Mary Ann Hasemeier Henry (1918-2006)
Friend of the Desert, Fellow of CNPS

by Nancy Nies

If you go to Short Canyon, you’ll see a bronze plaque and a colorful kiosk, both honoring an exceptional woman — Mary Ann Henry — whose botanical work resulted in the protection of this and other areas of high biodiversity. It was on my first visit to Short Canyon, with a Kern CNPS field trip group on 24 March 2015, that I saw the plaque and kiosk — not to mention a spectacular display of spring wildflowers — and was prompted to learn more about the woman so devoted to the area that she spent a decade cataloguing its native plants, was responsible for its being designated an Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC), and acted as its docent, giving tours to many groups over many years.

Born in Seattle in 1918, Mary Ann Hasemeier attained the highest rank in Girl Scouting, that of Golden Eaglet, in 1936. Six years later she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in nursing from the University of Washington and married Ronald Henry. The couple spent five years living in Cincinnati, Ohio, before moving to the China Lake-Ridgecrest community, where Ron would work as a research chemist and where they would spend the rest of their lives. It was there that Mary Ann was to become a friend of the desert and accomplish much on its behalf.

While Mary Ann and her husband were raising three children in the 1950s, she served as president of the local Girl Scout Council as well as Cub Scout den mother, and helped build two Scout camps. The Henry family...
spent most weekends camping. It was then that Mary Ann began to teach herself botany with Edmund Jaeger’s *Desert Wildflowers*, filling in the book’s drawings with colored pencils each time she found a specimen. She also did coursework in botany, and became a respected field botanist.

Never working professionally as a nurse, Mary Ann did do volunteer work in the medical field, helping with area well-baby clinics, polio immunizations, and testing for tuberculosis and valley fever. She also volunteered her time to work with the Sierra Club, Maturango Museum, Audubon Kern River Preserve, Desert Tortoise Preserve, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Nature Conservancy, Mono Lake Committee, Yosemite Park Association, and California Native Plant Society. For years she was the conservation representative for the CNPS Bristlecone Chapter.

Mary Ann’s survey of the flora of Short Canyon provided the basis for its being named an ACEC by the BLM in 1988, and her work with the plants of Sand Canyon was, similarly, influential in its achieving ACEC status. Also, her five-year monitoring of a rare grass (*Swallenia alexandrae*) found at Eureka Dunes “has been incredibly important for evaluating population trends in dune grass, and has been relied upon in reviews of the dune grass listing as endangered,” according to botanist Michèle Slaton, of the CNPS Bristlecone Chapter. Mary Ann outlined her dune grass study and its conclusive results in her article, “A Rare Grass on the Eureka Dunes” (*Fremontia* 7 (2) 3-6, July 1979). She and her husband Ron were instrumental in the expansion of Death Valley National Park to include Saline and Eureka Valleys, and in establishing the boundaries for six wilderness areas created by the Desert Protection Act.

The Sierra Club’s Kern-Kaweah Chapter gave Mary Ann Henry its Sierra Club Cup Award — the chapter’s highest honor — in 1982 and its Long Trail Award in 1990. CNPS made her a Fellow in 1996. In 2002, the local chapters of CNPS, the Audubon Society, and the Sierra Club joined with the BLM’s Ridgecrest Field Office in recognizing Mary Ann’s years of dedication to Short Canyon by placing the bronze plaque there in her honor. It reads: “In recognition of her pioneering efforts to conduct the first systematic inventory of Short Canyon flora; her decades of service to environmental education; and her years of commitment to sustaining the desert’s beauty and biodiversity.”

When Mary Ann was named a CNPS Fellow, **Ann and Vincent Yoder** of the Bristlecone Chapter wrote (*Fremontia* 24 (3) 31-32, July 1996) that she “took time to develop an understanding of the ecology of the desert and to become its vigorous defender.” They called her “one of those rare individuals who [took] her role as citizen seriously,” and “an outspoken advocate of habitat preservation.” They wrote that she was an authority on the distribution and status of threatened desert plants and helped develop policies to protect them.

The Yoders wrote that another of Mary Ann’s major contributions was in educating the public. For many years she led weekly, booked-to-capacity spring wildflower walks, which the Ann and Vince Yoder called “an essential part of the Maturango Museum education program.” She also played a major role in the museum’s annual desert wildflower show, acting as its “lead botanist and guiding spirit,” said Charlotte Goodson, of the Bristlecone Chapter. In addition, Mary Ann led numerous Sierra Club outings, as well as botanical activities for hundreds of local sixth-graders in the Sand Canyon Environmental Education Program.