Pacific Beach Historical Society
NEWSLETTER

P.O. Box 9200 San Diego, CA 92109 John Fry, Editor 272-6655 Vol. X, No. 11 November, 1988

KATE SESSIONS -- "THE MOTHER OF BALBOA PARK", NOT TO MENTION LA JOLLA, HORTON PLAZA, AND HOTEL DEL CORONADO

November 8 will mark the 133rd anniversary of the birth of Kate Sessions. It is a semi-tradition to devote the November newsletter to one of the best-known citizens of the beach. Since member George Silvani is going to talk about the history of Balboa Park at the November meeting, it is appropriate to talk about Kate Sessions -- "The Mother of Balboa Park", from Elizabeth MacPhail's biography of Kate.

On February 17, 1892, the Common Council passed City Ordinance #153 granting "K. O. Sessions the right to use and occupy certain lands of the City Park (Balboa Park) . . . for the purpose of establishing an experimental nursery and garden, and for the development and cultivation of said City Park for a period of not exceeding ten years, with water privileges."

The section of the park leased to Kate was the northwest corner at Sixth and Upas, covering some thirty acres. However, she actually cultivated and used only about ten acres. Her office and flower gardens were near the corner of Sixth and Upas and flower fields extended down the canyon to what is now the Cabrillo Freeway.

The ordinance further provided that "said K. O. Sessions will annually plant upon the land, for the use of the city 100 choice and varied sorts of trees, and care for the same while occupying the said land; and will also furnish annually to the city 300 ornamental trees in crocks or boxes to be used by the city in park, street, plaza or school ground planting." Other provisions were that the city would not bear any expense for fencing, or piping water to the land, and the grounds were to be at all times open to the public (on foot). One provision to cause a problem later, was that the city would furnish water free of charge in a quantity sufficient for the proper cultivation of the leased land.

In order to comply with her city lease, Kate began to grow trees that could be used for permanent planting in the park as well as those suitable for street and school yard planting. For permanent planting in the park she favored several varieties of acacia and eucalyptus that had not previously been grown in Southern California. Among her favorites were the lemon scented Eucalyptus *Citiodora* and the scarlet Eucalyptus *Ficifolia*. Other early favorites were the Silk Oak, Monterey cypress, Torrey Pine, cork oak, pepper, camphor and several varieties of palms. Many were grown from seedlings and cuttings imported from foreign countries, South Africa, Asia, Spain, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Mexico, and South America. Because the soil in the park was hardpan and full of rocks it was often necessary to blast holes large enough to plant the trees properly.

For street planting she favored the California and Mexican fan palms and the Cocos plumosa. The California fan palm (*Washingtonia filifera*) with its thick trunk proved to be a poor choice for street planting because of the trimming it needed as soon as it had grown to any size. The Mexican fan palm (*Washingtonia robusta*) with its narrower trunk was better suited for street planting but both had roots that within a few years were breaking through sidewalks. Even worse were the Canary Island date palms that were often planted in front yards and along curbs, but not recommended for that location by Miss Sessions. She soon transferred her allegiance from the fan palm to the Cocos plumosa, and palm she had admired greatly in Honolulu and which she found thrived in Southern California. Soon after the first two had been planted in the courtyard of Hotel del Coronado she bought some small plants from Henry Dreer of Philadelphia. When these bore seeds there was no need to buy

more. Kate was able to supply the demand for the Cocos plumosa from her own nursery. She planted for the city all the Cocos plumosas on both sides of Sixth from Date to Upas during her years in the Park. Among exotic plants first grown in her park nursery were the Bougainvillea, jasmine, Tecomas, the blue Agapanthus, plumbago from South America, and several shrubs from New Zealand.

Kate was fond of young children and they delighted in visiting her nursery and helping her. One job they did well was picking violets and arranging them in small bouquets -- a tedious and time consuming job that Kate was glad to pay for. The children received 10¢ for each bouquet, and amount with which they were well satisfied. The enighborhood children worked Saturdays, Sundays and after school during the season. One Sunday, when it was time to receive their pay one little girl refused to accept it, saying it was Sunday and she had been taught that it was not right to work for pay on that day. Kate said nothing, but the next day when the child returned to work she paid her double for her bouquets.

Roses and carnations were the favorite cut flowers for large bouquets, but the demand for little bouquets of fresh violets was always great. Camellias were another delicate flower much in demand for corsages and small flower arrangements, and Kate's camellias were especially beautiful. As for carnations, Miss Sessions said San Diego County could grow better carnations than any other seacoast point in California. Today the carnation is the official flower of the city of San Diego.

San Diego before the turn of the century claimed a number of prominent easterners as permanent residents. Among them were the families of U. S. Grant, Jr., and Jesse Grant, sons of President U. S. Grant. U. S. Grant, Jr. purchased the Hubbell mansion at Seventh and Ash, the present site of the El Cortez Hotel, and Jesse Grant built a beautiful Colonial style home at Sixth and Quince.

U. S. Grant, Jr. employed as governess for his children Miss Anna Held, kindergarten teacher and friend of the great English actress Ellen Terry. One afternoon Mr. Grant Brought home with him "A woman who was a recognized authority on trees, plants and flowers, Kate Sessions, who loved flowers and growing plants as much as Anna loved children. She possessed the magic gift of being able to thrust a seemingly lifeless twig into the earth and tell it to grow and in time it leafed, budded and bloomed. She and Anna were kindred natures. They became friends immediately and the friendship lasted through the years. Kate and Anna would at times tie oranges, lemons and citrus fruits to shrubs in order that children just arriving in California from the east might have the thrill of pulling golden fruit from the trees."

The Grant family enjoyed La Jolla and Mr. Grant encouraged Anna to buy a lot there. Anna envisioned a home on her land, especially one with a fireplace. One month after acquiring her own lot she began to build a fireplace, gathering rocks from her own lot and placing them with her own hands. Soon the fireplace was built, but there were no walls. Finally she employed Irving Gill, a young architect, to draw plans for a small building around the fireplace. He received $15 for his work. The following Thanksgiving the Grant family joined Anna in her new home. Mrs. U. S. Grant, Sr., widow of the President, was with the Grant family on that occasion. Soon after the cottage was built Miss Sessions, together with Anna, planted eucalyptus trees. Kate warned her friends that they would need a lot of water. One day Anna saw a tag on a tree from Kate. "This tree wants water." After that she was more careful. Flowers were planted and winding steps led down to the beach.

Friends urged Anna to put up more cottages, or even tents, where they could stay. From the one little cottage grew the Green Dragon Colony in La Jolla, a haven for noted writers, musicians and actors, including Ellen Terry, Madame Modjeska with her husband Count Bozenta, and Padereski. When Anna married Max Heinrich, pianist and baritone, Madame Madjeska was Matron of Honor, Bozenta the Best Man, and Mrs. U. S. Grant, Jr., furnished the wedding breakfast in the Grant home.

Early in 1895 Kate's mother, Harriet Sessions, became ill and it was thought a change of climate might help her. She and her husband, Josiah, with their son, Frank, came to San Diego to stay with Kate. Mrs. Sessions succumbed three months later on May 1, at the age of 66. After disposing of his property in East Oakland Kate's father moved to San Diego to make his home with her. He was helpful in overseeing the workmen in her nursery and this gave her more time to devote to her flower shop. Josiah has been described as a rough outdoorsman, gruff but pleasant when he wanted to be, and with an extensive vocabulary of old Anglo-Saxon swear words which he passed on to his

daughter. Kate's brother Frank also decided to make his home in San Diego and was given work in the nursery.

Early in 1897 the city decided to beautify Horton Plaza in the heart of downtown. The hedge around it had grown straggly and was forever covered with dust. The manager of the Horton House across the street was anxious that its "front yard" be beautified. It was decided that the Plaza should be planted with trees and Miss Sessions was consulted. She recommended the Cocos plumosa palm because it would grow tall and not obscure the view. This was her favorite palm, perhaps because it reminded her of the first ones she had seen waving gracefully in the breeze in Honolulu. Almost without exception all of the Cocos plumosa palms today, so prevalent along older streets in San Diego,; as well as those in Balboa Park, were grown from seedlings in Miss Sessions' nursery.

On January 19, 1897, Kate personally planted in the Plaza twenty-eight stripling Cocos plumosas two and a half feet tall. She planted them with great care and pride, selecting only the finest specimens, and over the years she watched them grow to their full height and beauty. Thirty-three years later, in July of 1930, tragedy struck. A young girl, age nineteen, was waiting for the streetcar on the Third Street side of the Plaza when the top of one of the trees fell without any warning, crushing her. She died instantly. Although there were many other persons in the Plaza at the time, she was the only one injured.

The top of the tree had snapped off without a sound, making a clean break across the trunk. Investigation determined that termites had eaten through the tree and a gust of wind completed the destruction. The trees had been trimmed only a few weeks before and appeared to be in good shape. All the trees were then examined and it was found that aerial termites had riddled the top of the defective tree, leaving the bottom whole. No other trees were affected. A Coroner's Jury charged park authorities with negligence in connection with the death and the family of the girl received an indemnity from the city. In order to help pay the damage settlement, park employees were docked one day's pay. This death, caused by the falling of one of her trees, distressed Miss Sessions greatly.

Although Kate's activities for the past several years had been confined to her park nursery and flower shop, an opportunity presented itself in August of 1899 to take over management of the botanical gardens of Hotel del Coronado. These gardens provided not only the trees and shrubs for the hotel grounds, but also the cut flowers for decoration in the hotel. All the public rooms and each dining table were graced with large bouquets of fresh flowers.

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☐ - $10/Single Membership ☐ - $15/Family Membership ☐ - $20/Business/Group Membership

Send to: Membership Secretary, Pacific Beach Historical Society, P.O. Box 9200, San Diego, CA 92109

* Make checks payable to: Pacific Beach Historical Society (or P.B.H.S.)

NOVEMBER MEETING

Member George Silvani will make a slide presentation on the history of Balboa Park at the meeting of November 5.

The meeting will begin promptly at **10:30 AM** in the auditorium at **Wesley Palms, 2404 Loring Street.** Members who would like to have lunch in the dining room following the meeting should call Wesley Palms in advance.

KATE SESSIONS' BIRTHDAY

On November 8, at 11 AM, Kate Sessions' 133rd birthday will be celebrated with the planting of shrubs at Kate Sessions Park. Ruth Smith reminds us that Kate Sessions Park was named 33 years ago, on the 100th birthday of Kate Sessions. Until that time it had been known as Soledad Terrace Park.

MEMBERSHIP

Renewing their memberships since the publication of the last newsletter were the following: Frank Poole, Jackie & Denise LeMay, A. H. & Dorothy Rock, the Ed Stotler Family, James P. Olmsted, Ruth Spurr, Michael Letson, Harry Neely, Mr. & Mrs. Leander Peik, David & Jean Young, Woody & Aili Ogden, James & Gwen Marinos.

Joining the society were Marlene Krueger and Kathryn Black. Welcome aboard -- we look forward to seeing you at the next meeting!

PACIFIC BEACH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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