips with Elizabeth to visit her children.”<sup>28</sup>

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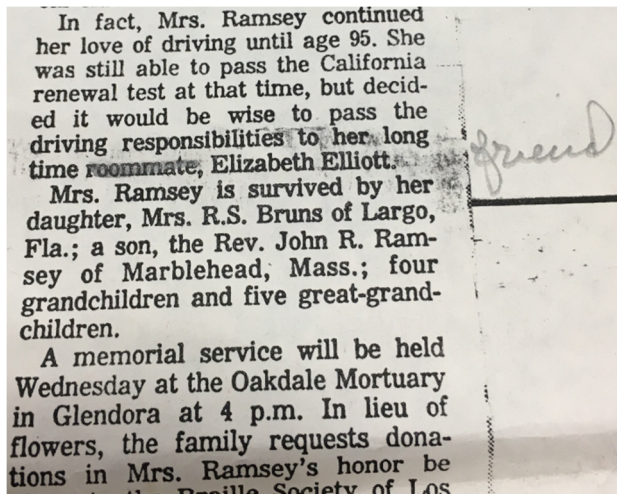
<sup>26</sup> “She Retraces 1909 Continental Trip,” *The Jefferson Bee* (Jefferson, Iowa), 20 October 1959; add 1930 census; “My dear Earluth” letter, 2 February 1980, from AHR to Earluth, page 2, Vassar archive; “Alice Ramsey is Still Driving 68 Years After First Auto Trip,” *Kokomo Tribune*, 9 February 1977.

<sup>27</sup> “Woman Repeats Trip from Coast-to-Coast,” *Asbury Park Press*, 7 December 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Louise Egan Steele, “I guess I’ve Always Been Liberated,” *Star News* (Pasadena, California), 18 September 1977.

The most explicit of the accounts came toward the end of Alice's life and appeared in a 1979 issue of *Cars & Parts* magazine. The author noted that Alice had moved in with Elizabeth:

At 19944 E. Lorencita Drive, they set up a household including a housekeeper, a cat, a dog and assorted automobiles. They also took a trip to Europe and liked a rented Mercedes-Benz so much that they went shopping for one on their return.<sup>29</sup>



Alice Ramsey's obituary, *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, 13 September 1983.

Notated copy held in Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library.

With Ramsey's death on September 13, 1983, the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune* obituary used the story of Alice giving up driving and turning it over to Elizabeth Elliott, to integrate her into the narrative of Alice's life. It asserted that Elliott was her "long time roommate." The archives at Vassar College hold Ramsey's papers, donated by both her daughter and her biographer,

and someone took a pencil to the obituary and crossed out "roommate" and wrote the word "friend." It may have been a notation made by her daughter Alice, who in her letter to the Vassar archives refers to Elizabeth Elliott as her mother's friend, with whom she lived "for the last 15 years of her life." In a letter to a friend shortly after her mother's death, Alice wrote lovingly that she spoke to "Elizabeth quite often and she has been so busy trying to sort out things and give things to mothers friends that she thinks they would like." She

<sup>29</sup> Mahoney, "Alice Huyler Ramsey," 28.

observed, “She does miss mother so much but keeps very busy and that is the best antidote for loneliness.”<sup>30</sup>

Historian Judith Bennett argued a relationship like Alice and Anna’s and like Alice and Elizabeth’s should be categorized as “lesbian-like.” In this case, as is true of most everyday people’s lives, we cannot know the intimate, physical, and emotional details of their relationship. Bennett contends, however, that ignoring their lived experience risks only seeing their lives through a “distorting heteronormative lens.” In fact, that is what the historical record to date had done. Even searching for evidence of Alice Ramsey’s life proves difficult, as she was frequently referred to in formal accounts as Mrs. John Ramsey. Her adherence to “social norms” validated her publicly, affirming her gender role as a married woman, and was further affirmed in having given birth to two children. Bennett, though, suggests giving credence to the evidence we find of women “whose lives might have particularly offered opportunities for same-sex love; women who resisted norms of feminine behavior based on heterosexual marriage; women who lived in circumstances that allowed them to nurture and support other women...” All of these lesbian-like behaviors are evident in Alice Ramsey’s life, and she was able to navigate her resistance to norms of feminine behavior with support from her father and then husband. From her husband’s death in 1933 to the end of her own life in 1983, her life was decidedly lesbian-like.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Alice Ramsey’s obituary, *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, September 13, 1983, notated copy held in Archives & Special Collections, Vassar College Library; Alice Bruns to Erluth and Raymond, 1 December 1983 (references death of Ramsey, which had occurred 10 September 1983), Vassar Archive; Alice Ramsey Bruns letter to Lisa Brower, Vassar Archives, dated 11 April 1988.

<sup>31</sup> Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9(1/2) (Jan-Apr 2000), 9-10, 12, 16. This question of how to best understand historical figures has been the subject of animated debate, sparked by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s revolutionary publication of “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America” in 1975. For the first time, Smith-Rosenberg challenged historians to take women’s emotional ties with other women seriously (*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1(1): 1-29). As scholars moved forward in analyzing women’s experiences, they struggled with how to define and characterize both the behavior and the identity of women’s sexuality. The problem, as characterized by Leila Rupp was that the choice appeared to be between “labeling women lesbians who might violently reject the label, or on the other hand, glossing over the significance of women’s relationships...” (“‘Imagine My Surprise’: Women’s Relationships in Historical Perspective,” *Frontiers* 5(3) (1981), 62-63). See



Moreover, the women who Alice shared her life with, Anna and Elizabeth, did adhere to the qualities of more familiar lesbian-like women, never marrying or having children across their lives. While Bennett recognizes that much “recent lesbian history is dominated by women who were wealthier, better educated, more powerful, and more articulate than most,” she and other scholars might also have considered ways in which social groups like Women’s Clubs had a vested interest in downplaying or ignoring evidence of any visible lesbian-like members. In asking a long-standing Covina Women’s Club member, Patricia Sullivan, who wrote a community interest column for the local newspaper, if she believed that Alice Ramsey and Elizabeth Elliott were a couple, she said she “had always known they were a couple since I joined the club in the early 90s. It wasn’t hidden information when they were spoken of so I suppose it was an open secret.” Another active member in the Greater Federation of Women’s Clubs, Kim Plater, noted that the Federation and most local clubs have historically tended to be resistant to people’s open expression of sexual diversity, even as the group sought greater racial and class diversity. Beyond the rare acknowledgment that some historical figures in the Chicago club, such as Jane Addams, were lesbians, she bemoaned any recognition of or inclusion of lesbians.<sup>32</sup>

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also, Susan Ferentinos, *Interpreting LGBT History at Museums and Historic Sites* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 5-7, 21-28. See also, Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship & Love Between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York: Perennial, 2001); Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin 1991), 175-187; John D. Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Judith M. Bennett, “‘Lesbian-Like’ and the Social History of Lesbianisms,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 9(1/2) (Jan-Apr 2000), 20-21. Bennett’s introduction of “lesbian-like” was an effort to avoid the explicit characterization of historical figures as lesbians, and to frame their experience living in a world of women as valid and significant. Email correspondence with author and Patricia Sullivan (6 June 2017) and Kim Plater (8 June 2017). In the 1970s the President of the Federation was likely aware of Alice and Elizabeth as partners. As Ramsey recounted to her biographer, “The President of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs was a great friend of a cousin of Elizabeth Elliott with whom I have my home in Covina for the past 12 years, and while visiting this cousin had read my book. She conceived a plan for gathering women across the country who had been the first to do some unusual. I was invited to come to the Convention in Minneapolis and speak to the gathering of delegates.” (My Dear Earluth, 10 November 1980, Vassar Archive).

Automotive enthusiasts, Vassar College, Women's Club leaders, and the Maxwell-Briscoe company (later subsumed into the Chrysler Company) all had a vested interest in maintaining the façade Mrs. John R. Ramsey supplied to them. They all sought to profit socially and economically from their association with her celebrity. At a fundamental level, Ramsey professed to not want the attention that found her, noting in a 1980 letter that it "never kindled my interest in newspaper notoriety." While she may have been flattered to be discovered and valued for her accomplishments at the wheel, she was not seeking to assert a lesbian identity. She sought cover under the classic elements detailed by historian Martha Vicinus, including "class privilege, family support." The "advantages imposed respectability" and would have served to assure anyone meeting her that she defined herself by the man she married.

Alice Ramsey crossed the country in 1909, when nationally only a tiny percentage of women drove, there were few formal roads, and very little guidance on how to make their way. Alice Ramsey made no secret of her intimacy with Anna Harris and Elizabeth Elliott, and under cover of her married name and her identity as mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, she also lived for 50 years with women she loved. Her wealth, presumptive heterosexuality, and notoriety as an automotive pioneer led newspapers and magazines across the century to subtly cover her unconventional life.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> "Alice Ramsey is Still Driving 68 Years After First Auto Trip," *Kokomo Tribune*, 9 February 1977.