



Ynes Mexia (1870-1938)

Biographical Sketch by Jane Radcliffe, Archives Volunteer

Ynes Mexia was born May 24, 1870 to Enrique Mexia and Sarah Wilmer Mexia. Accounts vary on the place of her birth: some say Washington, D.C. and some say Limestone County, Texas. Historians agree that her father was a representative at the Mexican consulate in Washington, and that in 1871 the family moved to Limestone County on a land-grant that is today Mexia, Texas.

Very little is known of her early life. There is a short note in Lisa Yount's book *A to Z of Women in Science and Math*, (New York, N.Y. Facts on File, 1999), telling us that "After two short unhappy marriages" she moved to San Francisco. The first husband is identified here as Herman de Laue, a German-Spanish merchant who died in 1904. In another source, Ynes is referred to, during this same period, as "Ynes Mexia de K."

Her second marriage was to D. Augustin Reygadas. His photo, dated 1919-1922, appears in an album in the Academy archives. Most photos in that album are taken of sites in California. The University of Texas online history source www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/view/MM/fme54.html says she moved to Mexico when she married him and to San Francisco after they separated.

In 1921 she was enrolled in botany classes at the University of California in Berkeley. A 1980 letter of John Thomas Howell, CAS Curator Emeritus of Botany, reminisces about the autumn of 1923 "when I was enrolled in freshman botany at UCB and Mrs. Mexia was attending advanced classes....We were on a field trip with the Calypso Club, the student botanical club. We had spent the day under the guidance of Herbert Mason (then a graduate student under Prof. Jepson) exploring the floristic riches of Jasper Ridge.....Separated from the rest of the club, we made a wrong turn....reached the station long after our train had departed....Eventually we arrived in Berkeley (by train to San Francisco, streetcar to Ferry Building, ferry across the Bay, interurban to Berkeley, streetcar to our homes). Mrs. Mexia never let me forget it!" It was apparently, at that time, very remarkable for that experience to have occurred **unchaperoned**.

In July of 1925, at the age of 55, Ynes wrote to Alice Eastwood, letting Miss Eastwood know that she was about to accompany Stanford's Assistant Herbarium Curator, Roxanna Ferris, on a collecting trip to Mexico. Ynes pointed out that she herself had lived for many years in Mexico, and could be of use. She offered to collect duplicate botanical specimens for the Academy, mentioning that she is financing her own trip. She asks whether, after the first of the year, the Academy might reimburse her expenses, in exchange for ownership of the specimens she sends. It is not clear whether this happened. It is certain that this began an association of many years.

She made seven more collecting trips during the next twelve years, to Alaska, Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina. Her letters to Alice Eastwood continued, from wherever her collecting trips took her. They usually began with thanks to Miss Eastwood for her last letter. Sometimes they pointed to the hardship of finding paper to use to dry the specimens. There is a telegram asking for driers

to be sent. There are also many mentions of specimens being sent to the Academy by steamer, giving information about when to expect the shipment.

When she was home in San Francisco, she gave lantern-slide lectures from time to time. One of those happened at the Academy in 1932. Notes on her travels appeared regularly in *The Gull*, newsletter of the Audubon Society of the Pacific, 1926-35. The *Sierra Club Bulletin* published two accounts of her adventures, "Three Thousand Miles up the Amazon" (*SCB*, 18:1 [1933], 88-96), and "Camping on the Equator" (*SCB*, 22:1 [1937], 85-91). Several accounts of her expeditions were published in *Madrono*, the journal of the California Botanical Society. It also published a biographical note after her death (*Madrono*, October, 1938, Vol. IV, No. 8, 274-275).

She was a member of the California Botanical Society, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Association of the Pacific, the Sociedad Geografica de Lima, Peru, and had been made a life member of the California Academy of Sciences. She was also an honorary member of the Departamento Forestal y de Casa y Pesca de Mexico.

Her specimen collections can be viewed at the Academy. Portions are duplicated at the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia; Catholic University, Washington, D.C.; the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago; Gray Herbarium, Harvard University; the University of California, Berkeley; and important museums and botanical gardens in London, Copenhagen, Geneva, Paris, Stockholm, and Zurich. Her personal papers are at the Academy and at the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley.

There is substantial agreement that she collected some 150,000 specimens. Estimates of new species range from two to 500. The *Sierra Club Bulletin* credits her with two new genera. Future botany scholars may provide a better picture of her important contributions.

In 1938 she became ill during one of her trips to the mountains of Oaxaca and was forced to return home. She died on July 12, 1938.

In the same 1980 letter where he described his student botanical club adventure with Ynes Mexia, John Thomas Howell refers to her as a "close friend of Alice Eastwood." He continues, "In 1933 she accompanied Miss Eastwood and me on the first Eastwood and Howell collecting expedition....in an open Model T Ford, that traversed parts of Nevada, Utah, Arizona, and California....and netted over 1300 collection numbers.....Mrs. Mexia was to me a dear good friend."

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