



Front side of Meyer Medal. Courtesy of the San Diego Historical Society.

WHEN DR. FAIRCHILD VISITED MISS SESSIONS: SAN DIEGO 1919¹



By Nancy Carol Carter

In 1939, Kate Sessions received the prestigious Frank N. Meyer Medal for distinguished services in plant introduction by the American Genetics Association. She joined the ranks of previously recognized male botanists, including Louis Charles Trabut, a French doctor teaching at the University of Algiers; Henry Nicholas Ridley, an Englishman who learned to tap the rubber tree for latex; Palemon Howard Dorsett, who spent the 1920s identifying plants in China and Japan; and wealthy amateur plant explorers Barbour Lathrop and Allison V. Armour. It was thirty years before another woman received the same honor.²

Sessions was nominated for the award by David Fairchild, plant explorer, botanist and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) official. A newly-explored archive of letters, photographs and manuscripts at the Fairchild Tropical Botanical Garden expands our knowledge of their relationship. Their seventeen-year-long correspondence suggests that he was the most enduring and influential of her professional contacts.³ This article reveals both the professional and the personal nature of their relationship, giving us a more nuanced understanding of Kate Sessions herself.

By the end of the nineteenth century, botany had moved almost entirely from its Enlightenment origins as a proper and recommended activity for women and children to a professionalized and almost exclusively male pursuit within the science culture. Some exceptional women made a place for themselves in the field at this early date, but had to overcome barriers. As botany became a scientific study, women in England were excluded from research-based botanical gardens and the Linnean Society and Royal Society where scientific papers were read and leaders in the field assembled. As the century progressed, places for women in scientific societies slowly opened.⁴

In the United States, nineteenth-century women usually had to settle for “negotiated” affiliations with science, rather than careers as scientists as the field became increasing masculine. A few women found welcoming undergraduate programs toward the end of the century, while others went abroad for advanced study. Emily Lovira Gregory (1841-1897) was the first American woman to receive a Ph.D. in botany, awarded in 1886 by the University of Zurich, one of the few institutions in the world that would confer a Doctor of Philosophy degree on a woman. Most women, however, could not gain entry to college science programs. Instead, they found work as laboratory technicians, botanical artists, or in preparing herbarium specimens. A few, such as Kate Sessions, persisted long enough to prove their merit and develop a career in their chosen field.⁵

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An early photograph of Kate Sessions. ©SDHS #81:11358.

When Kate Sessions left public school teaching to establish a career in horticulture, she stepped away from “women’s work” and into a male domain. She was the sole proprietor of a nursery and garden design business and became well known as an active horticultural professional. She tested plants for the Department of Agriculture, introduced many of them into the San Diego landscape and taught others how to grow and propagate these new species. She wrote and read professional literature. She participated in a plant exploration trip that brought a new species of palm tree to the United States. She was the preferred guide and interpreter of the

Southern California landscape for visiting scientists. She gathered plants for botanical classification, commercialized and popularized wild plants, traded plants and seeds with botanical gardens worldwide, and maintained an active correspondence with scientists who were combining botany and agriculture into the new field of horticulture.⁶ Over the course of her 55-year career, she broke away from the prevailing notion that a woman’s place in the field of horticulture was as a genteel hobbyist.

KATHERINE OLIVIA SESSIONS (1857-1940)

Kate Sessions’ parents were born in Connecticut, but had relocated to San Francisco long before their only daughter was born on November 8, 1857. The family moved across the bay to Oakland, settling near Lake Merritt, then a rural farming and ranching area. Her mother encouraged her curiosity and indulged her propensity to roam the countryside on horseback. Kate displayed an early interest in plants, working in the family garden, and collecting and preserving specimens. Ferns were a special interest. Her botanical horizons were expanded by a long trip to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) after high school.⁷

Unlike many parents of the day, Josiah and Harriet Sessions encouraged their daughter to further her education. Kate Sessions enrolled in the science curriculum at the University of California, Berkeley, and majored in chemistry. She graduated in 1881. A serious and conscientious student, she hoped to work in banking, chemistry, agriculture, or botany after graduation. However, teaching was the occupation most easily open to women. Kate Sessions signed up with the Oakland School system. Two years later a friend told her of an opening in San Diego for a school principal. She got the job and moved south. School funding problems and personnel shuffles convinced her to leave San Diego for a teaching job in San Gabriel.

Kate Sessions was soon lured back to San Diego. In 1885 she was presented the opportunity to enter the nursery business. She was to supply the hands-on work and know-how while her older partners financed the venture. In a short time, the partnership was dissolved, and her own “Miss K.O. Sessions Nursery” was established. Sessions quickly became an active force in San Diego civic affairs. She was a relentless

community booster and made the City Beautiful Movement her special crusade, championing tree planting and the allotment and development of public land for a city park. She never married and she never brought a partner into the business she operated from 1885 until her death in 1940.

Along with the practical experience she gained every day through her active participation in the work of her nursery, Sessions devoted herself to a life-time of horticultural study.

DAVID GRANDISON FAIRCHILD (1869-1954)

David Fairchild worked for the Department of Agriculture for almost 30 years, eventually specializing in plant exploration and importation. After college and graduate study, he joined the USDA in 1889 at age 19 as a plant pathologist. Eager to continue his education and to travel, Fairchild successfully applied for “the Smithsonian working table” at a research station in Naples. He resigned from the USDA and embarked in November 1893 on the first of many ocean voyages.⁸



Barbour Lathrop and David Fairchild on Western U.S. tour, 1919. Courtesy of the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden Archive.

A chance meeting aboard the ship with wealthy globe-trotter Barbour Lathrop changed Fairchild’s life. He was enthralled by Lathrop’s travel tales, having fixed on the notion of someday visiting Java. Lathrop later offered to pay for Fairchild’s trip to Java, as “an investment in science.” After the Naples

appointment and additional botanical study in German universities, Fairchild accepted Lathrop’s offer and sailed to Java in 1896.⁹

Fairchild happily pursued his own scientific research and relaxed into the slow pace of life in Dutch colonial Java. After eight months, his benefactor showed up on short notice and swept Fairchild off on an extended trip. While traveling, Lathrop convinced Fairchild that he should use his knowledge of botany to identify and collect useful plants as yet unknown in the United States—to travel around the world identifying vegetables, fruits, drug plants, grains, and other economic plants that could enrich the American diet and expand the agricultural economy.¹⁰ Fairchild adopted the quest for economically useful plants as his life’s work, but also developed an avid interest in ornamental plants that could beautify home gardens and the American landscape.

Upon returning to the United States, Fairchild made his way back to Washington, D.C., and won support at the Department of Agriculture for a new “Section of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction.” The idea dovetailed with the funding, ten years earlier, of a federal agriculture experiment station in each state. Fairchild began his second career at the USDA. After a brief interlude, Barbour Lathrop again stormed into Fairchild’s life, convincing him that the plant introduction office could succeed only if Fairchild developed a reliable international network of personal contacts. Lathrop offered to pay all expenses to provide a “reconnaissance of the world.” A reluctant

Secretary of Agriculture released Fairchild from departmental office duties and reassigned him as the department's "Agricultural Explorer."¹¹

Fairchild immediately began sending foreign plant cuttings and seeds back to Washington, D.C., including *Tipuana tipu* from the Botanic Gardens of Buenos Aires, a tree Sessions later popularized in San Diego. Fairchild and Lathrop traveled the world for the next five years, visiting botanical gardens and meeting plant scientists.¹² Fairchild eventually became a link between Sessions and some of these international contacts.

After the odyssey ended and Fairchild had returned to work in Washington, D. C., he met Alexander Graham Bell and his younger daughter, Marian Hubbard Bell (1880-1962). David Fairchild married Marian Bell in 1905 and took his place in the remarkable Bell family. Marian Bell became a partner in Fairchild's botanical expeditions and she took up photography. They co-authored a book in 1914 and eventually retired to Florida.¹³

SESSIONS AND FAIRCHILD CROSS PATHS

Exactly when and how Sessions and Fairchild first came into contact is still unknown. One intriguing but purely speculative possibility is that they met at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Fairchild tells of being assigned to staff the Department of Agriculture exhibit for three months and meeting many visitors. Kate Sessions traveled to Chicago for the exposition where she presumably visited the grand Palace of Agriculture, as well as the extensive displays in the horticulture building.¹⁴

It is also possible that they gradually become aware of each other through mutual acquaintances. They both had a number of contacts in the relatively small circle of plant scientists and professional growers of their time. Kate Sessions conducted a busy wholesale trade and enjoyed a personal friendship with horticulturist Emanuele O. Franceschi (also known as Francesco Franceschi) of Santa Barbara. She sometimes stopped in Santa Barbara to see him when returning from visits to San Francisco on the coastal steamer. Fairchild also visited Franceschi at his nursery. The Santa Barbara nursery owner and plant importer knew both Sessions and Fairchild well before 1900.¹⁵ Among others with whom both corresponded were Luther Burbank, Charles S. Sargent of Harvard's Arnold Arboretum, Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University, and various heads of botanical gardens around the world.

It is very likely that Kate Sessions initiated a correspondence while Fairchild headed the office charged with importing foreign seeds and plants at the Department of Agriculture. Sessions was always seeking new plants to try in San Diego and acquired many from the USDA.¹⁶ She surely welcomed the monthly publication Fairchild started in 1908. It described new plant species brought to the United States during the prior month. "Just write in for samples of the plants," the publication invited, with a first month choice of imports from Ceylon, Egypt, Formosa, India, Russia, Spain, Sudan, the Transvaal, Tripoli and Baghdad. About 1911, Fairchild's office began to compile and send out "to all experimenters" an annual list of plants available for distribution from the USDA.¹⁷

The USDA distributed seeds and cuttings from new species to growers in various geographic locales and depended on them to nurture the plants, monitor their growth, take the new introductions into a second generation, and adhere to a scientific method of recording and reporting results. Kate Sessions was one of the active experimenters

and she took seriously her part of the bargain by writing full reports on the fate of the plants tried in San Diego, either by her personally or by the farmers she convinced to plant USDA-supplied seeds. Sessions in turn benefited because she could propagate and sell through her nursery any of the free plants she received.

David Fairchild and his government department used volunteers because the USDA did not otherwise have the means to test and learn about the many foreign plants being brought to the United States. The work of volunteer test growers was an important supplement to that of the limited number of federal agriculture experiment stations. Sessions gained Fairchild's confidence as a reliable horticulturist who enthusiastically accepted new plants for testing in Southern California. He particularly prized her proficiency in establishing new plants from seeds and cuttings. Along the way, she further rewarded Fairchild by introducing him to new species acquired from her many other sources.¹⁸

Exactly when and how Sessions and Fairchild encountered each other may never be known, but letters in the Fairchild Archive document a correspondence that began no later than 1922 and continued into 1939. This same correspondence and Fairchild's travel records provide evidence of just one personal meeting between the two.

THE 1919 SAN DIEGO VISIT

The MacPhail biography of Sessions mentions a comment made by David Fairchild when he toured Kate Sessions' home garden in San Diego. MacPhail relied on a second-hand account and provides no information about when or why David Fairchild was in San Diego. Information in the Fairchild Archive provides details about the date and circumstances of this visit, the only documented personal meeting between Sessions and Fairchild. The occasion was a USDA business trip David and Marian Fairchild made to the American West in 1919. While in San Diego, they spent most of two days in the company of Kate Sessions.¹⁹

David Fairchild made several extended trips around the country for the Department of Agriculture, visiting federal agricultural stations and surveying newly established commercial crops. He talked to farmers growing new strains of wheat, soybeans, citrus, and other varieties brought into the country by his plant importation office. He also used these outings to meet the many nursery owners and other volunteers who tested shrubs and trees distributed by the USDA. These regional canvases helped Fairchild expand and solidify his extensive domestic network of horticultural contacts. It was quite natural that while in San Diego he would visit Kate Sessions, one of his valued Southern California contacts.

While traveling, Fairchild recorded his observations in one of the small red notebooks he habitually carried. Hundreds of these notebooks are arranged by date at the Fairchild Archive.²⁰ He scribbled quick observations, horticultural notes, personal business, and names and addresses of almost everyone he met. Fairchild later used these notebooks to write up full reports of his field trips. His notebooks yield candid comments on the San Diego region in 1919 from the perspective of an international traveler. Driving from Los Angeles to San Diego by automobile, Fairchild was unimpressed with Encinitas, noting that it was a "little poor village."²¹ He stopped at the Scripps Institute at La Jolla which had "a charming quiet about the place" and reminded him of the Naples Zoological Station where he had worked. "The Biological Station could be made the center of a great scientific development," Fairchild predicted, "but I was rather impressed by its isolation more than anything else."²²

Upon arrival at the U.S. Grant Hotel, the Fairchilds were welcomed by a basket of Belladonna lilies and heather sent by Kate Sessions. Fairchild was pleased by a flower arrangement that he had never seen before. They crossed the bay. To Fairchild's eye, the ornamental plants in the patio of the Hotel del Coronado did not compare favorably with those growing in Miami. Fairchild ascribed their "lack of luxuriance" to the cooler, drier climate of San Diego.²³

On Sunday, October 12, Marian and David Fairchild visited Miss Sessions at her Mission Hills home, observing various plants in her garden. Later he visited the Sessions Nursery. He described several plants at the nursery in his official report, linking some with the specific seed and plant introduction number from the Department of Agriculture and the date and place where the plant had originally been collected. Sessions' nursery stock included plants from Australia, Brazil, and Peru, among many others. Fairchild noticed that Sessions had *Aloe ciliata* in domestic production, noting that it was routinely shipped as a cut flower to the United States from France.²⁴

The next day Sessions accompanied the Fairchilds to visit the Chula Vista agricultural experiment station and a number of orchards and gardens in the San Diego region. Plants introduced by the USDA from Egypt, Peru, Hawaii, New Zealand, China, Australia, and Panama were observed.²⁵ They visited the home of William H. Sallmon – the most "perfect piece of Aztec architecture" Fairchild had seen. The agriculture department would have been interested in Sallmon's orchard because it was the oldest and largest stand of avocado trees in the Chula Vista area and was planted with ten different varieties of the tree.²⁶

Driving back to San Diego, they visited the "beautiful arboretum near the exposition grounds" (today's Balboa Park) and noted various plantings. Fairchild was gratified to see the USDA-introduced Brazilian pepper tree (*Schinus terebinthifolius*) being used as a street tree. He noted Sessions' grouped stands of palm trees in the park, predicting that when grown up they "will be a wonderful sight."²⁷ Twenty years after the Fairchild visit, she was able to report to him on "the fine stand" of over 200 of palms.²⁸

Late in the day the party visited several private gardens with bamboos and other plants Kate Sessions had introduced to San Diego. Fairchild wrote, "I was charmed by the variety of plants grown privately here and feel that these amateurs are going to do a great work of selection and adaptation."²⁹ One of the garden hosts was Alfred D. Robinson, a founder of the San Diego Floral Association, first editor of *California Garden*, and an influential promoter of the garden lath house. Independently wealthy, he was a dedicated gardener and active in civic efforts that promised improvements in San Diego life.³⁰

Robinson's mansion, "Rosecroft," sat amid ten acres of former barley fields on the east side of the largely undeveloped Point Loma peninsula. Robinson grew all kinds of flowers, but is considered to be without peer as an early propagator of begonias.³¹ Agricultural experts of the day—including David Fairchild—backed up this assessment, judging Rosecroft Gardens as having "the finest begonias to be grown anywhere in the world." In Fairchild's report on his San Diego trip, he called Robinson's hanging baskets of begonias "the loveliest things I ever saw."³² Robinson's lath house also was home to other flowers and a lavish fernery.

Mrs. Fairchild was sufficiently impressed to haul out the oversized camera equipment of the day to photograph Kate Sessions standing in the Robinson lath house. The picture captures Robinson's luxuriant botanical creation and portrays a

62-year old Sessions, looking handsome and scrupulously turned out for her East Coast visitors. She holds a showy new dahlia plant. Almost twenty years later, Kate Sessions still claimed this picture as “the best one I ever had taken,” saying that she was not very photogenic.³³ Her appearance in this photograph contrasts startlingly with her biographer’s description of the workaday Sessions with the sun-damaged face who “had lost all interest in her clothes and appearance” as she neared age 60.³⁴

As the Fairchilds continued their journey across Southern California, Dr. Fairchild was decidedly unimpressed by the terrain between San Diego and the Imperial Valley. They drove “over the El Cajon Road to La Mesa, through large olive orchards and new peach orchards to Jamul where the Hygea Springs are.” The travelers were “thrilled” to be so close to the imagined dangers of Mexico, wracked by years of revolution and civil war, but Fairchild found east San Diego County to be a “God-forsaken place...words fail to describe the barrenness of the piles of...boulders.” The Imperial Valley, however, drew high praise as a great achievement of the pioneering American spirit. The “view of the human made oasis as it bursts into view . . . is inspiring,” Fairchild wrote.³⁵ While noting that some Department of Agriculture officials were reluctant to invest federal funds in the Imperial Valley, Fairchild was glad that the USDA had furnished plants to the settlers.



Kate Sessions at Alfred D. Robinson’s Rosecroft lath house in Point Loma, 1919. Photograph by Marion Fairchild. Courtesy of the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden Archive.

COLLEAGUE AND PARAGON

Fairchild’s 1919 visit to Southern California permanently sealed his professional relationship with Kate Sessions. They maintained a correspondence through two decades. After the visit, Sessions wrote him long letters recalling their time together in San Diego. In the summer of 1922, Kate Sessions wrote a letter to Marian Fairchild in which she mentioned that the Fairchild’s visit over two years ago “has been such a delightful memory for me.”³⁶ She valued the strengthened tie of friendship and she



Kate Sessions by cactus, 1935. ©SDHS, Union-Tribune Collection.

valued her personal relationship with an important government official. She was willing to call in the occasional favor, such as asking Fairchild to smooth the way past import regulations and any delays when she sent plants back into the United States from her European trip in 1925.³⁷

Sessions and Fairchild were abroad at the same time. He cabled an invitation for her to join the group he had assembled for plant exploration in Morocco's Atlas Mountains. His telegram was delayed in its delivery. When it finally caught up with her in Paris she was unable to alter her travel plans. Disappointed at missing the plant expedition, she was nevertheless pleased by the invitation, writing, "I couldn't help feeling very much excited over the telegram it was like a big Xmas surprise."³⁸

Two years later, she recalled the invitation to Morocco and thanked him for his "contributions from that far away land" that were now growing in her garden. "I do hope you will be coming this way so I may show you my treasures." Fairchild planned a return to San Diego in 1928 and Sessions wrote, "I will be at home and so pleased to see you," but when the trip was unexpectedly cancelled, she regretted his change in plans as "sad news." She reported that her garden had been specially prepared for his arrival and that she "had some real big and serious questions collected" for him.³⁹ After this missed opportunity, they never again met in person.

Although Sessions had working relationships with several outstanding professionals in her field and was visited in San Diego by many other famous botanists and plant experts, Fairchild emerges as the scientist who most strongly inspired her determination to learn more and accomplish more as a horticulturist. His attainments set a benchmark for her. She understood the value of his international education and travels, his role at the center of plant introduction for the Department of Agriculture, and his first-hand knowledge of horticultural developments across the United States. "How much more Mr. Fairchild must realize in plant work and possibilities with his wide and long experience," she wrote in admiration to Marian Fairchild.⁴⁰

There is no evidence that David Fairchild consciously placed expectations upon Sessions. The facts point strongly in the other direction: Fairchild was generous in acknowledging the attainments of others. Sessions clearly impressed him with her enthusiasm and knowledge. He called attention to her success with imported plants in one of his books, mentioning her by name.⁴¹ His regard for her was sufficiently high to maintain their correspondence and plant-trading long after he had left government service and had no official reason to keep up with the horticultural fortunes of Southern California.

The link with Sessions was reinforced by Fairchild's attraction to the growing conditions in San Diego. He understood that it was an ideal testing ground for his particular favorites in the plant kingdom: tropical and semitropical species. He tangentially enlisted Sessions in his long-term campaign to enrich the American diet by promoting new foods he had discovered in his travels, some of his favorites being bamboo shoots, papayas, mangoes, avocados, and carissa (Natal plums). Sessions never shared his enthusiasm for reshaping national eating habits, but she gamely tried growing some of the new introductions, reporting at one point, "I too am in the Papaya game!"⁴²

Sessions' letters to David Fairchild reveal an aspect of her personality not previously captured in published accounts of her life and work. She is always described as modest, but also as confident, strong-minded, outspoken, and sometimes domineering and rough in her language and treatment of others. Her letters to Fairchild are patiently descriptive, gracious, and exhibit a deference that few others in her life won. These letters earnestly report her work and often seek his advice. David Fairchild was someone from whom she thought she could learn, but also someone whose respect and approbation were extremely important to her.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE FAIRCHILD VISIT

It is not surprising that David Fairchild and Kate Sessions encountered each other professionally. The *unexpected* aspect of their relationship is that colleagues of different genders solidified such a mutually respectful and professionally rewarding alliance during the Edwardian age. Fairchild's trip to San Diego was the key to this important result. Prior to their 1919 meeting, Sessions was one of scores of private growers who dealt with Fairchild's office at the USDA. Without a personal meeting their relationship is unlikely to have gained its warmth and stamina and Fairchild, although he knew and admired her work, might not have invested so heavily in a long-term association.

The San Diego visit acquainted Fairchild with facts about Sessions that could not help but elevate his professional regard. Sessions was one of the few American women with a college degree in science and she consistently deepened her knowledge of plant science with an academic approach of study and field research. She may have been the only woman owner and operator of a nursery business Fairchild ever met. During his visit, he found that she knew everyone of horticultural significance in her region. By observing the natural and introduced landscape of San Diego with a trained eye, he could fully appreciate the contribution Sessions was making toward transforming a desert with appropriate exotic additions. He took particular



Back side of Meyer Medal. Courtesy of the San Diego Historical Society.

note of the *Brahea brandegeei* palm grove Sessions had planted in Balboa Park. He would have learned that Sessions was part of a plant hunting expedition led by noted botanist Townshend Stith Brandegee to Baja California where this botanically unclassified palm was located. Sessions introduced this plant to the United States by propagated hundreds of the palms from seeds she gathered on that trip.⁴³

His broad experience of the world allowed Fairchild to objectively assess Sessions during their two days of conversation and touring together in the San Diego region. His subsequent actions demonstrate that he judged her to be a talented horticulturist who had contributed to the science. David Fairchild exhibited his high regard by playing an instrumental role in securing the Meyer Medal for Kate Sessions.⁴⁴

Fairchild headed the office of plant introduction when the explorer Frank N. Meyer died during his fourth plant collecting trip to China. Meyer left a gift to his USDA office mates in his will. Fairchild and the others used the bequest to create the Meyer Medal for “meritorious work in the field of plant introduction.” As a government office, they had to turn the award over to a private group, but those in the USDA retained the responsibility of recommending deserving recipients. Fairchild suggested names over the years to the selection committee. He had been close to Meyer and took a genuine interest in this remembrance of his friend.⁴⁵

Fairchild knew hundreds of horticulturists residing in all parts of the world, but Kate Sessions was the person he nominated for a Meyer Medal in 1939. The formal presentation was made at the Pasadena Flower Show with the following remarks by Dr. Knowles A. Ryerson, Dean of the College of Agriculture, University of California.

[I]t is a pleasure to pay tribute to one of our outstanding citizens – not of California...nor of the United States, but one whose plant work is known the world over: Miss Kate Sessions’ name is known not only all over America, but all over the world and in some places better known than in the United States... The plant explorer has the fun of [finding new plant species], but whether they last or are developed, depends on another group and it is to honor one of these that we are here today. Many [plants are imported] and few of them last. Miss Kate Sessions is one of the outstanding persons who has introduced plants, interested other people in them—all of which takes dogged determination, and requires much more perseverance than the explorer...She... kept in constant contact with the leading Botanical Gardens in Europe. She introduced the [palm trees] *Erythea brandegeei* [*Brahea brandegeei*]...and *Kentia fosteriana* [*Howea forsteriana*]. She is also responsible for calling the public’s attention to the very splendid *Ceanothus cyaneus* ...and the beautiful *Fremontia mexicana* [*Fremontodenron mexicana*]. She is the first person to encourage the use of poinsettias as a cut flower at Christmas. She is also responsible for the first development of Balboa Park in San Diego and its splendid collection of agaves, aloes, and mesembryanthemum It has been her life work to stimulate other people in the production and preservation of plants...⁴⁶

Kate Sessions was surprised and humbled by the Meyer Medal. After receiving the award, she learned that Fairchild quietly had elicited some information from other California horticulturists in advance of nominating her. In a letter thanking Fairchild for putting forward her name, she called the award “astonishing news,” admitting that she had been so overcome that she could not tell anyone about it for several days. She

wrote of being very happy in her work, but not worthy of such recognition. "I can't help the feeling that I am not deserving of so great an honor...and I believe that you are mainly responsible for this selection...you have been too generous...That I have been able to interest the general public in the care and love of the new plants I have raised from seed...I will admit to be a fact...[but] I never could have thought of any such reward as this for my work."⁴⁷

Although approaching her 82nd year and now among the small group holding a Meyer Medal, there was no resting on her laurels with Fairchild. Sessions once again recalled his visit to San Diego in 1919, thanked him for his faith in her work, and made a last pledge to her iconic confederate: "I do hope this great honor...will spur me to do better work in the future for horticulture."⁴⁸

Through the richness of the landscape now flourishing on its desert land, San Diego continues to benefit from the productive professional collaboration of David Fairchild, plant explorer and importer, and Kate Sessions, who overcame every artificial barrier erected against women in horticulture to make a lasting contribution to her community and rise to the top of her profession.

NOTES



1. The author thanks the University of San Diego for financial support from the Interdisciplinary Travel Fund to conduct research for this paper at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden and the National Archives. The generous assistance of Librarian and Archivist Nancy Korber of the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden is gratefully acknowledged.
2. Dr. Louis Charles Trabut was a medical doctor, botanist, and professor in the medical college at the University of Algiers. Henry Nicholas Ridley was the first scientific director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens. He introduced the rubber tree as an economic crop in the Malay Peninsula. Palemon Howard Dorsett was a USDA plant scientist who traveled in Asia for almost a decade collecting soybean species. Later collecting trips took him to Brazil and the West Indies. Barbour Lathrop and Allison V. Armour were financially independent amateurs who financed and joined plant exploration trips around the world. Dr. Erna Bennett, plant geneticist with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, was awarded the Meyer Medal in 1971.
3. The materials are in the David Fairchild papers at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden Archive, Miami, Florida (hereafter cited as Fairchild Archive). There are 14 long letters from Sessions in the Fairchild Archive. The first letter is dated July 17, 1922; the last April 10, 1939. Letters in the Fairchild Archive reveal the correspondents' shared passion for beautiful trees, shrubs, and flowers. They introduced new plants to each other with detailed descriptions. Sessions discusses the San Diego visits of plant scientists from around the country, reports in a general way on horticulture developments in San Diego, and seeks Fairchild's advice on her proposed civic projects.
4. Ann B. Shteir, *Cultivating Women; Cultivating Science: Flora's Daughters and Botany in England, 1760-1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 145, 175. For more information on the transformation of botany from a hobby into a science that excluded women, see Barbara T. Gates, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 34-65. The impact of the New Botany, emphasizing laboratory work and plant physiology over field work and taxonomy, further distanced professional botanists from amateurs in the 1880s and beyond. Elizabeth B. Keeney, *The Botanizers: Amateur Scientists in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill:

- University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 123-134; "Scientific Societies and Lady Members," in Patricia Phillips, *The Scientific Lady: A Social History of Women's Scientific Interests, 1520-1918* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 193-234.
5. Nina Baym, *American Women of Letters and the Nineteenth-Century Sciences: Styles of Affiliation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Rosalind Rosenberg, "Emily Lovira Gregory," Sample Biography, http://www.columbia.edu/~rr91/3567/sample_biographies/emily_gregory__bio.htm (accessed May 18, 2005); Margaret W. Rossiter, *Women Scientists in America: Struggles and Strategies to 1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982). Sessions' contemporaries included Mary Katharine Layne Curran Brandegee (1844-1920) and Alice Eastwood (1859-1953), both personal friends. Katharine Brandegee's first job was as a school teacher. After being widowed in 1874, she entered medical school in San Francisco, earning an M.D. in 1883. A lack of medical patients and a developing interest in plants led her to the California Academy of Science where she studied botany and became curator of the herbarium. One of the highest placed female plant scientists of her time, she was a leading authority on California plants. Christopher K. Frazier, "The Botanical Brandegees and their Eponyms," *The New Mexico Botanist* 16 (December 2000), 1-3; <http://web.nmsu.edu/~kallred/herbweb/> (accessed July 29, 2005). Brandegee's protege, Alice Eastwood, also began work as a teacher, but plant science was her passion. Through independent field work and self-education she became a renowned botanist with a long career at the California Academy of Science. Carol Green Wilson, *Alice Eastwood's Wonderland: The Adventures of a Botanist* (San Francisco, California Academy of Sciences, 1955).
 6. One of the best known examples is *Ceanothus cyaneus*, a wild San Diego lilac sent by Kate Sessions to Alice Eastwood at the California Academy of Science for classification, naming, and publication. Sessions developed an impressive network, as illustrated by just a few of her contacts. Sessions corresponded and traded plants with C. S. Sargent of Harvard University's Arnold Arboretum. He published the first horticultural paper in the United States, *Garden and Forest*. Mary B. Coulston helped to edit this paper. She had studied at Cornell University under Liberty Hyde Bailey, a leading plant and agriculture scientist and another of Sessions' professional contacts. Coulston was hired by the San Diego Park Improvement Committee (upon which Sessions served) to promote and publicize the idea of developing the city park. Coulston and Sessions became fast friends, and together widened their contacts to include superintendents of the most prominent public parks in the nation. Michele Lee Martinez, "Kate Olivia Sessions: Plant Scientist" (master's thesis, University of San Diego, 1998), 86-88.
 7. The leading biography of Kate Sessions is Elizabeth C. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions Pioneer Horticulturist* (San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1976). Substantial biographical information is also recounted in Michele Lee Martinez, "Kate Olivia Sessions: Plant Scientist" (master's thesis, University of San Diego, 1998), 5-64. Kate Sessions' diary was used by both authors. The San Diego Public Library, the San Diego Museum of Natural History, and the San Diego Historical Society all have Kate O. Sessions collections. Oral histories and interviews relating to Sessions are available at the San Diego Historical Society. More than 200 articles by Sessions were published in *California Garden* magazine. Many anecdotes and remembrances of Sessions by her contemporaries appear in San Diego newspapers and *California Garden*.
 8. David Fairchild's contributions to this government activity are chronicled in Nelson Klose, *America's Crop Heritage: The History of Foreign Plant Introduction by the Federal Government* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State College Press, 1950), 113-124; David Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden: Travels of a Plant Explorer* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), 28-29.
 9. Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 60.

10. Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 64-82.
11. Hatch Act of Mar. 2, 1887, ch. 314, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 24 (1887), 440; Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 117-18.
12. Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 131. This tree was promoted by Sessions into a San Diego favorite. She noted that her original stock came from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (*Tipuana tipu* is a botanical synonym of *Tipuana speciosa*). Kate Sessions, "Tipuana Speciosa and Other Trees," *California Garden* 24 (Aug 1934): 7. See also Barbara Schillreff Jones, ed., *The Complete Writings of Kate Sessions in California Garden 1909-1939* (San Diego: San Diego Floral Association, 1998), 132-33.
13. Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 289. Marian's older sister, Elsie May, was married to Gilbert H. Grosvenor (1875-1966), editor-in-chief of *National Geographic* and president of the National Geographic Society. The brothers-in-law had a presaging interest in photography. Grosvenor popularized *National Geographic* by including numerous photographs in each issue. The Fairchilds captured thousands of images of people and plants over a period of 60 years. They adapted a camera to produce greatly enlarged photographs of insects which they used for illustrations in their published works. See David Fairchild and Marian Fairchild, *Book of Monsters: Portraits and Biographies of a Few of the Inhabitants of Woodland and Meadow* (Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1914).
14. The Department of Agriculture was assigned to a colonnade connected to the Palace of Agriculture. *Official Guide to the World's Columbian Exposition . . . May to October 26, 1893 [Hand Book Edition]*, comp. John J. Flinn (Chicago: The Columbian Guide Co., 1893), 49; Hubert Howe Bancroft, "Horticulture and Forestry," in *The Book of the Fair an Historical and Descriptive Presentation . . . the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (Chicago: Bancroft Co., 1895), 1:427-65; Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 29-30. Sessions made reference to her Chicago trip when extolling the "wealth of floral beauty" available in California. "Beautifying the Park. Suggestions from Miss Sessions," *San Diego Union*, Sept. 4, 1899.
15. Emanuele Orazio Franceschi was a Santa Barbara nurseryman who shared Kate Sessions' passion for identifying drought-resistant species of tall-growing trees and other plants that could thrive in Southern California. His many plant introductions include the zucchini. Peggy Riccio, "The Mother of Balboa Park," *American Gardener* 77 (January-February, 1998), 48, 50. Franceschi was already importing many plant species to California when Fairchild called upon him in Santa Barbara. Fairchild thought California owed a debt to Franceschi for his untiring interest and effort. Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 117-20.
16. The Kate Sessions papers at the San Diego Museum of Natural History include an official USDA mailing envelope and correspondence with the USDA's Chico station. Sessions frequently mentioned the Department as a source of plants and wrote to David Fairchild near the end of her life that she had acquired "a good many plants" from his office. Sessions to Fairchild, April 10, 1939, Fairchild Archive.
17. *Bulletin of New Plant Immigrants*, 1908-24 (carbon copy typescripts and multigraph pamphlets), Record Group 54, Box 1, Records of the Bureau of Plant Industry, Soil, and Agricultural Engineering Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction, National Archives of the United States (hereafter cited Record Group 54, Box 1, National Archives); *Bulletin of New Plant Immigrants*, No. 1 (Aug. 19, 1908): n. p., Record Group 54, Box 1, National Archives. The thirteenth annual list was announced in the *Bulletin of New Plant Immigrants*, No. 218 (Sept. 30, 1924): ii, Record Group 54, Box 1, National Archives.
18. In an undated manuscript, Sessions makes reference to successfully raising some seed "sent to me by Dr. David Fairchild from the Canary Islands." Kate Sessions Papers, San Diego Natural History Museum. Her propagation of palm tree seeds was cited at the Meyer Medal presentation. After retiring to Florida, Fairchild even requested items for his home garden from Sessions, including a particular Australian wild flower. Sessions to Fairchild, August

- 13, 1928, Fairchild Archive.
19. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions*, 109; C. I. Jerabek, "Some Plants In Miss Sessions' Garden," *California Garden* 50 (Autumn, 1959), 15.
 20. This archive also includes Fairchild's voluminous correspondence, thousands of his photographic negatives, his typed reports of trips, and other personal papers. Fairchild Archive.
 21. David Fairchild notebook, Oct. 10, 1919 (Los Angeles) - Oct. 13, 1919 (San Diego), Fairchild Archive (hereafter cited as Fairchild notebook).
 22. David Fairchild, Western Trip 1919, August 21st to November 8, incl., (typescript) 283, Fairchild Archive (hereafter cited as Fairchild, Western Trip).
 23. Fairchild notebook; Fairchild, Western Trip, 283-84.
 24. Fairchild notebook; Fairchild, Western Trip, 293, 291. The address he noted was 1432 Monteceto.
 25. The Chula Vista station, headed by Charles G. Marshall, was part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Bureau of Plant Industry, under which Fairchild's Section of Foreign Seed and Plant Introduction operated. Before the renumbering of Chula Vista's streets, it was located between 3rd and 4th Avenues. "Chula Vista," *San Diego City and Country Directory, 1919* (San Diego: San Diego Directory Co., 1919), 294, 1043.
 26. Fairchild, Western Trip, 294. The house still stands at 435 First Avenue, Chula Vista. Described as "Pueblo Revival" in style, it was built in 1916 by L.E. Smith for Sallmon who was the first vice president of the San Diego Land and Town Corporation and the Sweetwater Water Company. "No. 38 - William Sallmon House," http://www.cvhistorichomes.org/no_38.htm (accessed October 3, 2005); F. O. Popenoe, "San Diego County Avocado History," *California Avocado Association 1927 Yearbook* 12 (1927?), 41-48, www.avocadosource.com (accessed May 22, 2004).
 27. Fairchild, Western Trip, 295. Sessions had planted 250 small *Brahea brandegeei*, or San Jose Hesper palms, known to Sessions and Fairchild by the earlier name *Erythea brandegeei*. They were grown from seeds she personally collected at San Jose del Cabo in Baja. The grove is north of the bowling lawns in Balboa Park. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions*, 67-68.
 28. Sessions to Fairchild, April 10, 1939, Fairchild Archive.
 29. Fairchild, Western Trip, 295.
 30. *California Garden*, the oldest continuously published horticultural magazine in the United States, has been published by the San Diego Floral Association since 1909. As recently as the year 2000, Robinson's writings on lath houses were still being cited. He was called the "father of modern lathehouses (sic)." Wallace W. Wagner, "Lathhouses for Every Climate," *Begonian* 67 (July/August, 2000): 138. The American Begonia Society today awards the "Alfred D. Robinson Medal" for newly established and registered begonia hybrids developed by its members. Michael Ludwig, "ABS Awards International Houston 2002," *Begonian*, 69 (Sept.-Oct. 2002):171; The American Begonia Society, www.begonias.org/begonian (accessed May 25, 2005).
 31. Robinson's house was an Italian Renaissance showplace designed by architect Emmor Brooke Weaver, best known for his work in the Arts and Crafts style. *San Diego Architects, 1868-1930*, 2d ed., comp. Graduate Students of Public History and Historic Preservation under the direction of Raymond S. Brandes (San Diego: [University of San Diego], 1991), 199. Today, the house and the remaining fraction of the estate lands is rented for social events. See also "Rosecroft, A Historical Landmark," www.rosecroftsandiego.com (accessed May 25, 2005).

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32. Victoria Padilla, *Southern California Gardens: An Illustrated History*, (Santa Barbara: Allen A. Knoll Pub., 1994), 120; Fairchild, Western Trip, 290.
33. Sessions to Fairchild, April 10, 1939, Fairchild Archive.
34. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions*, 84.
35. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions*, 297.
36. Sessions to Marian Bell Fairchild, July 17, 1922, Fairchild Archive.
37. Sessions to Fairchild, April 4, 1925, Fairchild Archive.
38. Sessions to Fairchild, April 27, 1925, Fairchild Archive.
39. Sessions to Fairchild, April 7, 1927, May 20, 1928, June 7, 1928, Fairchild Archive.
40. Session to Marian Bell Fairchild, July 17, 1922, Fairchild Archive.
41. David Fairchild, *Exploring for Plants* (New York: MacMillan, 1930), 149, 202.
42. Sessions to Fairchild, June 20, 1928, Fairchild Archive.
43. Sessions dated the Baja California trip precisely to October 1900 in a descriptive article about the trip. K. O. Sessions, "The Palm-Erthea Brandegeei," *California Garden* 11, no. 11 (May 1920): 13. Five years later, writing from London, she again stated that she traveled to Baja with the Brandege party in 1900. K. O. Sessions, "A Brief Appreciation of a Noted Botanist," *California Garden* 16, no. 12 (June 1925): 9. In a discussion of a wild Baja morning glory, Sessions again uses 1900 as the date of the Baja palm gathering trip. K. O. Sessions, "Yellow Morning Glory in Lower California," *California Garden* 24, no. 9 (Mar. 1933): 10. However, this date is brought into question by documentation in the Brandege Botanical Collections indicating that the trip may have occurred in 1902. Joseph Ewan, "Bibliographical Miscellany-IV. A Bibliogeographical Guide to the Brandege Botanical Collections," *American Midland Naturalist* 27, no. 3 (May 1942), 772, 778, 780; MacPhail, *Kate Sessions*, 67-68.
44. Sessions acknowledged his role in a long and grateful letter to Fairchild just eleven months before her death. Sessions to Fairchild, April 10, 1939, Fairchild Archive.
45. Fairchild, *The World Was My Garden*, 455-56.
46. "Presentation of the F. N. Meyer Medal to Miss Kate Sessions . . . [typescript of introduction and remarks of Knowles A. Ryerson]," April 1, [1939]. Fairchild Archive.
47. Sessions to Fairchild, April 10, 1939, Fairchild Archive.
48. Sessions to Fairchild, April 10, 1939, Fairchild Archive.