Jane Seymour Pinheiro (1907-1978): Antelope Valley Artist, Botanist, Conservationist and Activist

by Nancy Nies

Part One

When my neighbor told me about her visit to the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve, she showed me a box of note cards she had purchased there, featuring lovely watercolor paintings of California poppies. I had not been familiar with the artist, Jane Pinheiro, but was to learn that she was a woman of many remarkable accomplishments, devoted to the betterment of life in the Antelope Valley and the preservation of the desert’s natural beauty.

Born Jane Seymour in Denver, she grew up in Salt Lake City, where she earned teaching credentials from the University of Utah. In the late 1920s, after her father died, Jane moved to California with her mother, who began running a boarding house in Pasadena. There, Jane met a young man from the Azores named Joe Pinheiro, whom she married in 1930. Ten years later, the couple moved to the Antelope Valley, so that Joe could take a job in the dairy at the “Pancho” Barnes Dude Ranch, located where Edwards Air Force Base is now.

Self-Taught Artist and Botanist

Living in the Antelope Valley, Jane came to know and love the desert wildflowers. She began to draw and paint them, becoming a self-taught botanist and authority on desert plants. Jane Pinheiro served as botanical consultant for the Nature Conservancy, as well as for publications such as Sunset Magazine. A UC Davis botanist, seeing Jane’s watercolor paintings, said they were so botanically accurate that they could be used for plant

Note card with painting entitled “California Poppies and Davy Gilia” by Jane S. Pinheiro
identification, calling them “a treasure” worthy of protection.

This led to the Lancaster Woman’s Club, of which Jane Pinheiro was a member, forming a Wildflower Preservation Committee. The group raised the funds to purchase 163 of Jane’s botanical watercolors and provide them with acid-free mountings, oak frames and protective padded envelopes for transport and storage. Eventually, the paintings would be housed in a place Jane would not live to see — the poppy reserve’s Jane S. Pinheiro Interpretive Center. More than a hundred additional paintings hang in the galleries of the Theodore Payne Foundation and the Native Plant Guild. Others hang across the US, from coast to coast.

Community Activist

Jane Pinheiro was an exceptionally capable woman, sensitive to the needs of her community and possessing both the will and the skill to “get the job done.” In 1949 Jane was instrumental in the establishment of what would become the Antelope Valley Medical Center. She would serve nearly 30 years on the hospital board. In 1950, foreseeing the need for water development in the valley, Jane began work to establish what would later be known as the Antelope Valley East Kern Water Basin Agency. That same year, Jane and a neighbor started the annual Quartz Hill Almond Blossom Festival. She also spent ten years on the Board of Directors of the Antelope Valley Fair. In addition, she founded the Antelope Valley Allied Arts Association and the Antelope Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship.

Environmental Activist

Early on, in the 1940s, Jane realized that rapid development threatened the desert trees and wildflower fields. Passionate about preserving and protecting the desert environment, Jane lobbied state and local officials on conservation issues. A friend of presidents and governors, she succeeded in convincing the California State Assembly to set aside almost 3,000 acres for the protection of the Joshua tree, creating what is now Saddleback Butte State Park.

She also worked to create Devil’s Punchbowl County Park and eight wildflower/wildlife sanctuaries, ranging from 100 to 455 acres in size, in the Antelope Valley, and raised funds for Red Rock Canyon, Morongo and Sand Ridge, as well. In 1963, for the benefit of the many people who came each spring to view the valley’s wildflowers, Jane established the first Antelope Valley Wildflower Center, which the Lancaster Woman’s Club ran each spring for the following twenty years, until the opening of the Jane S. Pinheiro Interpretive Center.

Despite failing health during her last decade of life, Jane continued her work to preserve the desert she loved. Known for her projects at the state and county levels, she also earned two national awards for her work in conservation — the Nature Conservancy’s Oak Leaf Award in 1975 and the Sol Feinstone Environmental Award in 1976. ✩ [to be continued in September issue.]

Thank You

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