

History Comes Alive!

by Hynda Rudd,
City Archivist (Retired),
and Club Member



Tales From the City Archives

Theodore Payne
as a young man.



Theodore Payne: Hero of Native Plants

■ Englishman was a champion of local native flora, some of which exist to this day because of his efforts.

I usually write about items that I come across in the City Archives vault. But this topic came while I sat across from John Wickham of the Chief Legislative Analyst's Office while he was also doing research in the Archives reference area. Because I love to chat with people doing research, one thing led to another, and out of the conversation I discovered an unknown entity named Theodore Payne.

I was very interested in Mr. Payne's activities with California plants. Also, my interest was truly piqued when I discovered, through speaking with Mr.

Wickham, President of the Theodore Payne Foundation in Sun Valley, California, that palm trees from the lower desert of Palm Springs and Palm Desert are the only species native to California. Therefore, I felt so inclined to learn more about local plants and the illustrious career of Mr. Payne, who spent his life, 70 years, in horticulture, being a preservationist and crusader of California-native plants, that I decided to investigate this very interesting history. I want to sincerely thank the Theodore Payne Foundation for giving me the book, Theodore Payne in His Own Words: A Voice for California Native Plants.

Theodore Payne was born June 19, 1872, in Northamptonshire, England. He was the fifth of six boys, and both his parents died before he was 12. But before his mother died, she had introduced him to the beauty and pageantry of flowers and beautiful gardens. While in school he was involved in botanical societies, pressed plants and apprenticed in a professional nursery at age 16. This is where he learned training in the nursery and seed business. In 1891, at 19, Payne saw a large display of California native plants at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, England. At 21, Payne migrated on his own to California, 6,000 miles from his home in England.

Young Payne sailed for New York in 1893, spending some time there, then went onto Chicago to visit the World's Fair. Upon arriving in the Golden State, Theodore, who

had been trained in the seed and nursery business, looked for that defined work in Los Angeles. On Main Street, just south of Second Street, he met a Scotsman, James H. Denham, who owned a seed store. He took an interest in the English lad and got him some part-time work picking apricots at a \$1.50 a day. This work and other jobs were not of a permanent nature and did not last long. Denham then offered Payne the opportunity to work as a gardener on a private estate in the Santa Ana Mountains. Payne claimed he was a seed and nurseryman, but took the position upon the advice of his new mentor. This position and work began Payne's interest in California wild flowers.

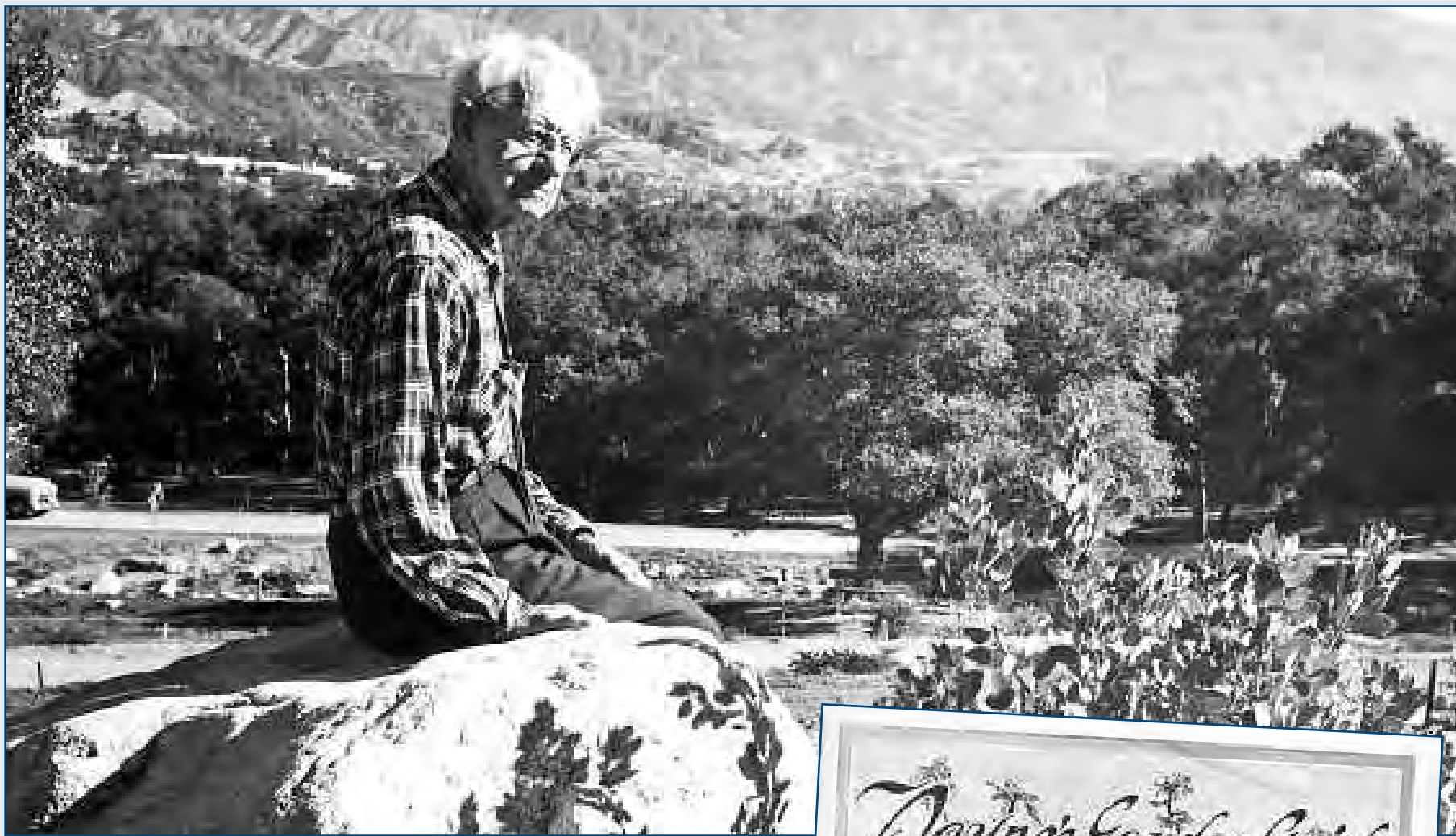
Theodore worked for two-and-a-half years where he was in charge of the gardens of the famous Polish stage actress, Madam Helena Modjeska (1840-1909), on her ranch called the "Forest of Arden" in Santiago Canyon, Orange County. His pay was \$35 a month with room and board. His work would include growing plants to maturity and bringing them to fruit or flower. His previous work entailed propagating young plants and trees. With the new job he would truly begin to see the fruits of his labor, past and present (no pun intended). In time, Theodore Payne wrote his memoir, *Life on the Modjeska Ranch in the Gay Nineties*, which continues to be a legacy and guidebook for park rangers and docents.

Upon leaving the Modjeska ranch, Payne toured Southern California. Then in 1896, he went to work in Los Angeles at the Germain Seed (then Fruit) Co., where he worked for seven years, the last year as manager of the operation. While working for the Germain Co., Theodore returned to England for a lengthy visit. The local seed and plant store was the handler of the magnificent pampas plumes that were prominent in southern California. On his trip abroad he represented the firm and sold more than 40,000 of the dried plumes in England and Germany.

In 1903, he began his own business at 440 South Broadway, where he had a seed store and nursery. Two



Theodore Payne's store on Main Street downtown.



Theodore Payne near the end of his career, sitting in the Descanso Gardens native plant garden he designed.

[Theodore Payne] introduced into cultivation in California between 400 and 500 species of wild flowers and native plants and made them available for general use.

years later he moved to 345 South Main St., where he remained until 1931. Early magazine ads stated, "A Breath of California for that Garden Back East," noting that for \$1 wild flower seed mixes (a variety of 20 mixes) could be sent by mail to interested parties.

At this time, Payne began specializing in California wild flowers, native plants and eucalyptus. Due to a lengthy and complex association between Theodore and a prominent Italian botanist in 1896, Payne sent him eucalyptus seeds that were planted in Libya, where they and their offspring continued into flourish into the mid-20th century, and possibly beyond. During this period, he purchased land at Hoover and 33rd Street to grow his great variety of plants and wild flowers. He grew native wild flowers in Hollywood and Pasadena. He also created a wild flower garden for the Raymond Hotel in Pasadena. In 1906, he published his first catalog, California Native Flower Seeds.

By 1913, Theodore Payne became the President of the Wildflower Club of the Southwest Museum. He laid out its native garden and developed its herbarium. Two years later, at what is now the Exposition Park Rose Garden, Theodore developed the first public area in Los Angeles planted entirely with native plants, trees and wildflowers; this was a five-acre wild garden containing 262 species. By the late 19-teens, he was commissioned to do horticulture projects at Pomona and Occidental Colleges and Tory Pines Park and Washington Park in Pasadena.

In 1922, Payne purchased property for a nursery on Los Feliz Boulevard. It sat across from the Lawry's Tam O'Shanter Restaurant, the oldest eatery still in existence under one family in the history of Los Angeles. The acreage of the planting ground was 10 acres. During this time and thereafter, Mr. Payne published articles and gave speaking engagements on the loss of California wildflowers.

Over the ensuing years, he was called upon throughout most of southern California to provide ideas and create and design plant materials for such prestigious places as the Santa Barbara Botanic Gardens, the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Orange County, which was moved in later times to Claremont. He was also commis-

sioned to provide private estate landscaping in Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Pasadena and Santa Barbara. In 1939, he created a native plant garden with 176 species at the California Institute of Technology, later the site of the Norman Church Laboratory.

On Theodore Payne's 80th birthday in 1952, he was honored as an honorary life member by the Southern California Horticultural Institute. In 1958, he developed a five acre native plant garden at Descanso Gardens in La Cañada. In 1960, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors set aside 320 acres in the Antelope Valley, near Llano, to become the Theodore Payne Wildlife Sanctuary, dedicated Jan. 28, 1961. At that time, the Theodore Payne Foundation (TPF) incorporated to carry on Payne's work.

I will now quote directly from Theodore Payne about his incredible career in horticulture.

"[I] start[ed] my career in horticulture in 1888, I have now spent 70 years of my life in this field. Of this period 65 years have been spent in California and 55 years in business for myself.... During this period I have introduced into cultivation in California between 400 and 500 species of wild flowers and native plants and made them available for general use. Some of these plants were introduced into Europe a long time ago but were unknown in California gardens."

(To find out the names of these wildflowers and plants, with the possibility to purchase them, please contact the Theodore Payne Foundation at (818) 768-1802.)

After 55 years in the business, Theodore's stock of plants, seeds and equipment went to the Theodore Payne Foundation, a nonprofit organization to perpetuate California's native flora. On his 90th birthday in 1962, the County Board of Supervisors celebrated the event. A



One of Theodore Payne's catalogs, dated 1927. The plant on the cover is a Nevin's Barberry, identified by Rev. Nevin, who discovered the native plant at the Buena Vista Street Bridge on the north side of Griffith Park. This highly endangered plant is currently in the nursery trade because of Theodore Payne's efforts.

year later, the California Garden Clubs awarded him "Man of the Year." On May 6, 1963, Theodore Payne passed away six weeks before his 91st birthday.

Mr. Payne married Alice Noyes in 1907. They had no children. But his foundation carries on as his namesake and all his historic traditions.

Photos courtesy John Wickham, the Theodore Payne Foundation.

Did You Know?

In 1881, the State Normal School, a forerunner of UCLA, is opened.

Did You Know is provided by Larry Williams, Bureau of Contract Administration.