Mary Beal (1878-1964), Botanist of the Mojave Desert
by Nancy Nies

PART ONE

“IF YOU SHOULD COME UPON A SMALL, active woman in some isolated corner of the Mojave, wrapped about with photographic equipment and clinging to the canyon wall with fingers and toes while she decides whether to study a flower or investigate a mineral specimen, it will be quite safe to say: ‘Hello, Mary Beal.’”

This vivid description of an exceptional woman, written by her friend Harold Weight, appeared in the December 1948 issue of The Desert Magazine, where he and his wife Lucile were staff editors.

So, how did a young woman from Illinois, with no formal training in botany, end up spending most of her life in the California desert, developing friendships with well-known naturalists, collecting thousands of plant specimens for the Jepson Herbarium at the University of California at Berkeley, writing a regular botany column for The Desert Magazine, and leaving a legacy of desert protection?

Early Influences

According to a booklet entitled “The Floral World of Mary Beal,” written in 1969 by her friend Lucile Weight, Mary moved to Riverside, California, with her family in 1900. From 1906 to 1910, she worked at the Riverside library, where she became acquainted with John Burroughs (1837-1921), famed naturalist and nature essayist, when she aided him with reference materials.

Mary Beal and John Burroughs in front of her tent home on the Van Dyke ranch in Daggett, CA, 1911

The California Native Plant Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of California native plants and their natural habitats, and to increasing the understanding, appreciation, and horticultural use of native plants.
In 1910, suffering from a respiratory illness, Mary was advised by her doctor to spend some time in the desert. She then “boldly wrote John Muir, asking for advice on her escape from civilization” (John Muir Newsletter, Fall 1995). Muir recommended the Van Dyke ranch in Daggett, where Muir’s daughter Helen was herself recovering from a lung ailment. Calling Mary Beal “[a] pioneer botanist in an age of earnest and accomplished amateurs,” the article goes on to say that “she stayed for the rest of her life, dying on the ranch in her eighties.”

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When Mary first arrived in the rough-and-tumble town of Daggett, where her landlord was desert writer and judge Theodore Strong Van Dyke, she lived in a tent house. Lucile Weight writes that Mary originally intended to stay at the ranch for only 18 months, but that she fell in love with the desert and built herself a rustic cabin.

Mary was fascinated by desert plants, and taught herself botany in the evenings by the light of a kerosene lamp. Her textbooks were a dictionary and, after its publication in 1925, Willis Jepson’s comprehensive Manual of the Flowering Plants of California, which was — and, now updated and called the Jepson Manual, still is — the standard guide to California plants.

A Life of Independence, Exploration and Discovery

An article on Mary Beal and Minerva Hoyt, from the Mojave National Preserve’s website, sets the stage for Mary’s life: “The Mojave Desert in the Great Depression years of the 1930s was a desolate place — sparsely populated by miners, occasional botanists, and a few adventurers and loners.” The article points out that it would have been very unusual to find a woman living and traveling alone in such an inhospitable environment, but that Mary was irresistibly drawn to the desert and to its “hundreds of majestic, fascinating, largely unexamined plants.”

In 2016 Julia Sizek wrote an article whose title alone indicates what an adventurous, independent woman Mary Beal was, particularly for her time: “When Women Seldom Travelled Alone, This Botanist Wandered the California Deserts in Search of Rare Plants.” Traveling far and wide in the Mojave Desert, Mary explored a huge area including San Bernardino, Riverside and Inyo counties, writes Sizak.

Mary loved the solitude of the desert, writes Harold Weight, and enjoyed making expeditions alone or with her horse or dog. Searching for plants, Mary wandered the desert and climbed the mountains of the Mojave — the Providence Mountains, the New York Mountains, the Ords, and Clark Mountain — which Mojave National Preserve’s website terms “islands in the desert where a great variety of species can be found, and where the flowering season is extended far beyond that on the desert floor.”

Mary Beal’s life was also filled with the joy of discovery, as shown by her 1941 account of encountering a memorable example of Mentzelia involucrata (samija or stick-leaf). She had not seen it in ten years and had begun to doubt she would ever see it again. Mary called the sighting “a treasure-trove beyond my most wishful dreams,” and went on to say: “Even today I have a vivid memory of one gorgeous specimen that was truly the queen of the desert garden. Two feet high it stood, and twice as broad, with dozens of branches forming a magnificent rounding bush, a mound of lustrous silken blossoms. Surely the flowers were holding jubilee as well as I.”

In PART TWO (June 2021 issue)... Mary Beal’s contributions to Mojave desert botany, her contributions to The Desert Magazine, and her legacy.