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Epilogue

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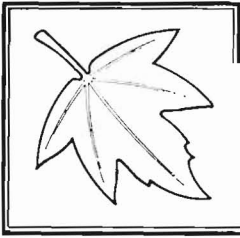


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EPILOGUE

At the conclusion of the writing of the history of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden there remain unanswered questions, some asked as early as 1928 by Ernest Branton when he wrote Mrs Bryant saying, "Should not something be said of your personal interests in plants or botanic gardens, or both." Mrs Bryant did not answer Branton or to my knowledge did she ever divulge the answers to anyone who might have recorded them. However, all evidence points to the fact that the establishment of a garden devoted to California plants was the logical culmination of an evolutionary development that took place in southern California horticulture during the early years of the present century. Not just one, but three, botanic gardens, all devoted to native plants, were founded within a matter of a few months in 1926-27. Perhaps all of these owed their origin either directly or indirectly to the efforts of one man who wished to interest the people of California in the floral wonders of their own state and the need to preserve them. That man was Theodore Payne, acknowledged to be the inspiration for one of the gardens.

Mrs Bryant and Theodore Payne were friends for many years and with her natural interest in the wildflowers growing at Rancho Santa Ana, she could not have failed to take note of Payne's widely publicized Exposition Park planting of 1915 located only a few blocks from her home on West 28th Street. That was the first time that any extensive area had ever been planted solely to California natives. Although her enthusiasm for California wildflowers probably developed gradually over a period of years, it is not likely that this could have led to the establishment of a wild garden earlier than 1925 when she became the sole owner of Rancho Santa Ana. Prior to that time the pastureland on which the garden was later located had been managed by her brother, Fred H. Bixby.

Before the end of 1925, she was already at work on her garden and informed Payne that she wanted to grow every kind of plant that grows in California, only to be told by him that that was quite an order. Once the garden was underway, Mrs Bryant began to pour increasing amounts of energy and enthusiasm into the project and later considerable amounts of her per-

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sonal funds to the point where the garden almost became an all-consuming passion.

These are not necessarily qualities that would guarantee either the establishment or the survival of a botanic garden, in the sense that the term is used today, or even in a pleasure garden. However, there appears to have been two fortuitous circumstances (a third came a little later) that were to forever shape the direction that the new garden was to take. Firstly, there was the appearance on the scene of Ernest Braunton; secondly, and even more important, was that of Willis Linn Jepson whose wise counsel given freely over a period of many years directed Mrs Bryant's efforts along lines which eventually led to the establishment of a scientific institution that 50 years later would rank high among the botanic gardens of the world. No name appears more frequently in the history of the garden than does that of Jepson and from the correspondence that has been preserved, it is evident that Mrs Bryant sought his advice on many matters over a period of nearly 20 years. Although Jepson and Mrs Bryant did not always agree, and for a time relations between them were strained to the breaking point, there appears to have been a mutual respect that existed between the two. They had much in common: both were native-born Californians; both called a spade a spade and at times were difficult or obstinate; and both wanted others to share with them a fuller enjoyment of California's trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. It is also clearly evident that Jepson early perceived in Mrs Bryant's efforts to establish a botanic garden the possibility of the founding of a research institution devoted to California botany, something that he would have liked to have done had he had adequate funds and the time. It is for this reason that after the break between the two in 1929, Jepson was willing to resume friendly relations again the following year. Normally with him such alienations were permanent.

Ernest Braunton is usually remembered as the man who laid out plans for the original planting of the garden (using a list of plants supplied by Jepson), but perhaps his most important contribution was the encouragement that he gave Mrs Bryant during the early years to persevere in spite of many obstacles. He was also the first to publicize the new venture and to call to the attention of the people of southern California, and elsewhere, the efforts being made by Mrs Bryant to develop a garden in Santa Ana Canyon. Ernest Braunton was the garden's first public relations man, a role that he played well.

The third fortuitous circumstance was the appointment of Carl Brandt Wolf as Botanist. Wolf, trained in taxonomy with Dr Abrams at Stanford University was a bright, enthusiastic, and hardworking young man who did much to set the scientific standards that would be followed by his

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successors. In addition to his training with Abrams, he had worked with Theodore Payne and had learned much of a practical nature about the growing and handling of native plants. He was as much at home gathering seeds or digging plants to take back to the garden as he was in filling his voluminous field presses with specimens for the herbarium. His rare combination of equal interests in botany and horticulture have not since been matched.

Although others have contributed significantly to the development of the garden, the names of Theodore Payne, Willis Linn Jepson, Carl Brandt Wolf, and Ernest Braunton will always stand out among those who were associated with the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden during its first 50 years.

In commenting upon histories of American colleges, Louis Benezet noted that too many of them suffered from being written with undue emphasis upon eulogy and freighted with both sentiment and inaccuracy.⁹⁷ In writing the history of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden, I have attempted to avoid those three pitfalls and to be as objective as possible for one who has been intimately associated with the institution for a little less than 30 of the garden's 50 years. It is difficult or impossible to be completely unbiased about the events that have occurred during one's own administration. In my case this is about one third of the garden's 50 years and it is left to a future historian to set into perspective the events of the recent past.