

# Aliso: A Journal of Systematic and Floristic Botany

---

Volume 2 | Issue 4

Article 2

---

1952

**Frank W. Peirson**

Philip A. Munz

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/aliso>



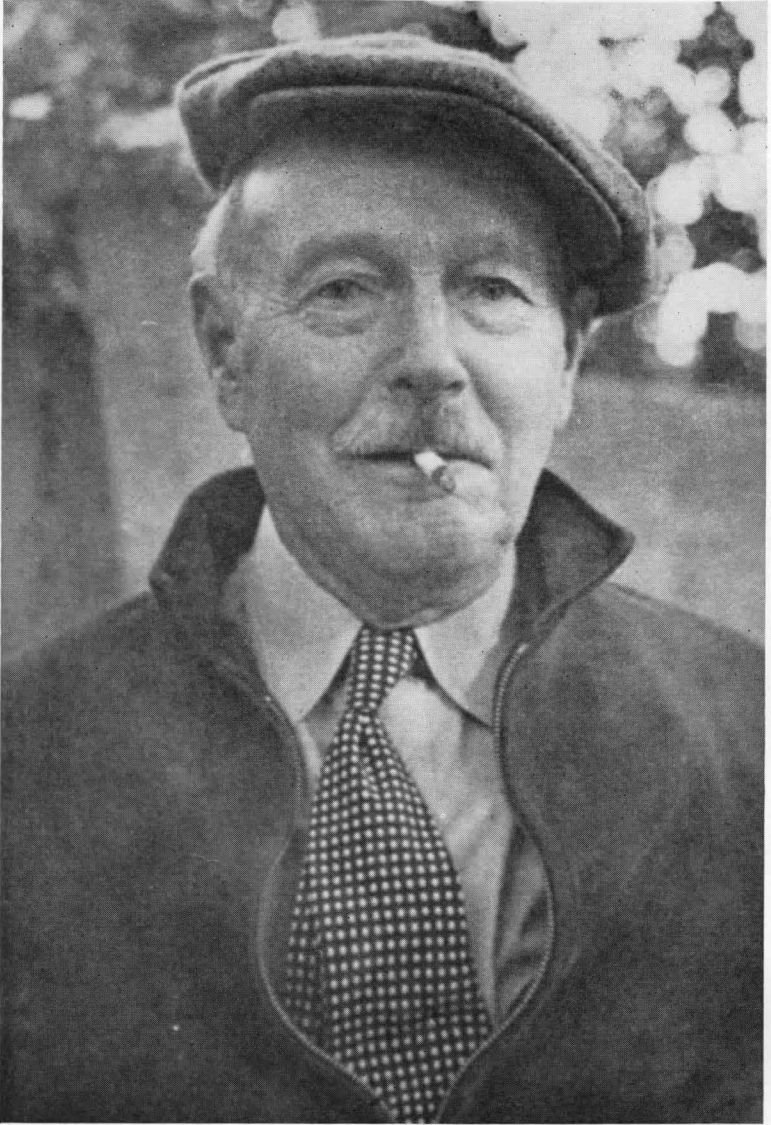
Part of the [Botany Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Munz, Philip A. (1952) "Frank W. Peirson," *Aliso: A Journal of Systematic and Floristic Botany*. Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/aliso/vol2/iss4/2>



Frank W. Peirson — 1865-1951

**FRANK W. PEIRSON**

By PHILIP A. MUNZ

Frank W. Peirson of Altadena, California, passed away on May 1, 1951 at the age of 85. Born December 11, 1865, into a Quaker family in western New York, Frank Peirson was early imbued with a sense of genuineness and simplicity that marked his entire life. He was educated at Haverford College, where he took his bachelor's and master's degrees, concentrating largely on literature. I remember many times while camping with him on botanical trips how much pleasure I received from his recitation of English and German poems that he had learned decades earlier. From Haverford he went to Germany where he did considerable work on his doctorate in language and literature at Heidelberg. At that time it was the European custom for students to follow their major professor when the latter moved from one university to another. But Frank, becoming disgusted when his mentor went to another university, decided to travel through Europe and then return to America. The wide acquaintance with European countries thus obtained and the extensive knowledge he had of their language and literature remained with him always.

On coming back to the United States, Frank tried teaching school in Maine, but did not like it and then went into business. In 1902, because of their health, he brought two old aunts to California for the milder climate. Settling in what is now Altadena, he built a home largely with his own hands and acquired considerable property which he later subdivided.

He had always been interested in sciences, particularly botany and geology, but during his student years at Haverford, had had little opportunity to develop such fields, since at that time science was more or less frowned upon in small colleges. He was able to get some astronomy, however. In his new home in California he renewed his interest in the plants and rocks and began sending specimens of plants to Dr. W. L. Jepson of the University of California for determination. The latter told him of the paucity of collections from the San Gabriel Range, at whose feet the Peirsons were living, and inspired him to begin the exploration of this area. Accompanied by his sister Mabel, who had come to California with him and had been teaching biology, he began a series of burro trips that lasted over a period of years and made much better known the vegetation of the trackless and wild country so near to Pasadena. There were almost no roads into these mountains at that time and the Peirsons spent many weary but interesting weeks climbing on foot into a terrain difficult to enter and bringing back specimens of the plant life. Thus began one of the best private herbaria in California, duplicates in most cases being sent to Dr. Jepson for inclusion in citation in the Flora of California.

Later the Peirsons transferred their main exploration to the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada, where again year after year they botanized in one canyon

after another. This is a region of great interest botanically and only recently easily accessible. It is a vast region and its botanical exploration is still not complete. The excellent specimens made by the Peirsons with accurate and painstaking data represent one of the best records of the plant life growing there that has yet been made. This study continued until the early 1940's, the last several seasons in the field concentrating on the upper Rock Creek Basin of extreme northern Inyo County. Many new records for the state were obtained, particularly in this region.

The Peirson herbarium contains also a good general collection of the plants of California. Many trips were made to the deserts and to most parts of the state. Always Jepson's *Flora* was kept in mind and thousands of duplicates were sent to Berkeley. Likewise there were longer trips through much of the West, such as to southern Canada, Montana, Wyoming, Arizona, Utah, etc. In addition to the determinations by Jepson, the herbarium was studied also by specialists from many institutions and in many plant groups, so that it is a noteworthy collection, not only because of its excellent specimens but also because so many have been cited in monographs and revisions. The Peirson herbarium is deposited with the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden and is available at the Garden's new home in Claremont. It contains about 14,000 sheets.

Frank and Mabel Peirson's big contribution to botany has thus been through their collecting and making available for study much botanical material, particularly of relatively unknown areas in California. Being keen of eye and mind, they were discriminating collectors and chose plants that seemed to them unusual as well as the better known forms. But Frank did also a certain amount of writing which should be mentioned:

(1) "Meanings of Specific Names of Southern California Plants," published as a supplement (pp. 605-613) of Munz, *Manual of Southern California Botany*, 1935.

(2) "Trees and Shrubs of the San Gabriel Range," published in 1935 by the Pasadena City Schools, with thirty-two pages. This list, containing keys and brief descriptions, has been very useful to students and schools along the south front of the San Gabriel Mountains.

(3) "Plants of Rock Creek Lake Basin," printed in 1938 by Belmont Adult Evening School Print Shop, Los Angeles. It has sixteen pages and was followed by a four-page list of addenda in 1942.

In addition to Mabel, Frank had two other sisters, Gertrude Peirson, who was for many years the housekeeper at the Altadena home and who passed away in 1948, and Jessie, Mrs. Coye Dunkelberger of Los Angeles.

To me, who in years gone by have had the pleasure of sharing some of the botanical trips of the Peirsons as well as the hospitality at their Altadena home, Frank will always remain a great friend. The unusually close relationship within their family, the tremendous range of reading and interest, the genuineness of their friendship, were always an inspiration to their many friends. Many botanists will continue to think back with pleasure and profit to the pleasant hours spent with the Peirsons both in their home and in the field. Many a youngster got his first stimulus in botany and other fields from Frank and Mabel Peirson.