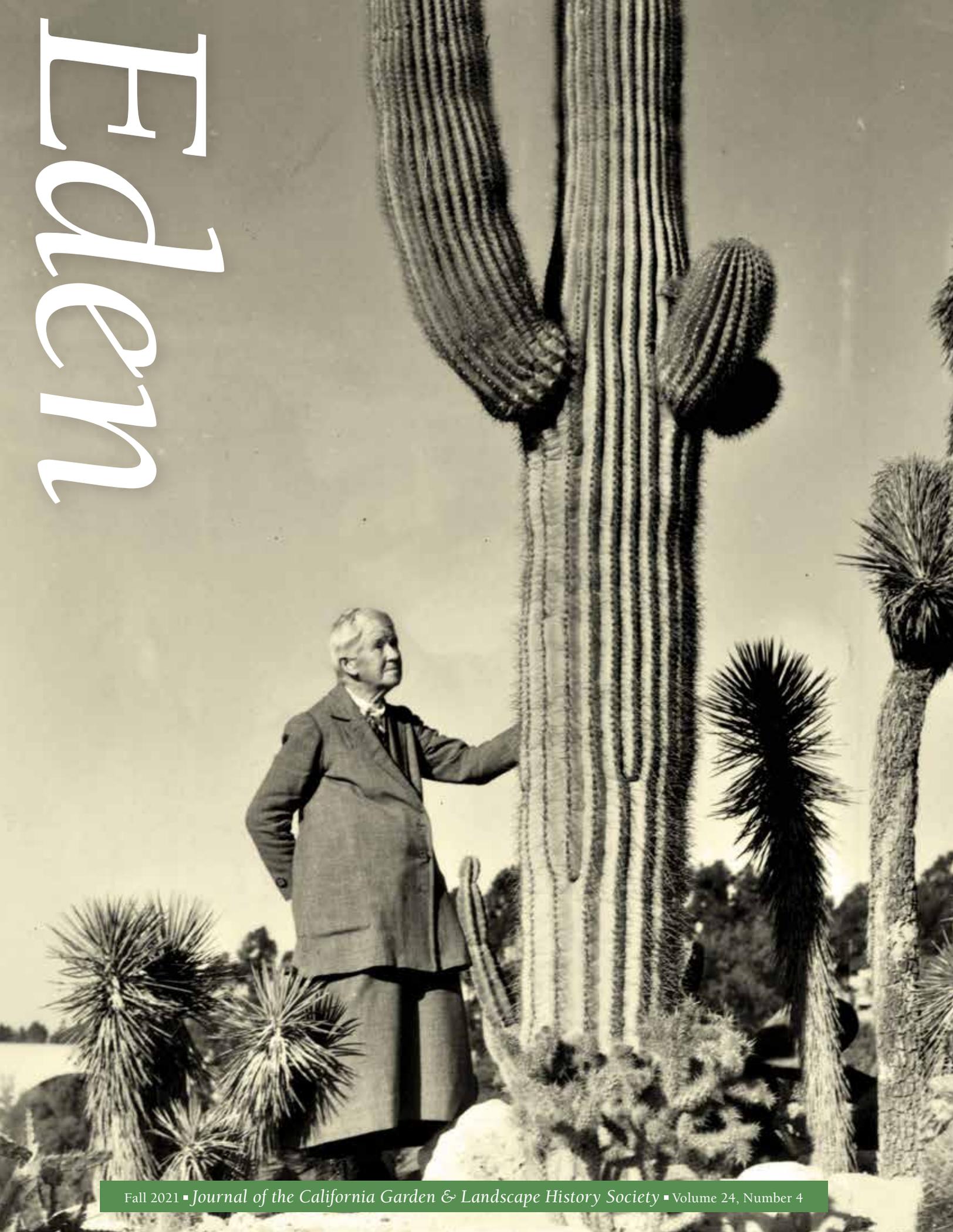


# Eden



# Eden

JOURNAL OF THE CALIFORNIA GARDEN & LANDSCAPE HISTORY SOCIETY

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Above: Native Matilija poppies are seen in the foreground, with Balboa Park's California Building's Tower and Dome in the background. Photograph by Rachel Cobb.



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Above: William Land Park Sacramento, Cal. McCurry Foto Co. 1937  
From McCurry Photograph Collection, 32276-12. Courtesy California History Room.



**The Balboa Park Gardens of  
Kate O. Sessions:  
San Jose Hesper Palm, Aloe and  
Agave, Cactus**

NANCY CAROL CARTER



*There was no one quite like Kate Sessions. Nursery woman, lecturer, writer, teacher, traveler, winner of the Meyer Medal for outstanding achievement in the field of horticulture. Kate Olivia Sessions left an indelible mark on the city in which she resided for almost sixty years. The San Diego garden that does not have a plant introduced or popularized by Miss Sessions is most unusual, and many of that city's finest plantings are the result of her endeavors.*

~ Victoria Padilla<sup>1</sup>

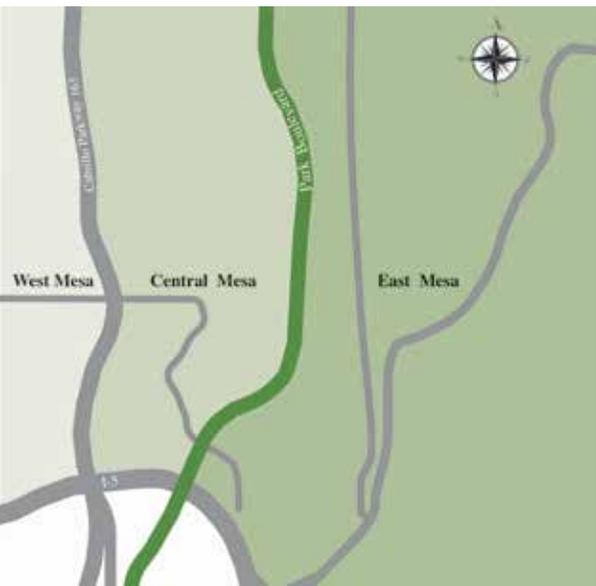


#### **KATE O. SESSIONS AND BALBOA PARK**

Horticulturist and nursery owner Kate O. Sessions (1857-1940) is so closely associated with the development of San Diego's Balboa Park that it is sometimes assumed that she was responsible for its entire early landscaping. In fact, her work in the park—while extremely important—was confined to a few years and a fraction of park acreage.

Kate Sessions first oversaw planting in City Park (renamed Balboa Park in 1910) when working with the Ladies Annex of the Chamber of Commerce. In the 1880s, the group gained approval to beautify a strip of land along the park's southwestern boundary.<sup>2</sup> The ill-fated "Annex Park" encompassed about 13 acres. The improvements of trees, shrubs, arbors, and benches suffered drought and vandalism and could

Left: Balboa Park Cactus Garden, 2021. Photograph by Rachel Cobb.  
Top: Kate Sessions at age twenty-three, 1880. Courtesy San Diego History Center Research Archives.  
Bottom: In 1939, Kate O. Sessions was awarded the prestigious Frank N. Meyer medal of the American Genetic Association, the first woman recipient.



not be sustained.<sup>3</sup>

Undaunted by the difficulties of her first venture into park improvement, Sessions proposed in 1892 that she be allowed to establish an experimental garden and operate her nursery on park land.<sup>4</sup> The City of San Diego enacted a special ordinance to legalize this public-private partnership. Lack of a reliable water supply had doomed the plantings in the Ladies Annex project, so Sessions was careful to secure access to city water in the lease negotiation. To defuse legal questions about turning public land over to a private business owner, Sessions was appointed to an unpaid city gardener position within the public works department.<sup>5</sup> She leased just over 32 acres in the northwest corner of City Park's 1,400 acres, although it was later suggested that she make active use of only about ten acres.<sup>6</sup>

As specified in the lease, Sessions paid her rent by providing trees to the city and planting a minimum of one hundred trees each year in the park. It is believed that she often exceeded this quota, planting more than the required 1,000 trees during the decade her business operated on park land. The West Mesa of Balboa Park continues to show evidence of her work, although many of the trees Sessions planted are reaching the end of their natural lives or already have died.

Sessions had a free hand during the term of her lease as there was no focused oversight of San Diego's only public park. There was no city park commission, no park superintendent, no park development plan and no specified planting regime or species list. Sessions selected trees and planted them in locations of her choice. While ostensibly an unpaid employee of the public works



department, she answered only to the Board of Aldermen (city council).

As required in her agreement with the city, Sessions did a great deal of experimental planting. She tested which native plants might be successfully domesticated and which imported trees and plants could thrive in the park and San Diego at large. Her routine nursery production and the flowers grown in the park for her florist business quickly demonstrated that park land could be successfully cultivated. Within months of taking up her lease, Sessions presented the Board of Aldermen with a basket of flowers grown in the park.<sup>7</sup> She established a practice in her first year of publicizing bloom dates for her fields of

roses, chrysanthemums, and other flowering plants. She encouraged the public to visit and specially invited the Board of Aldermen to see the park in bloom.<sup>8</sup> Hundreds of visitors witnessed her success in demonstrating that the dry and barren land disparaged by many San Diegans as a hopeless setting for a public park could, in fact, be beautified.<sup>9</sup>

In February 1902, Sessions successfully petitioned for a five-year extension of her City Park lease,<sup>10</sup> but events late in that year brought about a change in her nursery business plans. In November 1902, New York landscape architect Samuel Parsons, Jr. was commissioned to develop a comprehensive plan of development for San Diego's City



Park. He traveled to San Diego for a first consultation in December 1902.<sup>11</sup> Kate Sessions had long advocated for professional planning of the large park and was involved in the selection of Parsons.<sup>12</sup> His appointment was the signal for her nursery business to leave the park. She had purchased land in the largely undeveloped Mission Hills area, just a few miles northwest of City Park, and by fall 1903 had relocated her business there.<sup>13</sup>

The transfer of authority over park development was underscored when Sessions worked with Mary B. Coulston<sup>14</sup> to plan San Diego's first Arbor Day celebration. A planting in City Park was decided upon, but the choice of tree species and planting locations was not up to Sessions. Samuel Parsons, Jr. and his associate George Cooke made these decisions for the March 17, 1904, event. Schoolchildren helped to plant 60 pine and cypress trees in City Park that day.<sup>15</sup>

With the surrender of her lease, Kate Sessions never again had an official role in landscaping Balboa Park. Yet hers was a trusted and respected voice. She continued to influence park development through the sheer force of her expertise and relentless advocacy. Her access was maintained through long-term friendships with prominent citizens who served on the city park commission (established in 1905) and her personal connections with park staff, some of whom were former employees of her nursery. She was a founder and leading

member of the influential San Diego Floral Association, established in 1907. Most importantly, she nurtured a professional and personal friendship with John Morley, a key alliance lasting from his appointment as superintendent of San Diego city parks in 1911 through to his retirement in 1939.<sup>16</sup>

It was with John Morley's indulgent support that Kate Sessions orchestrated the establishment of three specialty gardens in Balboa Park, all created years after surrendering her park lease. In 1914 Kate Sessions provided plants for a San Jose Hesper palm grove near the Laurel Street entrance to the park. In 1932 she oversaw the planting of a new Aloe and Agave Garden created by the San Diego Floral Association in her honor. Sometimes called the Old Cactus Garden, the third Kate Sessions garden was planted as the 1935 California Pacific International Exposition was getting underway in Balboa Park.

Kate Sessions made extravagant use of her influence and expertise to bring these three gardens into being. Each conveys a story of her indomitable character and horticultural prowess. Yet a fully documented account of Sessions' role in the establishment of these three gardens has not appeared. In the absence of a clearly recorded history, the origin story of each has been forgotten or badly confused.

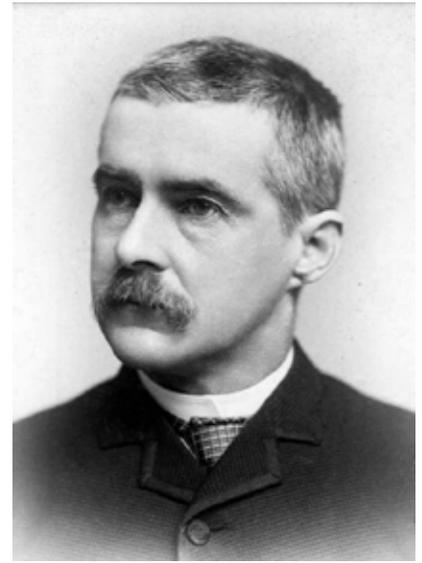
My own path out of this perplexing garden scrub began with John Blocker's article on the Balboa Park succulent gardens of Kate Sessions published in a 2014 issue

Opposite, left: BALBOA PARK MAP. Roadways and natural canyons divide the 1200-acre Balboa Park into three planning areas, the West, Central and East Mesas. The San Jose Hesper Palm grove is on the West Mesa. The Central Mesa is home to most Balboa Park museums, the San Diego Zoo and Sessions' Cactus Garden and former Aloe and Agave Garden. Two municipal golf courses and numerous other recreation facilities are located on the East Mesa.

Opposite, right: The Cactus Garden in the foreground, with Balboa Park's iconic California Tower and Dome beyond, 2021. Photograph by Rachel Cobb.

Above, left: The first San Jose Hesper palm illustration, published with Carl A. Purpus' botanical description and naming of the palm in *Gartenflora*, 1903. Native to Baja California and first cultivated in the United States by Kate Sessions, *Erythra brandegeei* has been reclassified as *Brahea brandegeei*.

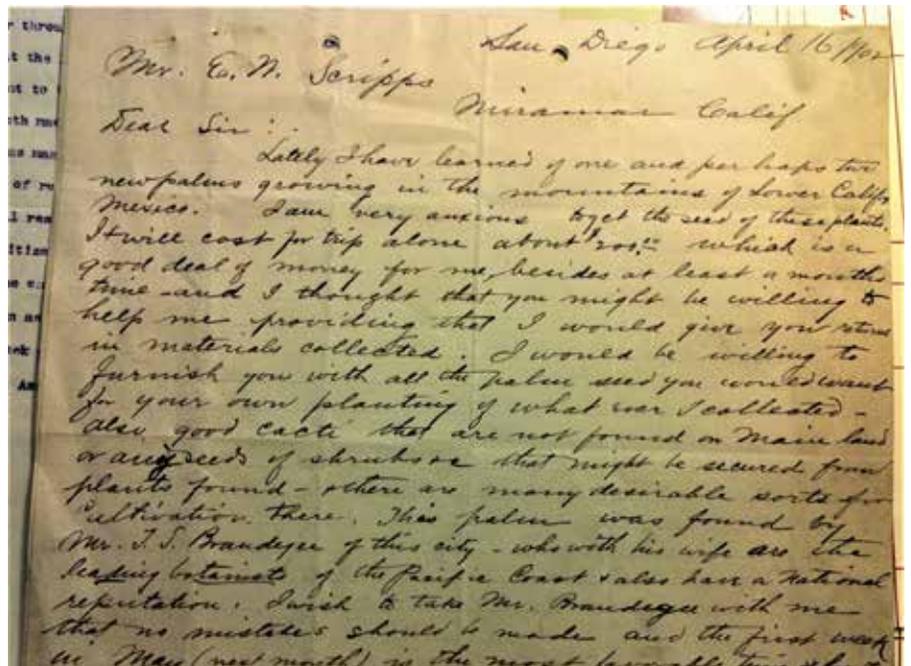
Above, right: This photograph of the San Jose Hesper palm is from William Hertrich's 1951 book *Palms and Cycads, Their Culture in Southern California*.



Top row: America's most eminent botanical couple of the 19th century, Katharine and T.S. Brandegee, collaborated with Kate Sessions after moving to San Diego in 1894. Sessions intended the Balboa Park Hesper palm grove to honor the Brandegees. Images courtesy of the University and Jepson Herbaria Archives, University of California, Berkeley.

Right: On April 16, 1902, Kate Sessions wrote to wealthy newspaper tycoon E. W. Scripps requesting \$200 to support a plant-hunting expedition to Mexico. His response is unknown, but the trip occurred in October 1902. Courtesy E. W. Scripps Papers, Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries.

Opposite: The Balboa Park Bowling Green, seen with the Hesper palm forest in the background. Photograph by Rachel Cobb.



of *California Garden*.<sup>17</sup> This article expands upon that work and adds information on the Balboa Park palm grove attributable to Sessions. The Kate Sessions gardens of Balboa Park are discussed in the chronological order of their creation.

### THE SAN JOSE HESPER PALM GROVE, 1914

*I was fortunately one of the party that went to... San Jose del Cabo, a four days journey by steamer [and] a three days trip on horseback to the mountains... I dug from the field five small palms...and brought them to San Diego... Later a few thousand seeds were planted...*<sup>18</sup>

~ Kate O. Sessions

The plantation of San Jose Hesper palms near Balboa Park's Laurel Street entrance is unique in the world and the largest collection of these rare palms in the United States.<sup>19</sup> Kate Sessions traveled to the southern tip of Mexico's Baja peninsula in 1902 to retrieve this plant for American gardens, an expedition made with the eminent botanist T. S. Brandegee (1843-1925), who had spotted and photographed the palm on an earlier botanizing trip. The plant was not grown anywhere in the United States. It was botanically undescribed and unrecorded in the scientific record when collected by Sessions and Brandegee.

A German plant collector who traveled widely across Mexico scientifically classified and named the palm. Carl A. Purpus

(1851-1941)<sup>20</sup> worked closely with T. S. Brandegee and his distinguished wife, medical doctor and botanist Katharine Curran Brandegee (1844-1920).<sup>21</sup> Purpus was supplied with specimens from the Brandegee-Sessions find. Determining that the palm was a new species, he named it *Erythea brandegeei* and in 1903 published the botanical description in *Gartenflora*, a monthly journal of German and Swiss garden and flower science published in Stuttgart, Germany.<sup>22</sup> The classification later changed to *Brahea brandegeei*. The common name is San Jose Hesper palm.

A personal account of her plant hunting expedition did not appear until 1920. Sessions wrote about the trip in a *California Garden* article, giving few details and

incorrectly dating the venture to 1900.<sup>23</sup> Sessions repeated that date in other writings<sup>24</sup> but hedged slightly in 1926 by stating that the palm was discovered “about 1900.”<sup>25</sup> Based on Sessions’ account, 1900 entered the historical record as the date of her Baja trip.<sup>26</sup> In fact, the trip occurred in 1902.

A letter Sessions wrote to E. W. Scripps on April 16, 1902, offers compelling proof that she had not yet made the plant hunting expedition. Her letter requests financial support to retrieve a special new palm tree from southern Baja.<sup>27</sup> Sessions wrote that she would be traveling with T. S. Brandegee. She provided his professional bona fides and described the planned expedition, even naming the coastal steamer that would be boarded in Ensenada. The departure date, she wrote, was just days away in early May. Knowing his interest in experimental horticulture, Sessions offered to provide Scripps with plants retrieved on the expedition and to write stories about the trip for his newspaper chain. She described the recovery of this new palm as the chance of a lifetime and requested \$200 to support the scientific undertaking.<sup>28</sup>

It may have been personally awkward for the independently-minded Sessions to solicit this funding, although it was common practice for plant hunters to seek support from wealthy backers. E. W. Scripps’ response to this appeal, if any, has not come to light, but Sessions and Brandegee did not depart San Diego in May 1902. Their trip was postponed for several months.

A second confirmation of the date for the Sessions-Brandegee expedition is found in an article by botanist and explorer Reid Moran. He meticulously dated the botanizing trips of T. S. Brandegee in Mexico by consolidating information in letters, published reports, herbarium labels, and specimen tags. Moran’s research established that Brandegee made no trip to Mexico in 1900 but did travel to Baja with Kate Sessions in October 1902.<sup>29</sup> A final bit of evidence appeared in the pages of the *San Diego Union* dated October 16, 1902. That day the newspaper reported that Kate Sessions “has gone to Mexico for three weeks.”<sup>30</sup>

Reasons for the postponement of the trip from May to October are unknown.

If E. W. Scripps declined to contribute to expedition costs, perhaps Sessions and Brandegee had to continue searching for financial support. A hint in this direction is offered by the distribution of the few small palms recovered on the trip. Sessions returned from Mexico with five small trees. Three of them survived. She sent one to a wealthy Montecito resident, James Waldron Gillespie, who was creating a botanical garden<sup>31</sup> and one to the Huntington estate in San Marino.<sup>32</sup> Both sources may have provided funding for the trip, but no documentary confirmation of financial support from either of these sources has been located.

Sessions planted the third surviving palm in the Mission Hills neighborhood where she had established her nursery after leaving Balboa Park. The more precious cargo from Mexico was a huge supply of seed from which she successfully propagated hundreds of San Jose Hesper palms. Sessions wrote in 1938 that these new plants were brought to life on her growing grounds near Stephens Street,<sup>33</sup> the location of her original sales yard in Mission Hills. She sold the new palm—a genuine





rarity available only from her nursery—to gardeners across the San Diego region and farther afield. Recorded sales include nine palms shipped to the Missouri Botanical Garden and forty purchased for street planting on Huntington Drive in San Gabriel. The superintendent of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, John McLaren, saw the palm while visiting Sessions and “so admired” it that he ordered a dozen to test in Northern California.<sup>34</sup>

Sessions had large numbers of seed-grown San Jose Hesper palms in cultivation as Balboa Park was being landscaped for the Panama-California Exposition, scheduled to open on January 1, 1915. John Morley was hired as San Diego superintendent of parks in 1911 and tasked with improving areas of Balboa Park falling outside the exposition grounds. Together they planned

a large installation of palms. In 1914 Sessions donated 150 palms and the park purchased 175 from her nursery to create the San Jose Hesper palm plantation. A few other species of palm were interplanted, including the Mexican blue fan palm (*Brahea armata*) and the Guadalupe Island fan palm (*Brahea edulis*). John Morley had created a large rose garden on the north side of the Laurel Street entrance to Balboa Park and the new palms were “planted outside the rose garden,” according to Sessions.<sup>35</sup> No surviving planting plan or early photograph shows the design of this landscape. Based on the surviving palms, the arrangement was unregimented and naturalistic. The palms were separated from the rose garden by a wide path and flowed from the mesa down the side of Cabrillo Canyon.

Morley’s rose garden was not maintained

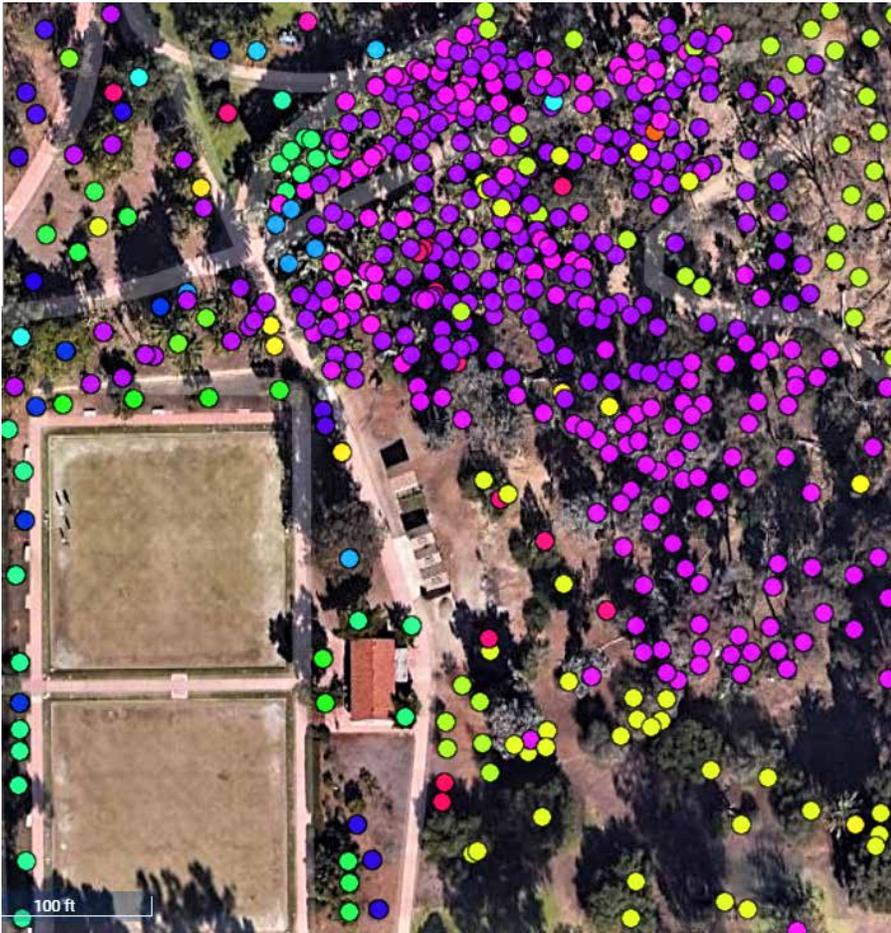
after the plants were infected by a killing blight in the late 1920s. Two bowling greens replaced the rose garden<sup>36</sup> and are now the near neighbors of the remaining palm forest. The San Jose Hesper palms have grown very tall. They are identified by their slender trunks, one of the features that attracted Kate Sessions and a characteristic, along with the hardness of the wood, that makes native stands of the palm in Mexico subject to over-harvesting for construction uses.

In 1926 Sessions wrote in *California Garden* that the palms planted in Balboa Park were “progressing well.”<sup>37</sup> Ten years later she had the pleasure of guiding Cornell University professor Liberty Hyde Bailey, one of the nation’s best known and most prolific horticulturists, through the palm grove.<sup>38</sup> Palms were one of his specialties. In his periodical, *Gentes Herbarum*, published in Ithaca, New York, Bailey described “the large plantation [of *brandegeei* palms] in Balboa Park, San Diego, which is grown from Kate Sessions’ original importation of seeds.”<sup>39</sup> Bailey later sent Sessions all his publications on palms, adding valuable references to her horticulture library.<sup>40</sup>

Sessions hoped for a more general appreciation of the palm she had brought to cultivation, writing in 1938 that “the public may not observe as often as they should” this “interesting group of fan-leaved palms.”<sup>41</sup> Just two years after this gentle prod, Kate Sessions was dead. The San Jose Hesper palm plantation soon blurred into the anonymous greenery of Balboa Park. The historically significant connection of the palm grove with Sessions and the Brandegees was forgotten, and the palm’s locally significant plant introduction story was lost to memory.

And yet, more than a century after 325 San Jose Hesper palms were planted in Balboa Park,<sup>42</sup> a significant number still survive. A 2018 tree inventory recorded 214 San Jose Hesper palms in the park. Of that number, 188 are growing in the original plantation area near Laurel Street and today’s bowling greens.<sup>43</sup>

This palm collection has never been known as a “garden” of Balboa Park, but the hardy survivors from 1914—now very tall on their slim trunks—and the newer Hesper palm volunteers should get that designation so that the currently unrecognized association of these palms with Sessions can be established. The plant-hunting story of a locally introduced species can be told and a key purpose of the palm plantation as envisioned by Sessions can be realized. These are “brandegeei” palms. Sessions intended this mass planting to honor



Katharine and Townshend Stith Brandegee who had brought distinction to San Diego and inspired her with their botanical expertise and scientific connections.<sup>44</sup>

The Brandegees were the most accomplished botanical couple of nineteenth-century America. Mrs. Brandegee was a trailblazer and outstanding botanical taxonomist and scholar. She was the third woman to graduate from medical school in California and the second woman in the United States to hold a professional position in botany. During her many years as Curator of Botany at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, she set a high standard for plant classification and description and crusaded for an elevated approach to botanical science. Her husband is still considered one of the most important botanists to have worked in Mexico. Both were adventurous field botanists who published scores of valued scientific papers. While residing in San Diego from 1894 until 1906, they established the region's first botanical garden and built the nation's largest private herbarium.<sup>45</sup> T. S. Brandegee volunteered both his civil engineering training and his botanical expertise to assist in the earliest development of Balboa Park.<sup>46</sup>

The Brandegees are deserving of remembrance, along with the close tie of this plant collection to Kate Sessions. The San Jose Hesper palm plantation represents the success of the only foreign plant hunting expedition undertaken by Sessions and proclaims her talent as a propagator. She was the first United States grower to collect the seeds of this palm and coax them into life. She personally brought into cultivation the original 325 San Jose Hesper palms planted in Balboa Park and is "the mother" of all that remain.

#### THE KATE O. SESSIONS ALOE AND AGAVE GARDEN, 1932

*The reason I have chosen [aloes and agaves] is that they, of all plants, require the least amount of care and water. Agaves are prickly, savage things and grow a long time before blooming. They die after blossoming, but they replace themselves by offshoots, so we do not lose them.*<sup>47</sup>

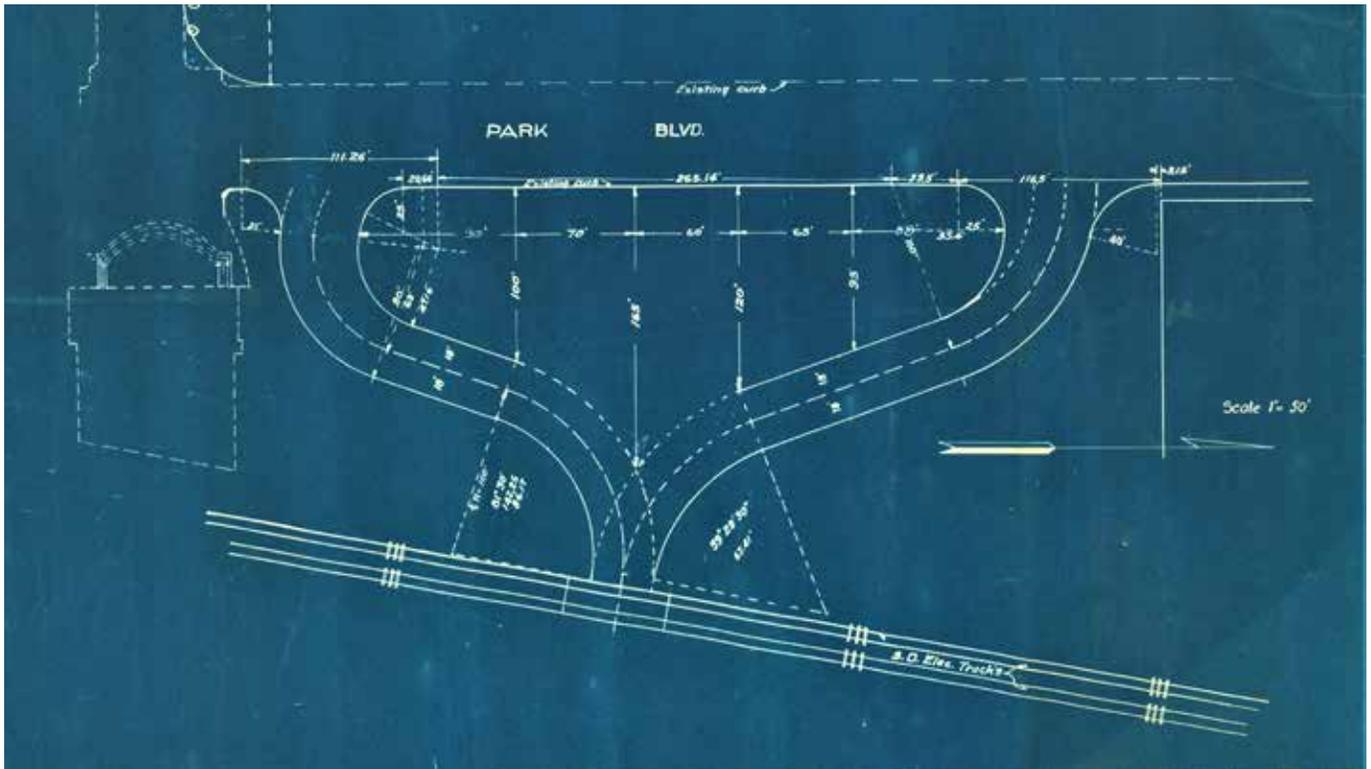
~ Kate O. Sessions

A Balboa Park aloe and agave garden was built as a tribute to Kate Sessions by the San Diego Floral Association and officially presented to the City of San Diego in 1935.

Opposite: The Hesper palm forest, 2021. Photo by the author.

Above, left: Balboa Park tree inventory map of the San Jose Hesper palm grove. Each colored dot represents a tree; dark purple indicates a San Jose Hesper palm. Two bowling greens are at bottom left. From the TreeTracker Inventory of Balboa Park.

Above, right: Kate Sessions at Alfred D. Robinson's Rosecroft lath house on Point Loma, San Diego. Seen here at age 62, Sessions had been in the nursery business for more than 30 years and was one of California's best-known horticulturists when photographed in 1919. Photograph by Marion Fairchild. Courtesy Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden Archive.



This garden was replaced with a parking lot in 1971 despite being the most botanically worthy specialty garden ever developed in Balboa Park and the only garden ever created with the combined expertise of Kate Sessions and the Huntington Garden's designer, William Hertrich.

In 1931 Sessions suffered a prolonged period of ill health. She finally appeared to be recovering, then took a turn for the worse that led to surgery and hospitalization.<sup>48</sup> Her many friends and admirers were alarmed. Sessions was 74 years of age and it was entirely possible that she was in her last illness. This towering figure of the community, this prodding voice of civic care and beautification, this fifty-year advocate for Balboa Park might soon die. Her legendary forcefulness and powerful voice could be forever stilled.

Had San Diego adequately recognized her contributions? Had Miss Sessions while alive received a fair share of the accolades that would be heaped upon her in death? These community reflections, kindled by the threat of her imminent loss, were directly tied to the creation of the Aloe and Agave Garden in Balboa Park, as well as the Cactus Garden that soon followed. These garden projects, long envisioned by Kate Sessions, were realized while she could participate in and savor them.

Creating new gardens in Balboa Park was not the first idea for honoring Sessions. During her early (and false) recovery, her

Floral Association friends began planning a community dinner to be held as soon as she was well. There would be a large attendance and Sessions would be lauded in multiple speeches. When Sessions learned of this plan, she quickly got out the word that she was not interested in a formal banquet but would be very pleased if the Floral Association helped her establish an aloe and agave garden in Balboa Park, thereby fulfilling one of her unrealized goals for community enhancement.<sup>49</sup>

*California Garden* reported on Sessions' health in May 1931 and advised: "It will be of interest to readers to know that a movement is under way to plant an agave and aloe garden in Balboa Park in her honor, this particular type of planting in the park being a long-cherished ambition of Miss Sessions."<sup>50</sup>

The Floral Association, then under the leadership of the indomitable Mary Alice Greer, energetically took up the project. First steps were to acquire permission and space to build a new garden on city land. The Floral Association found support in other San Diegans who agreed on the desirability of a Balboa Park succulent garden. In 1926 Walter S. Merrill, landscape architect and frequent contributor to *California Garden*, suggested exactly that, noting that succulents are, "the most interesting of all plants" and produce colorful and unusual blooms.<sup>51</sup> Kate Sessions praised the low maintenance and minimal

water requirements of aloes and agaves and stressed the peculiar suitability of San Diego for their cultivation.<sup>52</sup>

City and park officials approved the new garden and in 1931 assigned space within the park's Central Mesa, immediately east of today's Spanish Village Art Center. The location was north of the Yorick Theater building,<sup>53</sup> a relic of the 1915 exposition that no longer stands. The Aloe and Agave Garden is marked on few maps.<sup>54</sup> The clearest understanding of its size and location is derived from aerial photographs taken during the 1935-36 exposition. These photographs are the only guide to the layout of garden paths and planting beds as no formal design plan exists. While detailed lists of plants were kept, there is no description of the planting scheme.

The land allocation for the garden was generous. An undated blueprint<sup>55</sup> provides measurements of the garden and shows its location in relation to the Yorick Theater.<sup>56</sup> Park Boulevard (in its original route) formed the west boundary of the garden which was about 350 feet wide. Sitting on the lip of Florida Canyon, the plot extended down a gradual slope for 165 feet. The garden was framed by a road on each side. A broad triangular garden shape resulted as the two curved roads joined together at the lower tip of the garden near the elevated tracks of the San Diego Electric Railway. These twin road extensions connected Park Boulevard to a road leading to the floor of

Florida Canyon. Their construction delayed work on the Aloe and Agave Garden until summer, 1932.<sup>57</sup>

As preliminaries for the new garden were being ironed out, San Diegans were told about the plan in a Sunday newspaper feature story on August 23, 1931. Kate O. Sessions was identified as the inspiration for a new Balboa Park installation. The garden would contain “the most complete collection of [aloes and agaves]” on the Pacific coast. When the article appeared, Sessions was in Mercy Hospital recovering from surgery.<sup>58</sup> While convalescing, she sketched a design and plotted the layout of rock-lined pathways for the garden.<sup>59</sup> It was observed at the time that the promise of this new succulent garden seemed to boost her morale and contribute to her recovery.<sup>60</sup>

Road construction near the proposed garden delayed the project, but public interest was again stirred with a splashy news story in the *San Diego Union* of March 27, 1932. A large pictorial collage on the first page of the Home and Garden Section combined photographs of Sessions, her early florist shop, and her home and garden in the San Diego neighborhood of Pacific Beach. Sessions’ life story was told in depth. Her dream of a world-class aloe and agave garden for Balboa Park was described. Her return to good health was affirmed by Sessions’ pledge to “boss every bit of the planting” in the new garden.<sup>61</sup>

Sessions’ good friend Chauncy Jerabek (1890-1978) was the Floral Association lead on the garden project. He was also a Balboa Park employee. The extent of Sessions’ active involvement in the planting is unrecorded, but kind and diplomatic Jerabek was likely to have kept her as involved as her health allowed. Jerabek later chortled that “the people of San Diego will never know how much scheming Miss Sessions and I did” to complete the garden.<sup>62</sup>

The Floral Association solicited donations and organized two fundraisers in 1932 to support the project. Nationally published local garden writer, Eloise Roorbach,<sup>63</sup> wrote about an April garden party at the home of Mrs. Gertrude Evans in the Mission Hills neighborhood. Evans’ walled garden was considered a work of art. Guests were invited to enjoy the roses and wisteria, and to have a cup of tea after Kate Sessions delivered a talk. Donations “of paper or silver” for the new Balboa Park garden were to be discreetly deposited at the garden gate.<sup>64</sup> Invitations to the second event, an annual Floral Association card party, read: “All of us are proud of the growing aloe and agave garden next to the Yorick theatre, but naturally it is not being established there



without the expenditure of money.” Participants paid to join an afternoon of card games at the Floral Association’s Balboa Park headquarters. Rooms were decorated with seasonal floral displays and winners took home potted plants.<sup>65</sup> In 2020 dollars, the equivalent of about \$2,100 was raised over the year for the new garden.<sup>66</sup>

A few months later, in a letter to the editor of the *San Diego Union*, Kate Sessions appealed for a larger financial investment in Balboa Park horticulture. The horticultural variety of the park was unique, setting it apart from public parks across the United States and Europe, she observed. Additionally, the local climate invited park visits every day of the year. San Diego should capitalize on these advantages by enhancing park landscaping. Noting that thousands had been donated to build animal cages in

Opposite: An allocation of Balboa Park space for a new Aloe and Agave Garden included plans for an improved link between Park Boulevard and Florida Canyon. The two new curved roads resulted in a large triangular garden plot as shown on this 1932 blueprint. Courtesy Special Collections, San Diego Public Library.

Above: A 1936 aerial photograph of Balboa Park captures the triangular-shaped Kate O. Sessions Aloe and Agave Garden. Courtesy San Diego History Center Research Archives.



Above: The pathways of the large new Cactus Garden (at center left) stand out against the white sand dressing used in the beds. 1936 photograph of Palisades area of Balboa Park. Courtesy San Diego History Center Research Archives.

Opposite: San Diego's 1935 California Pacific International Exposition provided impetus for the new Cactus Garden planted on a canyonside south of the Cabrillo Bridge entrance to Balboa Park. Courtesy San Diego Floral Association.

the park, Sessions called for similar philanthropic augmentation of the park's budget for horticulture.<sup>67</sup>

Whether this letter generated donations to the Aloe and Agave Garden or the park is unknown, but in November 1932, Floral Association president Greer published a buoyant garden progress report. In *California Garden* she listed plant donations from San Diego and other parts of Southern California. Rare varieties had been supplied by the Huntington Gardens in San Marino, E. O. Orpet Nursery at Santa Barbara and B. L. Sloane, resident of Pasadena and president of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America. Kate Sessions donated "her entire collection of aloes and agaves in variety and many duplicates." Greer included a long desiderata list of varieties missing from the original planting. She concluded: "This garden in Balboa Park should in the next few years become internationally known, for this location is the very best obtainable in the United States where these plants will flourish in the open throughout the year."<sup>68</sup>

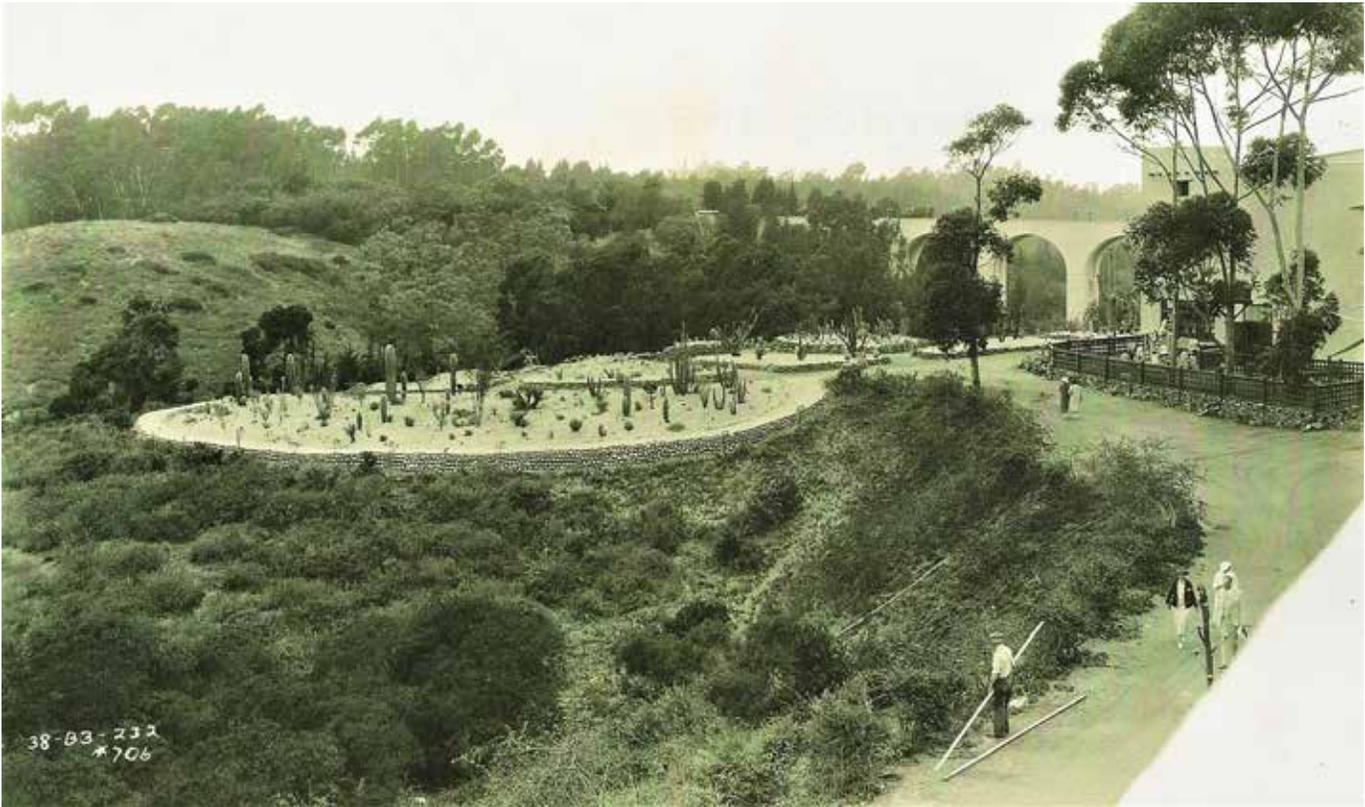
From the first, Sessions monitored the progress of the garden. She was distressed initially by how many plants were lost to hungry rabbits and was wholly unsentimental when the creatures were baited with poison.<sup>69</sup> These "succulent fed rabbits," as Jerabek called them, were eventually held at bay by special fencing around the beds

of plants they most favored.<sup>70</sup>

Sessions was at the garden, along with others from the Floral Association to welcome Los Angeles-based members of the Cactus and Succulent Society of America who visited in September 1933.<sup>71</sup> In early March 1934 Sessions wrote to her friend Alice Eastwood (1859-1953), curator of botany at San Francisco's Academy of Sciences, that the plants in the Aloe and Agave Garden were doing "extra well" and making an interesting show.<sup>72</sup> Local garden writer Ada Perry agreed. Her *San Diego Union* column promoted the garden and suggested that the 60 kinds of aloe, 40 kinds of agave and the 50 different *Mesembryanthemums* (ice plant), would serve to educate visitors about a large group of little-known plants. Perry's description of the garden is the best contemporary assessment by a seasoned garden writer.<sup>73</sup>

The botanical integrity of the garden was boosted by a continuing flow of donations and their careful documentation. Much of this is down to the work of Chauncy Jerabek, who made a point of seeking new plant varieties when traveling out of San Diego.<sup>74</sup> He saw that new plants were placed in the appropriate garden area, conscientiously identifying each and listing the botanical names in the ever-expanding garden inventory printed in *California Garden*.<sup>75</sup>

The fledgling garden benefited from



the decision to mount an exposition in Balboa Park in 1935. Preparations for the California Pacific International Exposition included a general burnishing of park landscapes. Even though the Aloe and Agave Garden fell outside the exposition grounds, exposition planners allocated government-funded workers and resources to both the Aloe and Agave Garden and the soon-to-follow Cactus Garden.

The Aloe and Agave Garden was extended beyond its original footprint with new planting in December 1934.<sup>76</sup> Jerabek was still involved, and park superintendent Morley assigned the park's general foreman, Frank Taylor, to coordinate the work. Fred Bode, who was later detailed to special landscape work for the 1935 exposition, joined the crew. Additional grading was required, and numerous loads of dirt, crushed hardpan and rocks were added to the site. Equipment and workers under the control of a depression-era program, the State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA), were used to carry out some of the heavy work. Water was piped in, drains installed, and benches were constructed. Hundreds of additional succulents and thousands of *Mesembryanthemum* cuttings were planted.<sup>77</sup>

Jerabek wrote about the provision of a city truck and workers for the task of collecting large donations of plants in the Los

Angeles area, including another infusion of hybrid aloes from William Hertrich at the Huntington Gardens.<sup>78</sup> On another occasion a city truck picked up donated plants and traveled to Foster, near Lakeside, to collect granite boulders used to hold a dedication plaque and to build decorative stone seating for the Aloe and Agave Garden.<sup>79</sup>

When the garden was deemed complete, it was time for the San Diego Floral Association to end its foray into park development. The Kate O. Sessions Aloe and Agave Garden was formally presented to the City of San Diego at a ceremony on March 23, 1935. A bronze plaque dedicating the garden to Sessions was unveiled. As the garden was already being "acclaimed by many scientists [as] one of the finest plantings of its kind," Floral Association president Greer reckoned the garden to be a fitting tribute to Sessions, the Floral Association's outstanding member.<sup>80</sup> A long-time friend and collaborator, begonia breeder Alfred D. Robinson, was unable to attend the ceremony, but his letter lauding Sessions as a civic leader was read. The remarks of San Diego businessman, philanthropist and park commissioner George W. Marston concluded with a charming simile. "Botanically speaking" he said, "I would class Miss Sessions as perennial, evergreen and everblooming."<sup>81</sup>

In her response, Sessions expressed

gratitude and called on San Diego to fully exploit its horticultural potential by planting more private and public gardens.<sup>82</sup> She made the case for an Alpine garden in San Diego's mountainous and rocky East County and proposed the planting of heather for year around bloom in Balboa Park. She suggested that a wide variety of flowering vines be planted in the park, ideally on trellises lining a long pathway.<sup>83</sup> None of these proposals were realized.

The California Pacific International Exposition of 1935 was financially successful, prompting an extension into 1936. Federal relief funds again paid recruits from the ranks of the unemployed to work in the Aloe and Agave Garden. The garden was again enlarged under Jerabek's supervision with more aloes and agaves and further planting of the canyon side with *Mesembryanthemums*. Jerabek related to a local garden writer some "laughable difficulties in teaching a score of [temporary workers] to distinguish one queer-looking plant from another." However, the plants quickly established themselves and were blooming and thriving in the poor soil of Balboa Park, a testimony to the adaptability of these succulents. The garden had become a hummingbird haven and was "fast earning the rating of one of the city's major attractions."<sup>84</sup> The increasing prevalence of automobiles in the park threatened some of

the extended plantings, a harbinger of the Aloe and Agave Garden's ignoble end, still a few decades into the future.<sup>85</sup>

The two-year exposition brought hundreds of additional visitors to the garden, including a nationally known horticultural scientist, Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University. He heaped praise on the garden.<sup>86</sup> Groups like the California Federation of Garden Clubs combined business with exposition visits at their June 1935 convention in San Diego. Many visitors took advantage of the special Floral Association Balboa Park garden tours offered during the exposition.<sup>87</sup> The Floral Association and Rose Society also opened their 1935-36 annual garden tours to exposition attendees, giving out-of-town visitors opportunities to see some of the grand private gardens of San Diego.<sup>88</sup> After the exposition, the Floral Association and the Museum of Natural History continued to feature the Aloe and Agave Garden in their guided Balboa Park garden tours.<sup>89</sup>

Press attention to the Aloe and Agave Garden dropped off once the exposition ended. But in 1938 a clump of *Agave attenuata* (Fox tail agave) shot spectacular blooms into the air. Kate Sessions explained that this was the first time in San Diego that an *Agave attenuata* had come into bloom. The plants, she said, were donated from her own home garden for the establishment of the Aloe and Agave Garden six years earlier.

The newspaper carried a photograph of the large agave plants with their extravagant bloom stalks.<sup>90</sup> Thereafter, the local press did not mention the Aloe and Agave garden for years, except in general lists of Balboa Park gardens.<sup>91</sup> Likewise, the garden disappeared from the pages of *California Garden* excepting occasional comments about the garden's increasingly poor condition.

Sessions realized early on that the garden needed more care than it was getting. She wrote in 1934 that Balboa Park horticulturist Chauncy Jerabek was assigned just one day a week in the garden and only occasionally had a helper. "Our park funds are very limited here," she commented to Alice Eastwood in San Francisco. "Roads get built as they keep a lot of men busy—but that don't make the park more beautiful or more interesting—I wish I were 20 years younger!"<sup>92</sup>

Kate Sessions died in March 1940. Almost exactly one year later a reproachful plea was made at a San Diego Floral Association meeting: "For goodness sakes why don't we do something about Miss Sessions' Aloe and Agave Garden? It's a perfect fright and no compliment to Miss Sessions." The condition of the "disgraceful weed patch" was blamed by park officials on a perpetual shortage of gardening staff. A Floral Association garden clean-up day was suggested.<sup>93</sup>

The garden, full of rare specimens and itself a rarity in the United States, was not

Below, left: Kate O. Sessions on a stone bench built in the Balboa Park Aloe and Agave Garden dedicated and named for her and on March 23, 1935. Courtesy San Diego History Center Research Archives.

Below, right: The San Diego Floral Association presented the Aloe and Agave Garden to the City of San Diego in March 1935. The garden was named for Sessions and dedicated to her. Courtesy San Diego Union.

Opposite: Kate O. Sessions posing beside a large agave in the Kate O. Sessions Aloe and Agave Garden of Balboa Park, 1938. Courtesy San Diego History Center Research Archives.



## ALOE AND AGAVE GARDEN DEDICATED TO MISS SESSIONS

The Kate Sessions Aloe and Agave garden in Balboa park was dedicated Saturday afternoon in a ceremony attended by many prominent San Diegans. Miss Sessions was a guest. Robert R. McLean, county horticultural commissioner, was master of ceremonies, and John Morley, park superintendent, accepted the garden on behalf of the city.

A stone seat built by F. W. Wylie opposite the marker of the garden was dedicated at the same time. The seat is an ornamental rockery type eight feet long. Two tons of stone and a ton of cement were used in its construction.

The garden was built by the floral association in honor of Miss Sessions and Mrs. Mary A. Greer, president of the group, thanked members for their donations that made the garden possible. George W. Marston, builder of Presidio park, pointed out that the planting of aloe and agave in honor of Miss Sessions was appropriate and could not be duplicated elsewhere.

In a short talk, Miss Sessions pleaded for other plantings for beautifying this locality, which, she asserted, is capable of growing more kinds of plants than any district in the United States.

yet ten years old and it was already being woefully neglected. Volunteers worked in the garden from time-to-time over the years, but intermittent interventions were inadequate to provide the required level of care.<sup>94</sup> The garden continued to deteriorate over the next decades. The fact of inadequate Balboa Park resources overcame considerations of the garden's botanical significance and potential value to the region, so well understood by Sessions.

A comprehensive new master plan for Balboa Park prepared by Harland Bartholomew and Associates was accepted by the City of San Diego in 1960. It called for the destruction of the "unmaintained Aloe and Agave Garden." According to the plan, the garden would be eliminated when proposed street and parking lot construction took place. Any plants in the garden worth keeping were to be relocated to the Cactus Garden in the Balboa Park Palisades area.<sup>95</sup> When the Aloe and Agave Garden was described as "unmaintained" and scheduled for removal, Balboa Park maintenance supervisors had little incentive to direct workers to the doomed plot.

Still, the neglected aloes and agaves put on a bit of a show. In 1966 a newspaper feature on Kate Sessions mentioned that the plants in her Balboa Park garden were blooming.<sup>96</sup> The next year the garden was described as extant, but struggling, in a *California Garden* remembrance of the

recently deceased William Hertrich, creator of the Huntington Gardens. Hertrich had helped establish Balboa Park's Aloe and Agave Garden. His professional friendship with Kate Sessions spanned thirty years and she called on his expertise as her succulent garden took shape in 1932. Alice Mary Greer, daughter of the former Floral Association president, wrote:

The years 1931 to 1935, when we of the Floral Association were first installing, then enlarging and finally dedicating the Kate Sessions Aloe Gardens—long since deteriorated; revived in part and now again struggling—those years found William Hertrich pitching right in with his characteristic quiet though rich enthusiasm and industry, helping us, giving freely of his superior knowledge. He guided in the landscape plans and actually contributed hundreds of our most valuable and rare specimens...<sup>97</sup>

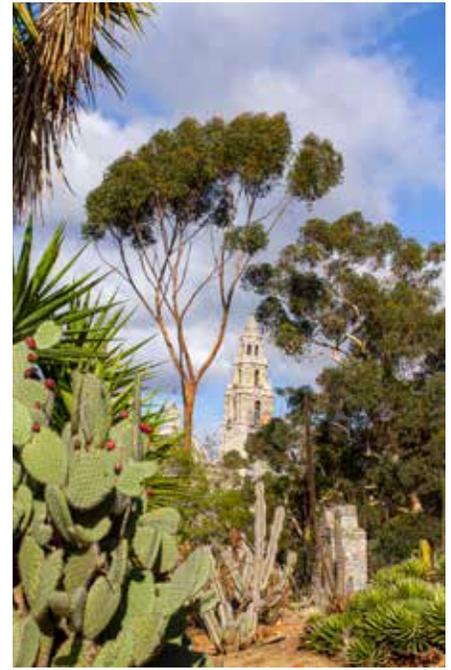
As some plants in the Aloe and Agave Garden stubbornly held to life, its surroundings underwent an enormous change. When federal funds were made available, a long-planned widening and realignment of Park Boulevard was accomplished in 1966.<sup>98</sup> The original route of Park Boulevard ran along the west side of the Aloe and Agave Garden. The realignment placed the new four-lane roadway and its generous median completely on the opposite (east)

side of the garden. This drastic change helps to explain years of confusion about the location of the Aloe and Agave Garden: was it on the west or east side of the park's main thoroughfare? Unless armed with a full understanding of Park Boulevard's relocation, this was unanswerable.

Making Park Boulevard into a multi-lane street required alterations of the natural topography along an entire swath of Balboa Park's Central Mesa. Significant cuts were made into the sloping terrain and tons of earth were used as fill to provide a flat road surface for Park Boulevard and to swing the road eastward to enlarge the San Diego Zoo parking lot. The transformed boulevard provided a quick route northward from downtown San Diego to and through Balboa Park, but it overtly severed the natural connection of Balboa Park's Central and East Mesa areas. Even greater concessions to the growing power of the automobile were ahead, bringing changes that finished off the ailing Aloe and Agave Garden.

In April 1970 San Diego superintendent of parks Lloyd Lowrey identified the biggest problem facing Balboa Park: the automobile. He urged agreement on a guiding principle: "that the park is for people, not for cars." From that understanding, he proposed to eliminate automobiles from inside the park and establish a reasonable number of parking places for





visitors. Lowrey argued for the closure of the Cabrillo Bridge to automobile traffic (a continuing debate) and announced plans for new parking lots.<sup>99</sup>

One of the largest of the five new parking lots designed for Balboa Park was to flank the Spanish Village Art Center.<sup>100</sup> Although it was not stated in plain language, this planned parking lot would completely subsume the land upon which the Kate O. Sessions Aloe and Agave Garden stood, overlaying it with a coating of asphalt.

Readers were undoubtedly confused by a separate news article appearing soon after the parking lots were announced. The story promised new life for the Aloe and Agave Garden. It said that the Cactus Garden would be phased out and its plants combined with the Aloe and Agave Garden. This was exactly the opposite of the Bartholomew master plan recommendation and conflicted with the contemporaneous report of a new Spanish Village parking lot that was about to overlay the Aloe and Agave Garden.<sup>101</sup> The story appears to be the product of journalistic confusion, one of many mix-ups of the two Balboa Park succulent gardens. Alternatively, this may have been a short-lived and unrealized idea for merging the two gardens at an entirely new location within the park.

With the imminent destruction of the Aloe and Agave Garden in the news, the San Diego Floral Association lamented the unrealized potential of the garden and hoped for a last-minute reprieve in a 1971 *California Garden* editorial:

The Aloe and Agave Garden in Balboa Park, planned and executed as a tribute to Kate Sessions, was acclaimed a splendid scientific collection [in 1935 when] the planted area was presented to the city. Now it is no longer a credit to the name it bears, though a larger exhibit in the Huntington Gardens, from which many valuable contributions were received, continues to be a mecca for tourists and students. It is hoped that the local garden can be saved before it is too late.<sup>102</sup>

The Kate O. Sessions Aloe and Agave Garden was not saved. Perhaps some plants were relocated to the Cactus Garden; perhaps others were moved to the Balboa Park Nursery. Perhaps all the plants were cleared by a bulldozer as the land was leveled for paving. The only certainty is that the Aloe and Agave Garden was assigned to history in 1971.<sup>103</sup> Its survival for forty years is most attributable to the plant material itself. Kate Sessions always said that San Diego is an ideal home for aloes and agaves. The survival of a largely neglected Balboa Park collection of those plants for four decades proves her point.

Five years after the Aloe and Agave Garden was paved over, the Balboa Park Committee approved the use of two and one-half acres of park land for a Desert Garden designed by Roger DeWeese.<sup>104</sup> In 1976 after extensive earth contouring, 1,300 plants and trees were installed on a site near the former Aloe and Agave Garden. The Desert Garden was built with a mission “to maintain a living collection of arid-land

plants of the world in a public display garden for conservation, historic preservation, wildlife sanctuary, public appreciation and education.”<sup>105</sup>

As the new garden was coming into being, a perplexing story headlined “Desert Garden Started After 50-year Wait,” appeared in San Diego’s *Evening Tribune*. Desert plants, it stated, had previously been locked out of Balboa Park. The reporter and the source of this story seemed completely oblivious that two Balboa Park gardens built in the 1930s—the Aloe and Agave Garden and the Cactus Garden—were both populated with many desert plants. There had been no “lock out” of desert plants from Balboa Park, but the article inexplicably went on to state:

Cactus, aloe, agave and other succulents—those seemingly indestructible plants that thrive in the most arid and least hospitable of areas—have been seeking a home in Balboa Park for 50 years. Now, after years of disappointment and false starts, work is under way to develop a 2.5-acre... Desert Garden. The unusual garden [is] a longtime goal of the San Diego Cactus and Succulent Society.<sup>106</sup>

This misinformed newspaper story typifies ongoing ignorance and confusion about the succulent gardens that have been created for Balboa Park: the Aloe and Agave Garden, the Cactus Garden and the Desert Garden. Kate Sessions has no direct connection with the Desert Garden, but in articles about the park, in some official



This spread: Scenes of the Balboa Park Cactus Garden. Photographs by Rachel Cobb

park documents and signs,<sup>107</sup> and in the minds of many, the gardens that Sessions did help to create have been repeatedly confused with each other and with the newer Desert Garden.

### THE CACTUS GARDEN, 1935

*Why will not some nature-loving student select the cactus for her or his life work and begin at once to make San Diego the world's cactus center... Why not give that pugnacious plant a chance for its life now in sunny Southern California.*<sup>108</sup>  
~ Kate O. Sessions

Kate Sessions addressed a large crowd at an open meeting of the San Diego Chamber of Commerce on August 31, 1899.<sup>109</sup> Her topic was the future of the unimproved City Park, later known as Balboa Park. At age forty-two, she was in her second decade as a local florist and nursery owner and had for seven years operated her nursery on one corner of the sprawling lands set aside by San Diego as a public park in 1868.

The paper she presented was called “unusually excellent” in news reports. The dusty chaparral-covered acres of the park could be made beautiful, she said, but considering the views from the park and the region’s unique climate, San Diego’s park should be like no other. Palms, flowering plants, and bamboo to rival any in Japan had already been shown to thrive in the park. In addition to these and other species, she suggested that the park be planted with a grouping of “cacti from the deserts of California, Arizona and Mexico that will

flourish and bloom and be of more interest to all travelers than almost any other order of plants.”<sup>110</sup>

A few years later, the botanical appeal of cactus was reinforced by Mary B. Coulston, writing for the Park Improvement Committee in 1902. She asserted that San Diego could have the “most famous cactus collection in the world” simply by digging up the abundant natural species found on City Park land and massing them into an organized garden.<sup>111</sup> In 1904 Sessions’ interest and knowledge were deepened when she designed a large cactus garden in Coronado. This commission from the Del Coronado Hotel produced what she called the “most original and attractive” spot on the beach.<sup>112</sup>

Much improvement and beautification came to Balboa Park over the next decades, but not a cactus garden. Having never given up on the idea, Sessions continued to advocate for these spiny plants.<sup>113</sup> In 1918 she appealed for a “nature-loving student” to take up the study of cactus as a life work and “make San Diego the world’s cactus center,” thereby replacing Germany’s dominance in this botanical field.<sup>114</sup> Sessions published an edited version of this *California Garden* article in the nationally distributed *The Florists’ Review*.<sup>115</sup>

A lengthy, unsigned article appeared in *California Garden* in 1923, likely written and illustrated with photographs by the founding editor of the magazine, Alfred D. Robinson. In it, he referenced the excellent cactus garden in the city of Riverside while maintaining that Balboa Park could have the best cactus garden in California “because it

has both the room and the climate.” Park commissioners were urged to at least make a beginning on a cactus garden.<sup>116</sup>

In 1926 Sessions wrote that San Diego could have an open-air cactus garden that “outrivaled” any in the world.<sup>117</sup> and “the sooner it is started the sooner we will be able to enjoy it and it will help to advertise our park and our city. Will it not be possible to organize a Cactus Club that will encourage and begin such a project?”<sup>118</sup> Her importuning continued, but without success. When Sessions was seventy-seven years of age, plans for a 1935 exposition in Balboa Park were announced. Seizing this opportunity, she lobbied the California Pacific International Exposition Company to add a cactus garden to their list of planned Balboa Park enhancements. Her “earnest efforts” were rewarded.<sup>119</sup> Thirty-six years after proposing this special garden, Sessions finally saw a large collection of cacti added to the attractions of “her” park. She announced the new cactus garden at the November 1934 San Diego Floral Association meeting<sup>120</sup> and appealed for donations in *California Garden*:

The permanent cactus display that is to be established ... will be the first general display in the open ground throughout the year in the United States of America, or even the world. This display will keep on growing and will be well cared for in Balboa Park. Everyone should enjoy making at least one contribution of at least three of one species to help the cause. . . . Due credit will be given every donor and a list of

species planted will be published.”<sup>121</sup>

Sessions’ claim of uniqueness for the planned garden was exaggerated. There were existing public cactus gardens in Southern California that she had visited. The Desert Garden at the Huntington Estate opened to the public in 1928. The city of Riverside maintained a two-acre cactus garden in its central Albert White Memorial Park. That garden was well established by 1903 and was of sufficient importance to be discussed in a 1908 publication of the Smithsonian Institution.<sup>122</sup> Sessions wrote about both the Huntington and Riverside cactus gardens in 1920. While acknowledging that Riverside’s display was probably the best in any California park, she contended that San Diego could create “an even finer collection” of cacti.<sup>123</sup>

Exposition designers included the weaving paths of a new Cactus Garden in plans for the Palisades area of Balboa Park, near the new buildings and plazas being built for the 1935 exposition. The garden was sited on a sloping Cabrillo Canyon hillside west of the New Mexico building, which was constructed for the 1915 exposition and renovated as the Palace of Education in 1935 (today it is the Balboa Park Club).

Chauncy Jerabek, Balboa Park employee and long-time friend of Kate Sessions, oversaw the ground preparation and planting of the Cactus Garden. The site was in its natural state and first had to be cleared of native vegetation. Pathways and beds were defined. A newspaper article described the garden plan: “...some 23 hillocks, no two alike, are being graded in an area west of the Palace of Education. An eight-foot drive lined with hardpan rock will circle the cacti beds. The walks between are six feet wide.” Once planted, the beds were dressed with white sand.

The first specimens for the new Cactus Garden were donated by San Diegans Fred Bode, Jr. and Mrs. Bertha Thomas.<sup>124</sup> Kate Sessions gave her entire collection of cacti to the garden, according to Jerabek, and she was demonstrably successful in soliciting donations from individuals and commercial nurseries. The first donations from out of state—63 different species of cactus—came from the proprietors of the Rio Grande Valley Cactus Garden in the south Texas town of Edinburg. Other donations came from Cactus Acres in El Paso and from an Oklahoma nursery. The Border Cactus Nursery of Nogales, Arizona, raised money to fund a collecting trip in the desert. The nursery sent “an excellent collection” of their finds to San Diego. The Federated Garden Clubs of Arizona,

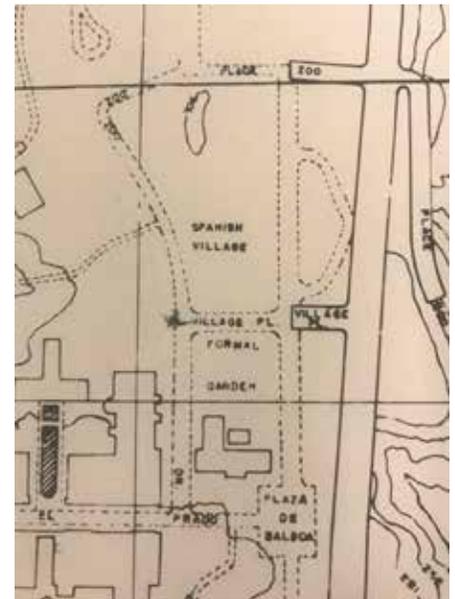
under the direction of the University of Arizona at Tucson, shipped an astonishing fifteen tons of cactus and desert plant material to San Diego. This included twenty saguaros (*Carnegiea gigantea*) ranging in size from one to twelve feet in height and many smaller cacti. A university employee traveled to San Diego to help unload and correctly plant everything in the Arizona shipment.<sup>125</sup>

Three inside beds of the cactus garden were filled with donations sent by William Hertrich, director of the Huntington Gardens. Carl F. Brassfield of Los Angeles donated a collection of *Opuntia* that had won a first prize at a Pasadena cactus show. Other gifts came from the Desert Nursery of Palm Springs and donors in Santa Barbara and Hawthorne. Local native species were displayed in a bed on the south side.<sup>126</sup> Jerabek created a desert dry wash in the northwest corner of the garden to mimic a natural feature found in east San Diego County.<sup>127</sup>

Donations continued to arrive through the fall of 1935. Local San Diego cactus grower Neff Bakkers<sup>128</sup> donated all the cactus plants from a display she had mounted in the downtown Marston’s Department Store. After some arm twisting by Sessions, workers were allowed to take a city truck to Los Angeles to retrieve a large haul of plants from the Cactus Exchange of Southern California. All species in the donation were named and ready to go into the garden.<sup>129</sup> Keeping her campaign for donations in the public eye, Kate Sessions captured a place in the 1935 Christmas Eve edition of the *San Diego Union*. She is pictured with a rare paper spine cactus (*Opuntia papyracantha*) that she presented as a gift to Balboa Park.<sup>130</sup>

Although planting continued for months after the exposition’s opening day, May 29, 1935,<sup>131</sup> the Cactus Garden offered a good show from the first. According to Jerabek, the earliest plantings thrived, even those from out of state. The beds had been constructed with special attention to good drainage to help the new plants cope with Balboa Park’s adobe soil.<sup>132</sup> A special “Exposition Edition” of the *San Diego Union* reported that 550 cacti were thriving with expert care in the new Cactus Garden.<sup>133</sup> The official exposition guidebooks for 1935 and 1936 increased that number to one thousand plants.<sup>134</sup>

San Diegan Richard Requa served as director of architecture for the California Pacific International Exposition. While quite interested in gardens—particularly the landscape style of Moorish Spain—Requa appears to have been cool to the



idea of a Cactus Garden. He seemingly left Sessions, Jerabek and the San Diego Floral Association to get on with the garden’s creation. However, when Requa published a book about the exposition in 1937, it was clear that the unfamiliar growing habits of some cactus plants had sparked his imagination. In a chapter on exposition landscaping, Requa described the new gardens he created in Balboa Park and the wide array of plants on view at the exposition. His darkly descriptive comments on the Cactus Garden stand out:

One genus alone occupied a segregated district, the cacti. These reptiles of the plant world were spread out in grotesque and in true desert abundance on a sun-baked hillside south of the Palace of Education. Some tall, straight and defiant, others prostrate, writhing and twisting like myriads of serpents in suspended animation under the spell of a snake charmer.<sup>135</sup>

With characteristic bluntness and a complete dismissal of the Moorish-inspired gardens that Requa had lovingly created for the exposition, Sessions stated in 1936 that the Cactus Garden was “the only real horticultural contribution made by the exposition” to Balboa Park.<sup>136</sup> A similar assessment had been published in the newspaper at the end of the exposition’s first year. The “extensive cactus garden” was named as one of the exposition’s three “most interesting permanent gifts to park landscaping.” The others were the rustic bridge across Palm Canyon and the pool and rock garden at the House of Pacific Relations, neither of which survive.<sup>137</sup>

After the 1935-36 exposition little was



Opposite: The Balboa Park Aloe and Agave Garden is indicated by the dotted triangular shape on this map, created after the 1966 relocation of Park Boulevard.

Left: Kate O. Sessions, 1930s.

written in *California Garden* or the local newspapers about the Balboa Park Cactus Garden. In 1938 a photograph of a tall blooming cactus plant in Balboa Park illustrated a story about the water retention of desert cactus,<sup>138</sup> but the garden itself was not part of the story. Later that year a news commentary suggested that winter tourists flocked to view cactus in Balboa Park to capture the “glamour of the desert” without having to make a long drive to the real thing. During 1938, weekly classes of more than 30 art students worked in the Cactus Garden, inspired by the unusual plants. The garden’s largest saguaro cactus, said to be 150 years old, was a favorite of both tourists and artists.<sup>139</sup>

The condition of Balboa Park was systematically examined when the exposition ended in 1936. San Diego’s city manager wanted advice on a post-exposition “rehabilitation of the park.” An appointed advisory committee produced an eight-page list of needed repairs and improvements. The Cactus Garden got a brief mention. The plants were said to be “attractive” but the overall garden presentation was “a sore spot on the landscape.” The report took exception to the top dressing used in the Cactus Garden beds, calling for a replacement of the “white sand which too flagrantly strikes the eye from a distance.” The addition of

brown topsoil and more greenery was recommended.<sup>140</sup>

Twenty years later another San Diego citizens’ group, the Balboa Park Study Committee, found no redeeming merit whatsoever in the Cactus Garden. The study group report of 1957 dismissed the Cactus Garden as “an exposition expediting” of so little contemporary interest that maintenance was not warranted.<sup>141</sup> Kate Sessions’ deep involvement with the Cactus Garden was either unknown to this citizens group or was not of consequence in their evaluation.

The comprehensive new master plan for Balboa Park produced by Bartholomew and Associates in 1960 called for the abandonment of the Aloe and Agave Garden but suggested that the Cactus Garden be rehabilitated and enclosed by a low wall or hedge to discourage vandalism. The plan called for removal of the building nearest the Cactus Garden, that is, the Balboa Park Club (in 1915 the New Mexico Building; in 1935 the Palace of Education). After razing the building, the newly open area east of the Cactus Garden would then become a picnic area complete with lawns and shade trees.<sup>142</sup>

The Bartholomew recommendations in the master plan had no perceptible effect on the Cactus Garden. No wall or hedge

was built around the Cactus Garden; the Balboa Park Club was not demolished. No discoverable records report the removal of aloe and agave plants to the Cactus Garden, although Balboa Park gardeners certainly could have made such a transfer.

The Cactus Garden became another casualty of inadequate Balboa Park funding. The somewhat hidden location of the garden was an invitation to vandalism and official neglect. Its best specimens were stolen or died. Yet, in 1974, the garden was mentioned favorably as part of an informal Balboa Park walking tour. The guide described a pleasant walk through the garden with its “huge and stately giant cacti.”<sup>143</sup> The trained eye of garden writer Betty Newton saw a grimmer reality a decade later, writing in 1985 that the Cactus Garden “stands neglected.”<sup>144</sup>

In the 1990s the Cactus Garden received some attention when the nearby Balboa Park Club underwent an extensive renovation that followed Secretary of the Interior Standards for historic structures.<sup>145</sup> By 1998 Cactus Garden plantings had been expanded to include a mixture of South African succulents, San Diego and Mexican native plants and some protea. Despite the expanded plant palette, the Cactus Garden remained sufficiently neglected and unkept to be classified by local landscape historian



Above: The Kate O. Sessions statue at the Laurel Street entrance to Balboa Park. Photograph by Rachel Cobb.

Opposite: Cactus Garden photograph by Rachel Cobb.

Carol Greentree as a “ghost garden.” This was her term for “untended relics of once-fine plantings.” She compared these gardens to ghost towns, that is, places abandoned and left to their own fate. Greentree saw both romance and useful lessons in ghost gardens. Neglected old landscapes, she wrote, “seem somehow shadowed in mystery” even as they snooze in the bright California sunshine. But ghost gardens like the Balboa Park Cactus Garden, are an “accidental proving-ground of sustainable landscaping.” The “survivor plants” in ghost gardens are the species that should get more use in California landscapes.<sup>146</sup>

Hardy survivor plants and a modicum of care brought the 1935 Cactus Garden into the new millennium, but it remained

a garden with many unmet needs. An intervention beginning in 2019 and led by the Balboa Park Conservancy has brought substantial improvements to the garden’s accessibility and ornamental appeal. A generous private donation and partnerships with other organizations cleaned up the garden, refurbished wide garden paths, rebuilt an access trail, addressed irrigation and drainage issues and added new plants. In 2021 the garden was renamed to honor Sessions. The “Kate O. Sessions Cactus Garden” is to receive new directional and interpretive signage, enhancements that will increase its visibility and future prospects.

#### AFTERWORD: LESSONS AND INSPIRATION FROM THE KATE SESSIONS’ GARDENS OF BALBOA PARK

At the formation of the California Garden and Landscape History Society (CGLHS), David C. Streatfield explained that gardens are an important part of California’s heritage because they are an expression of cultural attitudes about the California landscape.<sup>147</sup>

As Southern California slowly comes to a reckoning with its natural climate—a true cultural shift—its gardens are changing their look, plant palettes and water requirements. With this change, a subtle aspect of Kate Sessions’ Balboa Park succulent gardens comes into focus. When, in the 1930s Sessions brought both an aloe and agave garden and a cactus garden into Balboa Park, few people shared her prophetic understanding of the future of Southern California landscaping. But Kate Sessions knew then, as we increasingly understand today, the limits of water-thirsty plantings in her region. She called agave plants “savage” and cacti “pugnacious,” but she had a life-long fascination with these unusual plants. She wanted more people to appreciate their strange beauty and long-term sustainability in Southern California. What better way to spread the word than by creating Balboa Park gardens that multitudes of visitors would see?

Sessions is known as a great horticulturist in part because of her early understanding of the Southern California climate. But her Balboa Park succulent gardens were not widely perceived as demonstration gardens. Whether that value-added educational element would have made a difference in the fate of the gardens is questionable. Recognition as aesthetic enhancements and important botanical collections was not enough to win them adequate care and maintenance.

In theory, the communal value of these gardens should have been enlarged by their

association with Sessions, a revered figure in San Diego and beyond, but the connection seemingly wore away with passing decades. This brings us back to Streatfield's inaugural address to CGLHS. Gardens are fragile, he warned, and if they are to be preserved, public officials need to be made aware of their value. If apt, the garden's association with a historic figure or event must be elucidated.<sup>148</sup>

And here we arrive at the crux of the matter: the Kate Sessions succulent gardens and her San Jose Hesper palm grove in Balboa Park have not been adequately chronicled. When the Kate O. Sessions Aloe and Agave garden came under threat in the 1960s a few thin voices championed preservation of the garden, but its second and third generation of caretakers were people far distanced from the garden's creation. Tumultuous years of economic depression, war and dramatic postwar changes had all come to San Diego between the garden's founding in 1932 and its destruction in 1971. When parking space became a priority, the Aloe and Agave Garden's lost story and deteriorated state made it easy to consider it disposably "old" rather than importantly "historic."

A better outcome is possible for the two remaining Balboa Park gardens of Kate Sessions, the Cactus Garden and San Jose Hesper palm plantation.

As the Cactus Garden received an overdue refurbishment in recent years, a new appreciation for Kate Sessions as the inspiration and creative spur behind the garden emerged. The Balboa Park Conservancy organized a presentation on the garden's history and shepherded a renaming proposal through a multi-stage approval process. By March 2021, the San Diego City Historic Resources Board, the Balboa Park Committee and the City of San Diego Parks and Recreation Board had unanimously<sup>149</sup> agreed to rename the garden to honor Sessions. The Conservancy will create signage for the "Kate O. Sessions Cactus Garden," a name that reclaims and permanently proclaims the historic connection between Sessions and the garden. Interpretive signage will future embed the story of the garden into public memory.

While the connection between Sessions and the Cactus Garden was not completely lost to history, her connection to the San Jose Hesper palm plantation is a blank slate. Arguably, there are fewer than ten people who know that the palms in this grove are a product of a Sessions' plant hunting expedition, that she introduced the species to cultivation, that the grove honors two famous botanists, that the palms were



planted as Balboa Park was landscaped for the 1915 Panama-California Exposition, and that this palm grove is unique in the world. As things stand now, this historic palm grove could be destroyed without any sense of what is being lost. Ironically, the palms are growing a short distance from the Kate Sessions statue at the Laurel Street entrance to Balboa Park, but no connection is currently made between "the Mother of Balboa Park" and the San Jose Hesper palms.

This article is a first step in recording a history and context for the San Jose Hesper palm grove. The Balboa Park Conservancy will be approached with a request that an identity be assigned to the garden, that it be added to park maps and that locational and interpretive signage be created. The

"Sessions-Brandegge San Jose Hesper Palm Grove" has a captivating story to tell. Its background tale of people and adventure could be the long-term salvation of this unique Balboa Park feature.

The fates of the three Balboa Park gardens of Kate Sessions—destruction, neglect followed by belated salvation and dangerous anonymity—illustrate the potential fate of any public garden that is not separately funded or well-documented. The founders of CGLHS defined one part of the organization's mission as "promoting wider knowledge" to help preserve California's historic gardens and landscapes. Wider knowledge will not save every garden, but a robust garden story that places the garden within its community's history is critical to tipping the scales.

# Endnotes

1 Victoria Padilla, *Southern California Gardens*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961, 173, 167.

2 The area improved by the Ladies Annex was along Sixth Avenue between Juniper and Palm Streets. "Ladies Annex Meeting," *San Diego Union*, October 8, 1889, 7.

3 "Despoiling the Park Tract," *San Diego Union*, June 27, 1891, 5.

4 The original request from Sessions was in the form of a petition to the city council. Petition of Miss K. O. Sessions Plans for Park Improvement, January 26, 1892, Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego, [https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/3\\_ppetition\\_of\\_miss\\_kate\\_o\\_sessions\\_for\\_city\\_park\\_improvement.pdf](https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/3_ppetition_of_miss_kate_o_sessions_for_city_park_improvement.pdf).

City Council approval of the lease, on the recommendation of the committee on streets, highways and parks was reported in the newspaper. "City Council," *San Diego Union*, January 27, 1892, 5.

5 City of San Diego Ordinance No. 153, adopted on February 9, 1892, granted Kate Sessions the right to use and occupy certain lands of the City Park (just over 32 acres, legally described in metes and bounds), for the purpose of establishing an experimental nursery and garden and for the development and cultivation of City Park for a period not to exceed ten years, with water privileges as hereinafter mentioned. Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego, [https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/5\\_ordinance\\_no\\_153\\_granting\\_permission\\_to\\_k\\_o\\_sessions\\_the\\_right\\_to\\_use\\_certain\\_lands\\_in\\_city\\_park.pdf](https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/5_ordinance_no_153_granting_permission_to_k_o_sessions_the_right_to_use_certain_lands_in_city_park.pdf)

6 Elizabeth C. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*. San Diego: San Diego Historical Society, 1976, 51.

7 City of San Diego, Board of Delegates Minutes, June 6, 1892, 447. Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego.

8 City of San Diego, Board of Aldermen Minutes, October 11, 1892, 206. Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego.

9 The Sessions nursery made a special show of chrysanthemums each autumn. Her first display in Balboa Park brought out about 200 visitors. "A Beautiful Display," *San Diego Union*, Oct. 29, 1892, 5.

10 Sessions' request for a lease extension was referred to the Street Committee. City of San Diego, Board of Delegates Minutes, February 17, 1902, 222. Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego. A week later, the Board of Aldermen adopted the Street Committee recommendation that Sessions' lease be extended for an additional five years. City of San Diego, Board of Aldermen Minutes, February 24, 1902, 222. Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego.

11 The work of Samuel Parsons, Jr. and his San Diego City Park design are described in Gregory Montes, "San Diego's City Park 1902-1910 From Parsons to Balboa," *Journal of San Diego History* 25:1 (Winter 1979), 1-6.

12 Sessions helped to identify Parsons and other leading landscape architects as possible planners of City Park while serving on the Park Plans Subcommittee of the Park Improvement Committee created by the San Diego Chamber of Commerce to forge ahead on the development of San Diego's languishing City Park. The committee was established in 1902. Replies from landscape architects and park planners contacted by Sessions and others on the Park Plans Subcommittee are in "Responses from Planners," George W. Marston Papers, File 16, San Diego History Center Archives.

13 MacPhail: Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist, 70. After protracted negotiations, the City of San Diego purchased the water pipes she had installed in the park and Sessions officially surrendered her lease. This is documented in a letter from the Board of Public Works Secretary "F. H. Dixon to the City Council," September 22, 1904. Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego.

14 Coulston and her work on behalf of San Diego's City Park are documented in Nancy Carol Carter, "Mary B. Coulston: Unsung Planner of Balboa Park," *Journal of San Diego History* 58:3 (2012), 177-202.

15 "Children's Fete on Arbor Day," *San Diego Union*, March 9, 1904, 5; "Observance of Arbor Day," *San Diego Union*, March 18, 1904, 3.

16 Nancy Carol Carter, "John G. Morley," *California Garden* 102:3 (May-June 2011), 16.

17 John Blocker, "Kate Sessions' Cactus and Succulent Gardens in Balboa Park: A Tale of Three Gardens," *California Garden* 105:5 (September/October 2014), 21.

18 Kate O. Sessions, "The Palm—Erythea Brandegeeii." *California Garden* 11:11 (May 1920), 13.

19 The Rare Palm Seeds website (<https://www.rarepalmseeds.com/abraea-brandegeeii>, accessed July 15, 2020) describes the San Jose Hesper palm. Its natural habitats are the mountains and canyons of San José del Cabo on Mexico's Baja peninsula. It will reach 40 to 60 feet in height and is the tallest of the Braheas. It has green-gray fan-shaped fronds and a slender trunk. It is frost tolerant, drought tolerant and a clean tree. Despite its attributes, the San Jose Hesper palm is not widely cultivated. Seeds of the palm are available on a limited basis. Another palm growing website (<http://www.maderapalms.com/abraea-brandegeeii.aspx>, accessed August 4, 2020) suggests that the San Jose Hesper palm is "somewhat rare" due to general lack of its availability in the nursery trade,

although some consider the palm to be vastly underappreciated and underutilized.

20 Purpus was the son of Germany's royal forester and was interested in plants from an early age. He was formally educated as a pharmacist, but almost immediately began a long career as a botanical collector in the Americas, working from Canada to Mexico. Information on his life and work is on the website of the Jepson Herbarium at the University of California, Berkeley (<https://ucjeps.berkeley.edu/Purpus/>).

21 Biographical information about the Brandegees and their work with Carl A. Purpus is in Nancy Carol Carter, "The Brandegees: Leading Botanists in San Diego." *Journal of San Diego History* 55:4 (Fall 2009), 191-216. Information on the botanical explorations and collections of the Brandegees is in Joseph Ewan, "Bibliographical Miscellany—IV. A Bibliogeographical Guide to the Brandegees Botanical Collections," *American Midland Naturalist* 27:3 (May 1942), 772-789.

22 C. A. Purpus, "Erythea brandegeei," *Gartenflora* 52:13, figs. 1, 2 (1903). Purpus may have relied on T. S. and Katharine Brandegees for assistance in preparing the plant description as they were experienced in describing and publishing new species. According to "Purpus the Collector," a profile of Carl Albert Purpus written by botanists at the Technical University Darmstadt, this is the only plant species described by Purpus for the scientific record. "Purpus der Sammler," [https://www.bio.tu-darmstadt.de/botanischergarten/geschichte\\_bg/carlabertpurpus18511941\\_](https://www.bio.tu-darmstadt.de/botanischergarten/geschichte_bg/carlabertpurpus18511941_), accessed August 4, 2020.

23 Sessions, "The Palm—Erythea Brandegeeii."

24 Kate O. Sessions, "Yellow Morning Glory in Lower California," *California Garden* 24: 9 (March 1935), 10.

25 Kate O. Sessions, "Notes on Kentias and Other Palms," *California Garden* 18:4 (October 1926), 3.

26 The dating error was not exposed for many years and was compounded by inclusion in two basic sources. Sessions biographer, in her generally authoritative work, relied on Sessions' account and incorrectly dated the Sessions-Brandegees Baja plant hunting expedition to 1900. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, 67-68. Liberty Hyde Bailey, regarded as an authoritative horticulturist, did the same. L. H. Bailey, "Erythea Brandegeeii," *Gentes Herbarum* 4 (September 1934-September 1941), 101-103. Victoria Padilla dated the trip to 1903 in *Southern California Gardens*, 169.

27 K. O. Sessions to E. W. Scripps, April 16, 1902. E. W. Scripps Papers, Ms. Collection 117, Series 1, Subseries 1.1, Box 19, Folder 5, Mahn Center for Archives and Special Collections, Ohio University Libraries, Athens, Ohio. Scripps (1854-1926) was a wealthy newspaper tycoon who had followed his older half-sister, Ellen Browning Scripps, to San Diego and was engaged in horticultural experimentation on his Miramar Ranch. Both siblings financially supported scientific work. Each was acquainted with Kate Sessions and patronized her nursery business.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Reid Venable Moran (1916 - 2010) was curator of botany at the San Diego Natural History Museum from 1957 to 1982. His article, "The Mexican Itineraries of T. S. Brandegees," *Madroño* 11:6 (May 9, 1952), 258, established 1902 as the correct date of the Sessions-Brandegees Baja plant expedition. His findings preceded the publication of Elizabeth MacPhail's biography of Sessions by more than almost two decades, but Moran's work in *Madroño*, the journal of the California Botanical Society, escaped MacPhail's notice.

30 "New Park Buttons Represent Subscription," *San Diego Union*, October 16, 1902, 4.

31 James Waldron Gillespie (1895-1954) was the wealthy heir to a New York real estate fortune. He spent lavishly on his ten-acre Montecito estate. El Fureidis, starting a botanical garden before the house was constructed. "Gillespie, James Waldron. House, Montecito. 1905-1906," Pacific Coast Architecture Database, <http://pcad.lib.washington.edu/building/3034/>, accessed August 5, 2020.

32 Sessions sold many plants to the Huntington Estate over the years, including Brahea brandegeei palms. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, 78-79.

33 Kate O. Sessions, "Interesting Palms." *California Garden* 30:2 (October 1938), 2.

34 Sessions, "The Palm—Erythea Brandegeeii."

35 *Ibid.*

36 Morley's rose garden was severely depleted in 1924 when seven dozen bushes were stolen over a three-month period. "Fine Rose Bushes Stolen From Park," *San Diego Evening Tribune* (December 13, 1924), 7. A few years later, the fate of the garden was sealed by a blight (possibly Black Spot fungus). At the end of 1930, unemployed San Diegans were put to work laying out two new bowling greens on the site of the former rose garden. "Will Begin Work Thursday on New Project in Park," *San Diego Union*, December 7, 1930, Sect. 2-1.

37 Sessions, "Notes on Kentias and Other Palms."

38 Sessions reported on Bailey's visit at the June 1936 meeting of the San Diego Floral Association. Ada Perry, "The June Meeting," *California Garden* 28:1 (July 1936), 3, 8.

39 L. H. Bailey, "Erythea Brandegeeii," *Gentes Herbarum* 4 (September 1934-September 1941), 101-103.

40 Kate O. Sessions to David Fairchild, April 10, 1939. Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden Archive.

41 Sessions, "Interesting Palms."

42 Sessions, "Notes on Kentias and Other Palms." In this 1926 article Sessions describes a "group of about 200" San Jose Hesper palms, but does not suggest that a careful count was made in the grove. She was writing 14 years after the original planting and the survival rate of the original transplants is unknown.

43 Twenty of the San Jose Hesper palms are growing in front of the Balboa Park Activity Center, two in Palm Canyon and a handful of others are scattered around the park. Tree Plotter Balboa Park (electronic tree inventory), <https://pg-cloud.com/SDTT/scenario-publicBPC>, accessed August 18, 2020.

44 Sessions, "The Palm—Erythea Brandegeeii."

45 Carter, "The Brandegees: Leading Botanists in San Diego."

46 Several newspaper articles in 1903 describe the earliest work of implementing the Samuel Parsons, Jr., landscape plan for City Park (Balboa Park). When Parsons' associate George Cooke prepared for park road construction it was reported that Brandegees, a member of the Park Plans Committee and a Yale-trained civil engineer, walked "nearly every foot of the proposed roads" with him. "Architect Cooke Leaves for the East," *San Diego Evening Tribune* (August 2, 1903), 5.

47 Sessions was quoted in Nelda Perry, "Miss Kate Sessions is Inspiration of Prospective Balboa Park Plant Project," *California Garden* 23:4 (October 1931), 15. This article is reprinted from the *San Diego Union* newspaper. It describes the Aloe and Agave Garden project as a tribute that "affords Miss Sessions' friends great satisfaction that they are able to dedicate a garden of this kind to her."

48 The cause and nature of this illness is unknown. It was described as "due mainly to exhaustion and overwork" in MacPhail *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, 112. *California Garden* magazine reported that the illness followed "a strenuous week of feverish activity at the Encinitas Flower Show." Editor, "K. O. Sessions Agave and Aloe Garden Dedicated," *California Garden* 26:10 (April 1935), 2.

49 MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, 112-13. MacPhail may have relied on the account published in *California Garden* in 1935. That version includes the additional information that the editor was summoned by Sessions "to call on her at once" when she learned of the proposed community dinner in her honor. Editor, "K. O. Sessions Agave and Aloe Garden Dedicated."

50 Miss K. O. Sessions Improving," *California Garden* 22:11 (May 1931) 6.

51 Walter S. Merrill, "Three Suggestions for Balboa Park," *California Garden* 17:11 (May 1926), 9-10.

52 Perry, "Miss Kate Sessions is Inspiration."

53 The Yorick Memorial Theater was established in 1923 by a local thespian group that had taken over the United States Bureau of Fisheries building, later renamed the Canadian Legion building, "S.D. Players Dedicate Little Theater to Yorick," *San Diego Union*, April 21, 1923, 5. A map in a 1924 newspaper shows the theater location: "Balboa Park is San Diego's Growing Glory," *San Diego Union*, January 1, 1924, 3.

54 The Aloe and Agave Garden fell outside the official boundaries of the 1935-36 exposition grounds, perhaps explaining why it is not identified on any exposition map.

55 Aloe and Agave Garden [Blueprint Plan], Special Collections, San Diego Public Library.

56 The Yorick Theater was at the "T" intersection of Park Boulevard (in its original location) and Calle Colon (the street later extended as Village Place). With today's street configurations, the Yorick Theater would sit in the middle of Village Place, between the parking lots of Spanish Village and the Museum of Natural History.

57 "The work...to establish a garden in Balboa Park for a collection of aloes and agaves...is at last to begin. The surveying and staking of the paths and the laying of water pipes will be completed before the end of July. The long delay has been caused by the building of two roads...[that]...join and pass beneath the streetcar trestle, pass around a sloping hill and down to the valley below. This road was planned for in the Nolan Plan for future improvements in the Park..." "The Agave and Aloe Garden," *California Garden* 23:13 (July 1932), 6.

58 Nelda Perry, "Unique Garden to be Tribute to Local Leader," *San Diego Union*, August 23, 1931, 7.

59 MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, 114.

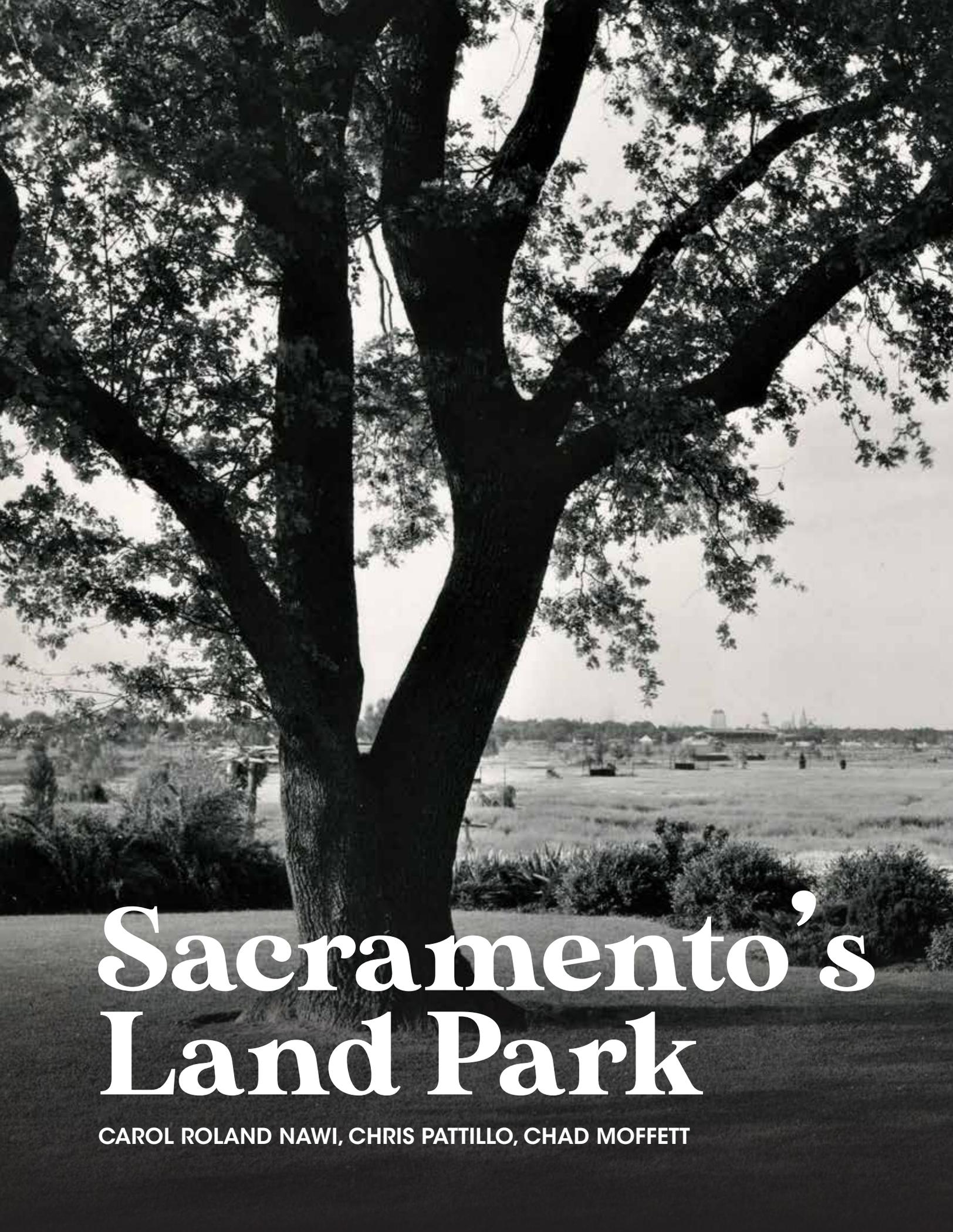
60 Those making this claim included Irene M. Clark, "Garden to Honor Kate Sessions, San Diego's Pioneer Beautifier," *San Diego Union* (March 27, 1932), Sect. 2-1. Garden writer Ada Perry echoed the claim in a later story about the Aloe and Agave Garden. Ada Perry, "Sessions Agave, Aloe Plot New Park Attraction," *San Diego Union*, June 10, 1934, Home and Garden Section, 5.

61 Clark, "Garden to Honor Kate Sessions."

62 In one instance, Jerabek confessed to lifting some mature date yucca plants from another section of the park and replanting them in the Aloe and Agave Garden at Sessions' instigation, but without first consulting the park superintendent. MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, 115.

63 Eloise Roorbach (1868-1961) wrote on travel, architecture and gardens, publishing in the Craftsman, Overland Monthly, House Beautiful and other leading publications of the day. She was an early celebrant of the architecture of Irving Gill.

- 64 Eloise Roorbach, "An April Afternoon in Mrs. Evans' Garden," *California Garden*, 23:12 (June 1932), 10. In this article Roorbach used inaccurate terminology. The fundraiser was for the Aloe and Agave Garden, but she referred to collecting money for the new "cactus" garden and the "cactus and succulent" garden.
- 65 "Announcement of Annual Card Party," *California Garden* 24:5 (November 1932), 7.
- 66 Mary Greer, "The Agave and Aloe Garden in Balboa Park," *California Garden* 24:5 (November 1932), 1-2.
- The actual amount of money raised for the garden in 1932 was \$115.52. Fund raising continued. At the December 1933 meeting of the Floral Association, wreaths of holly-leaved cherry, cypress and toyon were sold "to meet current expenses in connection with the Aloe and Agave Garden." "December Meeting," *California Garden* 24:7 (January 1933), 6.
- 67 Kate O. Sessions, letter to the editor, *San Diego Union*, August 29, 1932, 7.
- 68 Greer, "The Agave and Aloe Garden in Balboa Park."
- 69 K. O. Sessions, "Rabbits Relish Bitter Aloes," *California Garden* 25:4-5 (October-November 1933), 7.
- 70 C. I. Jerabek, "Also Succulent Fed Rabbits," *California Garden* 27:10 (April 1936), 9.
- 71 Several private San Diego gardens also were toured by the visitors that day including Kate Sessions' home garden. C. I. Jerabek, "New and Old Friends," *California Garden* 25:4-5 (October-November 1933), 8.
- 72 Kate O. Sessions to Alice Eastwood, March 10, 1934. Alice Eastwood Papers, Special Collections, California Academy of Sciences Library, San Francisco, California.
- 73 Ada Perry, "Sessions Agave, Aloe Plot New Park Attraction." Always searching for colorful and drought-resistant plants, Sessions strongly advocated the use of mesembryanthemums. Her collection of the plant was unparalleled, according to Victoria Padilla, *Southern California Gardens*, 269.
- 74 On one trip Jerabek collected donations from Santa Barbara, Santa Maria, Glendale and San Fernando. C. I. Jerabek, "K. O. Sessions Aloe and Agave Garden," *California Garden* 25:4-5 (October-November 1933), 2.
- 75 Howard E. Gates, of Anaheim had mounted a display of succulents at the 1935-36 exposition and donated many to Balboa Park when his exhibit closed. C. I. Jerabek "New Donations to the Cactus and Succulent Gardens in Balboa Park," *California Garden* 28:5 (November 1936), 2.
- 76 "Agave, Aloe Mesembryanthemums Garden Extended," *California Garden* 26:7 (January 1935), 1.
- 77 Chauncy Irgens Jerabek, "The Agave and Aloe Garden," *California Garden* 26:8-9 (February-March 1935), 1.
- 78 As usual, all the botanical names of the donations were listed. C. I. Jerabek, "More Plants for Exposition Cactus and Succulent Gardens," *California Garden* 27:5-6 (November-December 1935), 1.
- 79 C. I. Jerabek, "New Donations to Aloe and Agave Gardens" *California Garden*, 26:8-9 (February-March 1935), 2. A San Diego History Center photograph shows Kate Sessions sitting on this decorative stone bench, with the tracks of the elevated rail line in the background. It is reproduced on page 115 of MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*.
- 80 Alice Greer, "Chronological Outline of Activities," *California Garden* 30:12 (July 1939), 10, 20.
- 81 Ibid. Quoted with a slight variation in MacPhail, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, 115.
- 82 "Aloe and Agave Garden Dedicated to Miss Sessions," *San Diego Union*, March 25, 1935, 6.
- 83 Editor, "K. O. Sessions Agave and Aloe Garden Dedicated..." *California Garden* 26:10 (April 1935), 2.
- 84 Ada Perry, "A Dream Realized," *California Garden* 26:8-9 (February-March 1935), 2. A similar article was published in the newspaper with photographs of workers in the garden: Ada Perry, "Woman's Dream of Park 'Desert' is Coming True," *San Diego Union*, February 17, 1935, 5.
- 85 When some trees from Balboa Park's El Prado avenue of shaped black acacias were cut down at the behest of exposition officials (a controversial act), logs from the trees were used to outline areas of the extended garden where automobiles tended to transgress onto the spreading groundcover of mesembryanthemums. C. I. Jerabek, "An Old Saying," *California Garden* 27:10 (April 1936), 9.
- 86 Sessions reported on Bailey's visit at the June 1936 meeting of the San Diego Floral Association. Ada Perry, "The June Meeting."
- 87 "State Garden Federation Delegates Have Busy Convention Program Here," *San Diego Union*, June 16, 1935, 2.
- 88 Ada Perry, "San Diego's Rare Home Gardens Will be Opened to All Patrons of Expo," *San Diego Union*, April 28, 1935, 4; "Garden Tours Planned For Exposition Patrons, San Diego's Reputation for Gardens to be Upheld," *California Garden* 26:11 (May 1935) 8.
- 89 "Interesting Plants Object of Nature Walk," *San Diego Union*, April 22, 1938, 10.
- 90 "Agave Attenuata Blooms in Balboa Park," *San Diego Union*, December 22, 1938, 4.
- 91 "City Recreation Area Hailed as U.S. Greatest," *San Diego Union*, October 10, 1848, 33.
- 92 Kate O. Sessions to Alice Eastwood, March 10, 1934. Alice Eastwood Papers, Special Collections, California Academy of Sciences Library, San Francisco, California.
- 93 Ada Lorraine Perry, "Clean Up." *California Garden* 31:22 (May 1941), 4. Chancy Jerabek, who remained a city park employee until 1956 surely did as much as possible to maintain the garden, but he had specific duties elsewhere and did not supervise Balboa Park garden maintenance.
- 94 A letter to the editor mentioned San Diego Cactus and Succulent Society work on the Aloe and Agave Garden. "Park Improvement Needed," Mrs. J. J. Kennealy, letter to the editor, *San Diego Union*, January 27, 1962, 28.
- 95 Harland Bartholomew and Associates, Master Plan for Balboa Park, San Diego, California. June 1960, 13.
- 96 Carol Olten, "Kate Sessions Our First Lady of Flowers," *San Diego Union*, April 24, 1966, F1.
- 97 Alice Mary Greer, "A Book in the Hand," *California Garden* 58:1 (February-March 1967), 18-19.
- 98 "Federal Aid Called Boon to Park Boulevard Project," *San Diego Union*, November 30, 1962, 28; "Park Blvd. Work Nears Completion," *San Diego Union*, June 7, 1966, 21.
- 99 "Auto Called Top Park Problem," *San Diego Union*, April 26, 1970, G3. The Zoo sought 2,000 additional spaces to expand total Zoo parking capacity to 4,463 cars. One Zoo proposal was to terrace down the side of Florida Canyon to create parking, an idea opposed by environmental groups and champions of open space in Balboa Park. An alternative west-side entrance to Balboa Park was not established. The Cabrillo Bridge remains the entrance to the center of the park and is shared by pedestrians, cyclists and automobiles.
- 100 "Five Balboa Park Parking Lots Set," *San Diego Union*, April 24, 1970, B3. The contract for building the parking lots adding 730 new parking spaces, 302 of which were next to the Spanish Village Art Center, was awarded the next month. "Pact Awarded," *San Diego Union*, June 6, 1970, B2.
- 101 "1970-75 to Bring Major Park Changes," *San Diego Union*, April 28, 1970, 11-12.
- 102 [Untitled, unsigned notice], *California Gardens* 62:1 (January-February 1971), 36.
- 103 A map dated 1973 shows the site of the former garden completely fitting within the footprint of the new Spanish Village parking lot. *Aerial/Map Real Estate Atlas of San Diego County, 9th Edition*, Vol. 4. Miami: Real Estate Data, Inc., 1973, 454.
- 104 San Diego-based DeWeese served as president of the local chapter of the American Society of Landscape Architects in 1984. "Balboa Park Plans Okayed—New Garden Areas," *San Diego Union*, August 5, 1975, B-3.
- 105 "Balboa Park Desert Garden [Draft Brochure]." San Diego Park & Recreation Department, 1977(?). Carol Greentree Collection, Box 8, File 2, San Diego History Center Archives.
- 106 "Desert Garden Started After 50-year Wait," (*San Diego Evening Tribune*, August 13, 1976, E-1.
- 107 The most prominent example is the 1989 master plan for Balboa Park that mistakenly referred to the Desert Garden as the Cactus Garden. Subsequent park signage directs visitors to the "Cactus Garden" (instead of the "Desert Garden") on the east side of Park Boulevard next to the Rose Garden. City of San Diego, Balboa Park Master Plan, adopted July 26, 1989, 203.
- 108 Kate O. Sessions, "A Cactus Find," *California Garden* 9:12 (June 1918), 10.
- 109 In some sources, Sessions' Chamber of Commerce speech is dated to 1889 instead of 1899 (this error appears in Balboa Park historian Richard Amero's online documents hosted by the San Diego History Center).
- 110 "Chamber of Commerce Park Improvement Discussed," *San Diego Union*, September 1, 1899, 6. The full text of the paper Sessions presented was published in the newspaper three days later: "Beautifying the Park: Suggestions from Miss Sessions," *San Diego Union*, September 4, 1899, 7.
- 111 M.B.C. [Mary B. Coulston], "Native Plants in the Park," *San Diego Union*, October 15, 1902, 6.
- 112 "Cacti Plot at Coronado," *San Diego Union*, September 29, 1904, 10. In this news article, Kate Sessions is coyly referred to herself as "the San Diego florist" who has the project in hand.
- 113 In the pages of *California Garden* Sessions raised the idea of a park cactus garden in 1918, 1923 and 1926: "A Cactus Find"; "Aloes and Allied Plants for Southern California," 15:1 (July 1923), 8; "The Age of the Edinburgh Botanical Garden," 18:5 (November 1926), 3.
- 114 Sessions, "A Cactus Find."
- 115 [Kate O. Sessions], "Cacti," *The Florists' Review* 42:1075 (July 4, 1918), 42.
- 116 [Unsigned], "Aloes and Allied Plants for Southern California."
- 117 Kate O. Sessions, "San Diego's Horticultural Children," *California Garden* 18:2 (August 1926), 8.
- 118 Sessions, "The Age of the Edinburgh Botanical Garden."
- 119 Chauncy Jerabek, "Cacti..." *California Garden* 27:2 (August 1935), 5. Sessions had also pleaded with exposition officials to build a new lath house in which to display Epiphyllum plants, but to no avail.
- 120 "Cactus Garden, Plant Displays Expo Features," *San Diego Union*, November 25, 1934, 13.
- 121 [Kate O. Sessions], "Cactus Display Planned for Exposition," *California Garden* 26:8-9 (February-March 1935), 4.
- 122 Mary Scott, "Franz P. Hosp Pioneer Landscape Architect," Report of the Riverside Museum Associates, 3:1 (May 1966), n.p. The White Park cactus garden is described in Victoria Padilla, *Southern California Gardens*, 266.
- 123 Kate O. Sessions, "Cacti and Other Succulents," *California Garden* 12:5 (November 1920), 10.
- 124 Other early local cactus donors were William Decker, Mrs. Lena Graham, and Mr. and Mrs. David Troth. Jerabek, "Cacti..."
- 125 Ibid.
- 126 "Cactus Planned in Park," *San Diego Union*, March 30, 1935, G-8. Jerabek also wrote about the new garden: C. I. Jerabek, "Cacti: New Cactus Garden in Balboa Park," *California Garden*, August 1935, 5, 8.
- 127 Ada Perry, "Cactus Gardens Display Beauty of Desert Wash," *San Diego Union*, February 2, 1936, Home and Garden Section, 3.
- 128 Mrs. Neff Bakkers operated the Knickerbocker Nursery and Cactus Garden in Encanto, one of the most highly regarded cactus nurseries in the region. Bakkers' competitors included Helen McCabe's Cactus Gardens and Charles Cass Nursery in Pacific Beach. Larry W. Mitich, "George E. Lindsay—Explorer and Plantsman, Part 1," *Cactus and Succulent Journal* 61 (1988), 279.
- 129 On the same trip, more donations were collected for the Aloe and Agave Garden from the Gardens C. I. Jerabek, "More Plants for Exposition Cactus and Succulent Gardens," *California Garden* 27:5-6 (November-December 1935), 1.
- 130 "Federal Funds Will Be Sought for Expo Exhibit," *San Diego Union*, December 24, 1935, 2.
- 131 The California Pacific International Exposition in Balboa Park ran from May 29, 1935 to November 11, 1935 and in a second season, from February 12, 1936 to September 9, 1936. Buildings remaining from the 1915 exposition were refurbished and several new exposition structures were added in the Palisades area of Balboa Park. Legacies of the exposition include the Old Globe Theater, Spanish Village Art Center and the Houses of Pacific Relations.
- 132 Ibid. The Huntington donations included plants from six different genera of succulents.
- 133 "Romantic Glamour of New Expo Casts Spell Over All Visitors," *San Diego Union*, Exposition Edition, March 29, 1936, 1.
- 134 *Official Guide: Program and Souvenir Picture Book* (1935), 25; *Official Guide: Souvenir Program*, 1936, 19-20.
- 135 Richard S. Requa, *Inside Lights on the Building of the San Diego Exposition*, 1935. San Diego: Author, 1937, 103-104.
- 136 "El Monte Park Natural Site for Rock Garden, Assurance," *San Diego Union*, July 17, 1936, 12.
- 137 Only the Cactus Garden has survived into the twenty-first century. "Improvements Set For City," *San Diego Union*, Dec. 29, 1935, Section 2, 1.
- 138 Carl Coolidge, "Thar's Water in That Barr!—Even if it is a Desert Cactus," *San Diego Union*, July 10, 1938, C-6.
- 139 "Park's 'Desert' Attracts Student Artists; Tourists Flock to Cacti-Studded Slope," *San Diego Union*, November 17, 1938, B2.
- 140 *Report to the City Manager R. W. Flack, October 13, 1936*, Archives Center, Office of the City Clerk, City of San Diego, <https://www.sandiego.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/digitalarchives/pdf/collections/balboapark/balboaparkrehabilitation1936.pdf>.
- 141 *Final Report, Balboa Park Citizens Study Committee*, May 27, 1957, 66.
- 142 Bartholomew, *Master Plan for Balboa Park*, 68.
- 143 Karen Kenyon, "Balboa Park Can Be A Do-it-Yourself Happening," *San Diego Union*, June 9, 1974, G-8.
- 144 Betty Newton, "Balboa Park is Great Now, But You Should Have Seen it in '35," *San Diego Union*, November 24, 1985, F-36-37.
- 145 "Chapter 12: History of the New Mexico Building/Palace of Education and Balboa Park Club." In Richard Amero, *History of Balboa Park*, <http://www.balboaparkhistory.net/chapter12.pdf>.
- 146 Carol Greentree, "Ghost Gardens," *Southern California Gardener* (July-August 1998), 7. Note: A clipping of this article is in MS 305 Carol Greentree Collection, Box 8, File 2, San Diego History Center Archives. *The Southern California Gardener* was published in Van Nuys, California. It was superseded by a bi-monthly, *The Gardener's Companion*, edited by Lili Singer.
- 147 David C. Streatfield, "An Address on the History of Gardens and Landscapes in California, February 18, 1996," *Eden* 1:1 (May 1996), 3-4.
- 148 Streatfield, "An Address," 4-6.
- 149 The Balboa Park Committee voted on March 3, 2021; the City of San Diego Parks and Recreation Board voted on March 18, 2021.



# Sacramento's Land Park

CAROL ROLAND NAWI, CHRIS PATTILLO, CHAD MOFFETT



William Land Park Sacramento, Cal. McCurry Foto Co. 1937  
From McCurry Photograph Collection, 32276-12. Courtesy California History Room.

The Municipal Parks Movement that began in the 1850s with the pioneering horticultural and landscape work of Andrew Jackson Downing sought to bring a pastoral and rural environment within the boundaries of rapidly growing urban areas in the U.S. Park advocates deeply believed that exposure to nature was of spiritual and physical benefit to the denizens of crowded, often dirty and polluted, cities. In the minds of horticulturists, emerging landscape designers and architects, as well as social and sanitary reformers, providing public open space in cities directly improved the health and vitality of the urban population. It was not an accident that the parks movement arose on the heels of two major national cholera epidemics in the 1850s.

Parks also were seen as an embodiment of the nation's democratic principles providing the benefits of fresh air, recreation, and natural scenery to all levels of society, whether they resided in blocks of tidy townhouses or in dark overcrowded tenements. But from the beginning of the park movement access to the natural environment was thought to be particularly beneficial to the urban working poor and immigrant population who experienced the worst working conditions and the least desirable urban living conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Urban parks proliferated throughout the country between 1860 and 1890. The landscape design history and analysis of the movement for park development has largely focused on major metropolitan centers such as Downing's design for the Washington, D.C. Mall (1850) and the Olmsted and Vaux plan for Central Park in New York City (1857). Other notable examples of significant big city park development include Prospect Park in Brooklyn designed by Olmsted and Vaux in 1866; Forest Park in St. Louis designed by Maximillian Kern in 1876; and the Chicago Lakeshore parks designed by several landscape architects including Olmsted and Vaux and William Le Baron Jenny.<sup>2</sup> In California the two best known and documented metropolitan parks are located in the state's two largest cities: Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and Griffith Park in Los Angeles. The latter is one of the largest urban parks in America.

Although many of the earliest parks in the country are associated with big cities, many middle size and smaller cities also began to develop park facilities in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries - nowhere as actively as in the prosperous agricultural towns of California's Central Valley. Important among these Valley municipal parks were McKinley Park in Sacramento - developed by the Sacramento Street Railway Company in 1871,

Graceada Park in Modesto designed by John McClaren, Roeding Park in Fresno designed by Johannes Reimers in 1903, and Bidwell Park in Chico developed in 1905 on land donated to the city by Anne Bidwell. Bidwell Park, like Griffith Park in Los Angeles, is one of the largest municipal parks in the U.S.

The development and design of these parks in smaller cities and towns was guided by the same philosophies, sense of civic purpose, and design principles that guided the development of Central Park in New York and the National Mall in Washington DC. In the period between the 1860s and 1920s urban park development was guided by two major trends, one originating in the emerging field of landscape design and one significantly influenced by the social reform movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sacramento's William Land Park is an outstanding example of the urban park in a smaller city and seamlessly brings together the two major park design movements that governed municipal park development throughout the country at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nearing its one-hundred-year anniversary William Land Park is a major civic and design success.

Picturesque park design is most closely associated with the work of Downing, designer and editor of the *Horticulturist* magazine, and in the work of Olmsted and Vaux. In their writings and design work these pioneers sought to create a manmade landscape that imitated the natural and rural environment. To achieve their goal designers relied on curvilinear paths and roads, clusters of evergreen and deciduous trees and natural vegetation, large open meadows, and artificial lakes, streams, and ponds. The goal was to produce an easily accessible natural or pastoral setting situated in the very heart of the city.<sup>3</sup>

Picturesque park design placed primary emphasis on the arrangement of landscape features, but these "natural" spaces also provided for active recreation such as bridal paths for horseback riding, grassy areas for ball games, slopes for sledding, ponds for ice skating and boating, and playgrounds for children. These recreational facilities were subordinate to the overall rural and pastoral atmosphere of the park, with inconspicuous buildings constructed of natural materials such as stone and timber. Thus the park visitor's experience was derived primarily from the experience of open space, fresh air, and proximity to nature.

The principles of picturesque landscape design extended into the twentieth century through the establishment of academic programs, textbooks, professional publications, and professional landscape architectural

Below: Frederick Noble Evans, Sacramento Park Superintendent (1922-1948). Photo from his Sacramento Bee obituary, 1946.

Opposite: Evan's "Plan of William Land Park," 1926.



associations. Harvard's landscape architecture program, founded by Fredrick Olmsted, Jr. was the first to offer a degree in landscape architecture in the U.S. Under the leadership of professor Henry Vincent Hubbard the program trained a generation of influential landscape professionals steeped in the principles of picturesque design.<sup>4</sup>

The two best known examples of naturalistic and picturesque park design in California are Golden Gate Park in San Francisco and Griffith Park in Los Angeles, both developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. William Hammond Hall, a former surveyor and engineer selected to design Golden Gate Park, was a great admirer of Downing and Olmsted. During the period that Hammond worked on the park, he sought direct advice from Olmsted on matters of design and horticulture.<sup>5</sup> Foreshadowing the post-1900 Reform Park Movement that would later gain momentum, Hammond set aside space for a children's playground. This "Children's Quarter" was approved by the San Francisco Parks Commission in 1888 and is likely the oldest established park playground in the U.S.<sup>6</sup>

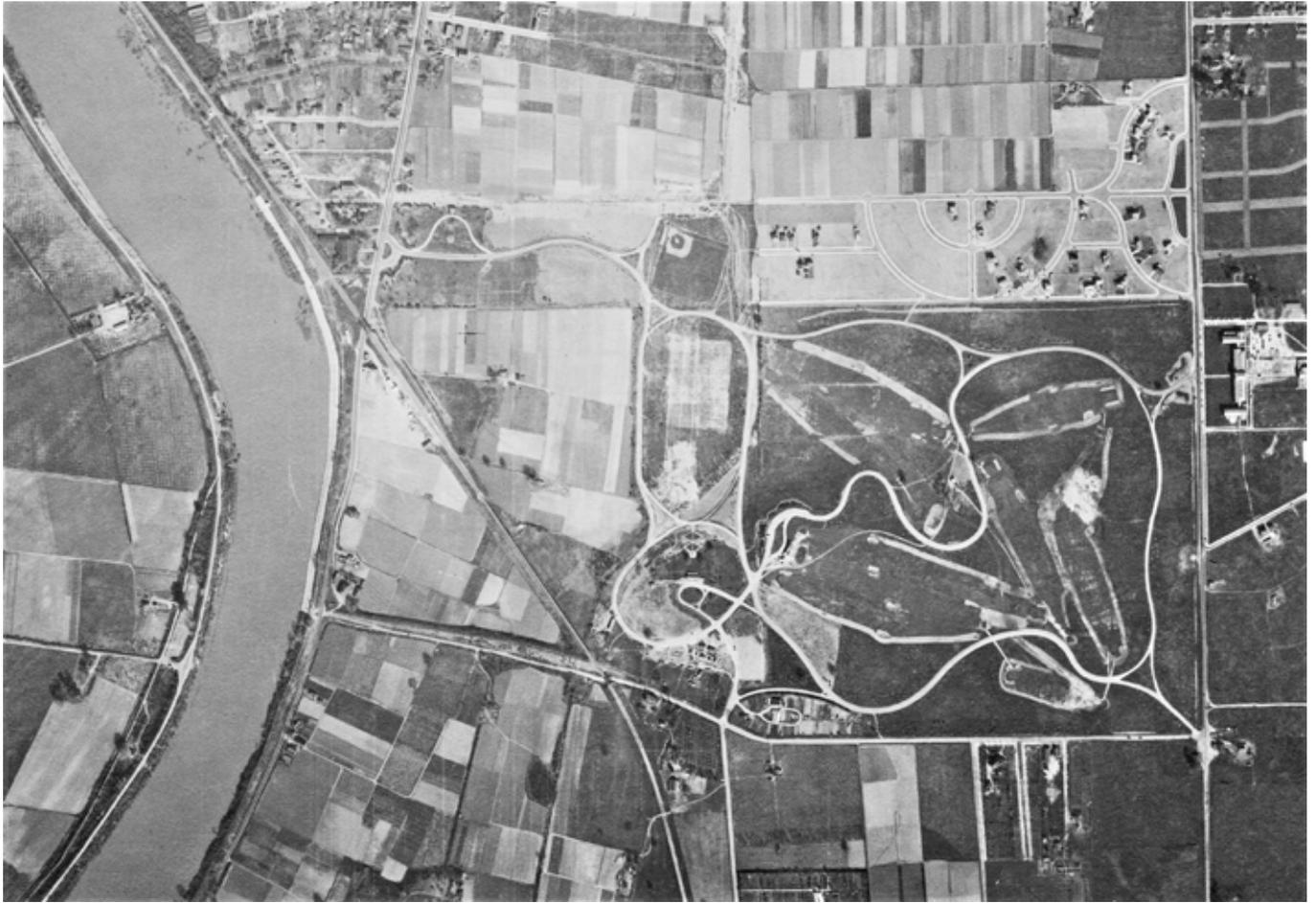
Griffith Park, part of the Mexican land grant Rancho Los Feliz (near the Los Angeles River), was donated to the City of Los

Angeles in 1896 by Colonel Griffith J. Griffith. It became one of the nation's largest municipal parks with more than 3,000 acres. The southside of the park reflected a design with picturesque curvilinear roads and open grassy meadows. But unlike Central and Prospect Parks in New York and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco which were based on the recreation of natural scenery, much of Griffith Park was left virtually in its natural state taking advantage of rugged hilly terrain, canyons, and native vegetation.<sup>7</sup> It also incorporated some major cultural institutions such as the Greek Theater and the Griffith Observatory.

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century social reform advocates such as Jacob Riis and Jane Addams, as well as political progressives, became increasingly focused on metropolitan parks as instruments of social betterment. The central focus of the Reform Park Movement was not the presentation and passive enjoyment of nature, but the use of the park's natural environment to segregate spaces within the landscape for well-defined social and athletic activities. While landscape design and planting remained an important element in the reform park, recreational facilities took on a central focus.<sup>8</sup>

The social reformers were interested in





creating formal playgrounds for the benefit of urban, particularly, poor children. As early as the 1870s playground advocates emphasized placing play equipment in school yards, but by the 1890s they expanded their focus to the inclusion of playgrounds in public parks.<sup>9</sup> By 1900 New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburg, Baltimore, New Haven, Providence, and San Francisco had introduced

formal playgrounds into their city parks.<sup>10</sup> The loosely organized playground movement took on an institutional form in 1906 with the establishment of the Playground Association of America.<sup>11</sup> Women played an active role in promoting public playgrounds. Many national women's groups such as the Garden Club of America, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and the Junior League, as well as local women's groups, such as the Sacramento Women's Council and the Tuesday Club, advocated for and sponsored community playground development.

William Land Park, Sacramento's first public metropolitan park, brought together picturesque and reform park design principals through the progressive and reformist ideals of its political and civic leadership and in the background and academic training of its landscape architect. Like many urban parks, William Land Park had its origin in the generous donation of one of Sacramento's wealthy and prominent citizens. William Land was a successful pioneer businessman, land developer, and politician. During his lifetime, Land served as Sacramento's mayor (1898-1899), a longtime president of the Chamber of Commerce, and as an enthusiastic supporter of civic betterment, social



reform, and creating “livable cities.” He died in 1911, bequeathing funds to the city to purchase “a public park within suitable distance of the said City of Sacramento, and which park shall be called William Land Park.”<sup>12</sup>

During the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sacramento underwent a profound political transformation from a town substantially controlled by the Central Pacific Railroad and its political allies to a city led by progressive reformers. These progressives espoused political reform but also sought to carry out an ambitious program of civic improvements and social betterment. As Sacramento historian Steven Avella characterizes the period: “...local progressives in Sacramento framed virtually every public issue as a struggle between the forces of urban advance and a reactionary cabal consisting of the overly powerful railroad and its puppet politicians.”<sup>13</sup> Led by individuals such as C.K. McClatchy, owner and editor of the *Sacramento Bee*, the city’s progressive newspaper, and Hiram Johnson, later to become governor of California, the city’s business and social elite were not only successful in changing local government, but were able to initiate programs of civic reform

that were intended to promote Sacramento as a “good place to live.”<sup>14</sup> During this time, the Chamber of Commerce announced that while its number one goal was a safe and sanitary municipal water supply, a cause that had been instrumental in its founding, the achievement of a “a big park” for the city had risen to second place in its list of desired civic improvements.<sup>15</sup>

Reform minded city officials moved forward to implement this goal by hiring its first City Park Superintendent, Frederick Noble Evans (1881-1946), in 1922. Evans was a graduate of the newly established landscape architecture program at Harvard University.<sup>16</sup> At Harvard, Evans would have studied under Hubbard and Fredrick Law Olmsted, Jr. and was exposed to Olmsted’s philosophy of park design when he worked briefly in the Olmsted Brothers Brookline office. In 1914 Evans left Boston to establish his own practice in Cleveland. He also taught at the University of Illinois. In 1919, while teaching at the university, Evans published the book, *Town Improvements*, a treatise on appropriate principles for the physical improvement of urban areas. The book contained a chapter on parks and open spaces in which he referenced the work of Olmsted, Sr.<sup>17</sup>

Opposite, top: 1928 aerial. Flight C\_201, Frame K-17, March 29, 1928. Courtesy of UCSB Library Geospatial Collection.

Opposite, bottom: This circa 1935 postcard provides a view from William Land Park’s Duck Lake, looking southerly toward the Charles Swanston Memorial and the park’s clubhouse. Courtesy Gretchen Steinberg.

Above: Circle of fan palms (*Washingtonia filifera*) on the golf course. Contemporary photographs courtesy Chris Pattillo, FASLA, PGAdesign.



Above: The Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe slide in Fairytale Town. Photographs by Chris Pattillo.

Opposite, left: Row of *Allocasuarina verticillate* (*Casuarina cunninghamiana*) trees.

Opposite, right: Welcome shade is ideal for Sacramento's climate.

Opposite, bottom: Fairytale Town entry gate.

In stepping into the Sacramento Park Superintendent job, Evans accepted a position that occupied the rest of his active professional life. He served as the City Park Superintendent, later titled "City Landscape Architect," for the next 26 years. During his long tenure, in addition to designing Land Park, he implemented extensive tree planting along the streets of the downtown and designed a formal rose garden in the already established McKinley Park.<sup>18</sup>

Land's provision of money rather than property inadvertently sparked a long period of civic controversy that delayed the design and construction of a public park for nearly a decade. Land left the location of the future park to the discretion of the Mayor and City Board of Trustees. The city solicited public proposals for suitable sites for a large park. Eleven proposals were received from which the city selected a site south of the city that had recently been annexed within the city boundaries. The 238-acre Swanston-McKevitt tract consisted primarily of small farms and undeveloped tracts of land near the Sacramento River.

Between 1911 and 1922 the city and a number of civic groups argued over the suitability of this site with a vocal faction arguing for an alternative site north of the American River. In 1922 the matter was finally resolved by the courts in favor of the Swanston-McKevitt tract to the south. Evans immediately proceeded to prepare a preliminary park plan for the tract that guided the initial land drainage and tree planting, begun that same year. The park site was located only a short distance from the Sacramento River and was subject to regular flooding and inundation. These conditions required the area to be drained and levees constructed to prevent seasonal flooding. Four thousand trees were planted over the 238-acre parcel.<sup>19</sup>

The preliminary park design incorporated modest buildings and structures to service recreational features of the park. Although designed by prominent local architects, these facilities were primarily functional and subordinate to the landscape. In 1923 and 1924 the golf course and golf house were completed to



considerable fanfare.<sup>20</sup> A formal memorial was also built in this area at the bequest of the Swanston family, the original owners of the Swanston Tract, to commemorate their involvement with the park. It was executed by the well-known San Francisco sculpture Ralph Stackpole in 1925.

Evans' final *General Plan for Land Park* (1926) was a thoughtful blending of picturesque and reform park design.<sup>21</sup> Design features included a curvilinear circulation pattern that separated auto paths, pedestrian walkways, and bridle paths. Dense tree plantings along the park boundaries separated it from city streets and created views and vistas through the park interior. The park golf course, one of its largest recreational features, also created long views through the park separated by mass plantings of casuarina trees that mimicked the large open meadows that were such a central element of late picturesque era "beautiful style" park design. Similarly, the large water ponds at the center of the landscape design created a pastoral environment where ducks, and — more recently — non-migrating geese, are a popular attraction. The overall aesthetic of the park design was no doubt a result of Evans' training at Harvard and his subsequent work with the Olmsted Brothers firm.

Spaces for recreational features also were a key component of the design throughout the park as demonstrated in the features associated with the final 1926 *General Plan for Land Park*. These included the nine-hole golf course and golf house, parade grounds, picnic areas, playgrounds, and tennis courts. The park incorporated a number of baseball diamonds completed by 1927 on the western side of the park and in the 1970s this area was modified to



include soccer fields.

The northernmost extension of the park which ran to the Riverside Drive streetcar stop was occupied by picnic facilities for families.<sup>22</sup> In the pre-WWII world with no air conditioning these facilities were a true amenity for urban families in Sacramento's scorching summer heat. A small "zoo" area with a stable, a facility for a history collection, and a largely domestic animal department, provided an educational focus.<sup>23</sup>

The *General Plan* resulted in several entry points along the north, south, and west sides of the park. The southeast and southwest entries were marked by tall



Above: Moderne-style park entry monument.  
Photographs by Chris Pattillo.

Opposite, left: Shaded picnic area

Opposite, right: Cobble edged curvilinear  
pond edge.

Opposite, bottom: Swanston memorial 2015.

battered river cobble pillars. Near the west entrance the Riverside Boulevard streetcar line stop provided low cost access to the park in keeping with Land's original intent that the park should serve the lower income citizens of the city, many of whom lived in the downtown area south of the State Capital.<sup>24</sup>

A series of artificial ponds were spread across the eastern portion of the park while the majority of the remaining eastern portion of the park was devoted to the nine-hole golf course. Buildings included the golf house, a field house, and a tennis house.

In the mid-1920s the city decided to combine its various live animal exhibits into one consolidated location to create a municipal zoo. These scattered exhibits included live alligators that had been on display in McKinley Park since 1915.<sup>25</sup> The collection of animals at McKinley Park increased in the 1910s and early 1920s with the acquisition of monkeys, raccoons and birds. Also, in 1915 Miller and Lux, a large Central Valley ranching and land company, donated 12 tule elk from their Buttonwillow

Ranch for display in a paddock in Del Paso Park.<sup>26</sup>

William Land Park emerged as the best candidate site for consolidating these animal exhibits. A small zoo was established at the southwest corner of the park behind the Swanston Memorial in an area designated in the *General Plan* for the natural history collection and animal department. The zoo opened in June 1927.<sup>27</sup> Following its opening, Superintendent Evans made improvements by adding landscaping and gravel paths and a pond for waterfowl and ducks.<sup>28</sup> In 1933 the zoo began adding more exotic animals when it acquired a kangaroo, adding an elephant in 1948. This trend continued into the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>29</sup> In 1956 the Sacramento Zoological Society was founded to support and assist the zoo and promote its growth and diversification. Today, this nonprofit group manages the facility.<sup>30</sup>

Aerial photographs verify that by the 1930s substantial progress had been made in realizing the major features of the 1926 *General Plan* and that the trees planted in



1922 were maturing and providing a dense canopy for the park.<sup>31</sup> The basic design of the 1926 *General Plan* appears to have guided the park development with many of its major features and uses still in place today.

The Great Depression brought an end to major development of the park due to a substantially reduced city budget. Subsequent WWII rationing of city funds continued this trend. For the first time since the park opened the city began to charge fees for the use of some of the park services such as the golf course and tennis courts.<sup>32</sup>

During the 1930s park improvement shifted from the city to the federal government's work-relief programs in cities throughout the country. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was active in Sacramento and completed a number of improvements in William Land Park. A children's playground was created in the western portion of the park in 1936 and stone curbing stamped "WPA 1939" and "WPA 1940" was installed throughout the park. This distinctive rustic curbing feature still frames the streets through the park today. The WPA also constructed a masonry and wood pergola with built-in benches that provided a formal entry to a garden, also installed by the WPA. The garden consists of curvilinear walkways flanked by stones and planted with vegetation.<sup>33</sup> Cobble stone fountains were installed in the existing water features by the San Francisco sculptor Ralph Stackpole, who had previously designed the Swanston Memorial.<sup>34</sup> By 1941 an amphitheater had been constructed on a slope west of the WPA garden facing toward the large water feature that had come to be known as the "Duck Pond." Still in use today for summer theater events, the stage was extensively redesigned by local architect Harry Devine as part of a number of major additions and improvements to the



park following WWII.<sup>35</sup> The circular stage is backed by a masonry wall and a planting of Italian cypress.

Sacramento grew rapidly in the post-war period. The city and community groups responded by developing new suburban parks and by expanding the facilities of existing parks; nowhere more prominently than in William Land Park. Perhaps the largest and certainly one of the most popular improvements was the construction of an elaborate and well-designed "Fairytale Town."

Shifts in child-rearing philosophy in the postwar period emphasized less strict discipline and the fostering of imagination and creativity in children. As a result, playgrounds began to take on new forms and designs intended to encourage these traits. Historian Galen Granz acknowledges



that one of the earliest manifestations of this new orientation in playground design was the introduction of brightly colored, although traditional, playground equipment.<sup>36</sup> It was only a short step from there to introducing play equipment designed in the fanciful forms of animals, dragons and storybook characters.

Throughout the country women's organizations such as the Junior League and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) took a strong interest in establishing such themed playgrounds. These fantasy lands were thought to encourage "versatility, spontaneity, a freedom and openness of physical plan and programming, the encouragement of dramatic and imaginative play" that was thoroughly in

keeping with the shifts in post war child-rearing.<sup>37</sup> Other advocates argued that these fantasy scenes encouraged children to read.

While Oakland and San Francisco pioneered these types of playgrounds, Central Valley towns quickly followed course. In addition to Sacramento's Fairytale Town, Storyland at Roeding Park in Fresno, Fun Town in Mickle Grove Park in Modesto, and Caper Acres at Bidwell Park in Chico were constructed in the same period. The culmination of this type of attraction on a grand commercial scale was the privately constructed park at Disneyland in Anaheim (1955).

Fantasy/adventure and fairytale areas ranged from small playgrounds that referenced well known children's stories to elaborate enclosed areas that featured large structures, highly imaginative play equipment, and settings drawn from popular children's literature. Land Park's Fairytale Town followed this latter model. Sponsored by the local Junior League, planning and design began in 1956.<sup>38</sup> Fairytale Town covered a large enclosed area at the north end of the park featuring a castle-like entry with a Humpty-Dumpty figure precariously sitting atop. Architects Kenneth C. Rickey and Fred E. Brooks (Rickey and Brooks, AIA) designed individual life-size exhibit/play areas in various storybook and poetry themes organized in a circular layout.

Original exhibits included *The Crooked Mile*, *The Cheese Stands Alone*, *Farmer Brown's Barn*, *Owl's House*, *Cinderella's Carriage*, *King Arthur's Castle*, *Tortoise and the Hare*, *Three Little Pigs*, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, and a children's theater. It opened to the public in 1959 with several additional exhibits installed in the 1960s. Fairytale Town, of all the amenities in Land Park, remains one of the most popular and heavily used recreational features. It is booked for numerous children's birthday parties every weekend through the year.<sup>39</sup>

Also in the early 1960s the zoo underwent a series of renovations and modernization.<sup>40</sup> Rickey and Brooks, the architecture firm that designed Fairytale Town, was hired to design the work which included more modern and humane animal enclosures.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the most notable feature of the Rickey and Brooks design was the zoo entry that is sited on the main road through the park. It is a striking example of the Mid-Century Modern architecture with interconnected paraboloid roofs.<sup>42</sup> The building has been identified as individually eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as one of Sacramento's outstanding mid-century structures.<sup>43</sup> In June 1961



most of the renovations were completed and the zoo reopened to the public.<sup>44</sup>

Today, Land Park, nearly ten decades after its founding, continues to realize the progressive and reformist ideals of the city government and civic groups that brought it into being. It retains most of its original design with its melding of picturesque and reform park design principles that guided the original 1926 plan. A professionally prepared landscape survey and evaluation in 2011 concluded that the entire park is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places as an outstanding example of local park development and landscape design in Sacramento and the Central Valley 1920s to 1960s. Above all else the park remains a vibrant community resource crowded with visitors on any weekend. Youth soccer players, golfers, runners, picnickers, theater goers and families exploring the zoo and Fairytale Town, utilize the park just as its founders envisioned in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The park remains a prized community resource

and a great source of civic pride.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Chris Pattillo, FASLA**, founded PGA-design in 1979 and led the design firm until her retirement in 2017. Pattillo attended the University of California at Berkeley, receiving her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1972 and a master's in landscape architecture in 1975. Along with her business partner Cathy Garrett, Pattillo developed an area of specialization doing cultural landscape work. Pattillo has been particularly interested in the Historic American Landscape Survey (HALS) and prepared several HALS documents during her career. She was the principal in charge of documenting the historic landscapes associated with the Presidio at San Francisco, Park Merced in San Francisco, and many other historically significant landscape sites. In 2003, Pattillo, Garrett, and Betsy Flack founded the Northern California Chapter of HALS, which continues its work. Pattillo was

Opposite, top: Path through the perennial garden. Photograph by Chris Pattillo, FASLA, PGAdesign.

Opposite, bottom: 1960s postcard showing the hyperbolic paraboloid structures in front of the Sacramento Zoo, designed by Rickey & Brooks, AIA. "Gateway to the William Land Park Zoo. Sacramento, California. Fritz Vibe Postcard Service, Sacramento, Calif." Courtesy Gretchen Steinberg.

Above: Amphitheater and stage backed by Italian cypress. Photograph by Chris Pattillo, FASLA, PGAdesign.



named a fellow by the American Society of Landscape Architects in 2012 based on her contributions to the HALS program.

**Carol Roland-Nawi** was appointed by Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr., to the position of State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) in September 2012. Dr. Roland-Nawi's previous work included senior historian and project manager at the engineering firm of Mead & Hunt, Inc., and principal of Roland-Nawi Associates. Her service in California state government included work with the Department of Transportation as a senior environmental planner; the Resources Agency, where she drafted regulations for the California Register of Historical Resources; and the Cultural Resources Division of the Department of Parks and Recreation, where her accomplishments included a context statement and first statewide inventory of CCC

resources. Dr. Roland-Nawi is a member of the California Garden & Landscape History Society, serving on its Editorial Board for *Eden*; and the California Preservation Foundation, where she served as president from 2005-2007. She holds a doctorate in American History from the University of California Riverside.

**Chad Moffet** is Market Leader for Mead & Hunt's Cultural Resources services. He completes cultural resource investigations throughout the United States with a specialization in historic roads and landscapes. Moffett received a master's degree in Cultural Resources Preservation from the University of Wisconsin – Madison in the Department of Landscape Architecture. Along with Roland-Nawi and Pattillo, Moffett completed the *Cultural Landscape Survey and Evaluation of William Land Park* (January 2012).

Above: Mixed perennial stone garden. Photographs by Chris Pattillo.

Left: Lady Banks' climbing rose on stone arbor.

Opposite: Fountain sprays in the pond.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> David Schuyler, *The New Urban Landscape: The Redefinition of City Form in Nineteenth-Century America*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1986. (59-62).

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Garvin, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996. 1-33).

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<sup>4</sup> Linda McClelland, *Building the National Parks: Historic Landscape Design and Construction*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998, 20-23.

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<sup>7</sup> Garvin, 50-51.

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<sup>9</sup> Cranz, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Cranz, 63.

<sup>11</sup> John Patterson, "The Development of Public Recreation in the City of Sacramento," Unpublished Master's Thesis, 1957, 9. In Sacramento Archives and Museum Collections Center, Sacramento, CA

<sup>12</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, "Death Summons William Land, Started Penniless; Left Millions," January 2, 1912; Last Will and Testament of William Land, typescript copy in the files of the Department of Parks and Recreation, City of Sacramento, n.d.

<sup>13</sup> Steven M. Avella, *Sacramento: Indomitable City*, Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Press, 77.

<sup>14</sup> Avella, 77, 79.

<sup>15</sup> Myrtle Shaw Lord, *A Sacramento Saga: Fifty Years of Achievement- Chamber of Commerce Leadership*, Sacramento: Sacramento Chamber of Commerce c.1946, 188.

<sup>16</sup> Lord, 189, 199.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick Noble Evans, *Town Improvement*, New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1919.

<sup>18</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, "Frederick Evans, Superintendent of Parks, Dies" January 2, 1942; *Who's Who in California*, Los Angeles: Who's Who Publishing, 1940, 2.

<sup>19</sup> Avella, 96.

<sup>20</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, "William Land Park Links Work Hurrying," August 20, 1922. The original golf house was designed by Dean & Dean and replaced in the 1950s by a design of Rickey & Brooks. The latter firm also designed the Fairyland playground & a new modernist entrance gate to the zoo in the same period.

<sup>21</sup> Evans, "Draft General Plan for William Land Park," 1922; "General Plan for William Land Park, Sacramento, California," 1926. Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

<sup>22</sup> City of Sacramento, "Administrative Records, City Parks and Recreation Department 1915-1977." Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

<sup>23</sup> Evans, "General Plan."

<sup>24</sup> William Burg, *Sacramento Streetcars*, Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2006, 72.

<sup>25</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, "Atkinson to Get Alligators for Park," 7 September 1915, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Kenneth Johnson, "The Sacramento Zoo," typescript in files of City of Sacramento Department of Parks and Recreation, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, 1.

<sup>28</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, "Plans for Improving Zoo Grounds Are Made," n.d.

<sup>29</sup> *Sacramento Bee*, "Zoo Acquires Kangaroo," January 25, 1933.

<sup>30</sup> Sacramento Zoo at <http://www.saczoo.org>.

<sup>31</sup> Land Park Aerial Photographs circa 1932 in Sacramento Bee Photo Collection, Center for Sacramento History; Sacra-

mento, California.

<sup>32</sup> Patterson, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Interview Daisey Mah, Park Gardener, Park Maintenance Department, William Land Park, June 17, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> City of Sacramento, "Department of Parks and Recreation Administrative Records, 1915-1977," Center for Sacramento History, Sacramento, California.

<sup>35</sup> Correspondence, City of Sacramento to William L. Land, Esq., February 2, 1977. City of Sacramento, Parks and Recreation Department files.

<sup>36</sup> Cranz, 126.

<sup>37</sup> City of Sacramento, Park and Recreation department files.

<sup>38</sup> Sacramento Recreation and Park Committee, "Meeting Minutes, May 1956." Files of City of Sacramento, Parks and Recreation Department.

<sup>39</sup> Dates of construction were confirmed as part of a comprehensive park survey conducted in 2011 by Mead and Hunt Engineering and PGALandscape Design for the City of Sacramento, Department of Parks and Recreation.

<sup>40</sup> Correspondence, City of Sacramento to William L. Land, Esq., February 2, 1977.

<sup>41</sup> Rickey and Brooks, Architects, "Layout Plan and Architectural Drawings for Buildings, Sacramento Zoo Rehabilitation, 1960." files of City of Sacramento, Department of Parks and Recreation.

<sup>42</sup> This type of roof is composed of two intersecting fields of straight line, each line at a slightly different angle, producing a seemingly rounded shape using straight joists

<sup>43</sup> "Sacramento Mid-Century Modern Home Tour," at <http://sacmcmhometour>, June 11, 1961.

<sup>44</sup> Johnson, 9; Correspondence City of Sacramento to William L. Land, Esq., February 2, 1977.



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Back Cover: Native Matilija poppies in the foreground, with the Tower and Dome of Balboa Park's famed California Building beyond. Photograph by Rachel Cobb.