

## San Diego Chapter

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Two pieces of paper — with dates five years apart — are the only remaining clues about the origins of the San Diego Chapter of CNPS. One paper is a letter of warm encouragement to the fledgling Chapter from Ledyard Stebbins (1967), and the other is the first Chapter newsletter (1972). Twenty years later, these two papers challenge the CNPS historian to reconnect the invisible threads of interest which link the two documents.

Bill Knerr, who has long been professionally active in many aspects of San Diego horticulture, originally queried Ledyard Stebbins in the spring of 1967 about forming a county Chapter of CNPS. In Stebbins' April 6 reply (on official CNPS stationery), he comments:

*"In a recent visit I was again much impressed with the number of localized species which occur near your rapidly growing center of population, and which are, therefore, seriously threatened. On visiting the Torrey Pines State Park I learned of efforts to add to this reserve the stands of Torrey pines to the northward, and south of Del Mar."*

Dr. Stebbins then suggested some likely local contacts, including professional botanists such as Dr. Reid Moran at the Natural History Museum, and faculty members at San Diego State University. Closing with a quick review of Chapter responsibilities (which included a charter membership of fifteen persons), Dr. Stebbins offered his earnest wish for success in initiating an area Chapter.

That success was slow to crystallize . . . but a one-sheet newsletter postmarked January 16, 1972 exults:

*"Well, we finally got the show on the road last Saturday! The officially adopted title is San Diego Chapter of the California Native Plant Society. Officers elected are: President, Mitch Beauchamp; Vice President, Mike Douglas; Recording Secretary, Anne Galloway (she later replaced Mitch as president); Corresponding Secretary, Bill Gunther; and Treasurer, Betty Macintosh. Committees were established: Field Trips, Darley Howe; Publicity, Burch Mehlin; Conservation, Reid Moran, Helen Witham (Chamlee), and Jack Reveal; and Finance, R.H. Aikin and Bette Kingman. Our paid membership now totals roughly thirty souls . . ."*

This first newsletter also suggested that San Diego members reserve a weekend in late March "to meet our friends to the north" because the Bay Chapter of CNPS planned an Easter vacation field trip to this area. The proposed excursion included visits to Silverwood Sanctuary, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, Otay Mountains and some vernal pools — quite a full weekend.

By the end of its first year, the Chapter had become a solid force in the community. Members participated in a Balboa Park celebration by presenting a weekend exhibit of striking photographs (by Betty Macintosh) and labeled plant specimens and informative literature. During a time of keen interest about environmentally responsible organizations, the Chapter hoped to both educate the public and to recruit energetic new members.

San Diego Chapter succeeded in arousing community interest. The following year witnessed a giant leap in group activities and commitments. Bill Knerr presided in 1972, a busy period in which the group hosted several garden tours, presented wildflower and photography exhibits, sponsored many field trips, produced an attractive newsletter, and staged its first plant sale.

As members increased the visibility of CNPS within the county, the Chapter found itself under unwanted pressure to assist with newly mandated environmental impact reports. The group decided to detach itself from such responsibilities (and

liabilities) by establishing a system of referrals to individual experts whose opinions would not represent (or compromise) an official CNPS position.

Many — if not *most* — of the charter members of the San Diego Chapter of CNPS invested inordinate amounts of time, energy and inventiveness in the group, for many years after its founding. Of all the earliest members, though, the one with the widest circle of outreach contacts and the most effective sphere of influence was Helen Witham Chamlee. Born Helen Vallejo, she was also related to the Carillo family, and was a true California native herself. As a child she was encouraged in her natural history interests, which she continued to develop as a parent and teacher. Her passion for botany won her a place on the staff of the Natural History Museum in 1968, where she ultimately became an associate of the education department. From that vantage point, she was about to do what she loved best: teach people about native plants. She wrote a regular newspaper column, led hikes, taught classes, produced a book on local ferns, and lectured to community groups. She lobbied vigorously and successfully for preservation of natural areas within the city, and she developed no less than fourteen nature trails throughout the county. Many, many persons attended CNPS meetings at her invitation and promptly joined the Chapter. Her personal encouragement and her ready willingness to help others learn about native plants could only be described as a quiet kind of charisma.

The California Council of Landscape Architects honored Helen for her dedication and outstanding service to environmental causes. The California Native Plant Society made her a Fellow. The Wild Animal Park named a native plant garden for her. Her fellow Chapter founders would surely agree that the first decade of CNPS in San Diego could appropriately be deemed the Helen Chamlee years.

Each founder saw the purposes of the charter group through the slightly different lens of his or her personal background. Mitch Beauchamp, then a botany student, felt that the prime motivation of the Chapter was the study and preservation of San Diego's unique local plants. Bill Knerr, plant propagator at the zoo, was interested in learning about the cultivation of native plants in this particular climate. Helen Witham (Chamlee), trained as a teacher, was eager to educate the public about indigenous plants. Betty Macintosh, a photographer, saw natives through her camera, and portrayed them eloquently in their own habitats. Reid Moran, a museum botanist, was keenly interested in rare specimens. Bette Klingman, a newcomer to the area, welcomed the dual opportunities of learning about her new home territory through plant hikes and making an active stand for the preservation of valuable open spaces. Bill Gunther, retired from the Navy, relished studying desert plants and growing native irises in his garden. *All* members sensed a certain urgency about the mission of CNPS, both in their own region and throughout the state. Whether the founder's private interests were in saving, sowing or studying native plants, CNPS provided its charter members with a reason to rally around a common concern — the plants, themselves.

Conservation efforts and botanical studies have become the strength of the present group, which continues to press for assertive environmental action. Often these center on vernal pools or other rare habitats. Yet laced among the regional hearings and letter-writing campaigns, there is still an abundance of memorable weekend wildflower hikes, informative monthly meetings, and successful annual plant sales. In fact, all of these activities interact to help educate members about the issues that the group's first president saw as primary: the preservation and study of San Diego's unique native plants.

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