

By Milt Stark

California Poppies

Antelope Valley Reflections, Volume 4, Number 2, Winter 1996

At the age of eight, I fell in love with the California poppy, a feeling that has not diminished over the years. In the spring of a wet year, as we traveled west from Lancaster, we went through these fantastically brilliant fields of poppies. The fields around the Palm Ranch (now known as Quartz Hill) blazed solid orange while the alluvial fans below the hills appeared on fire. Some of the perennial poppies were as large as coffee cups and a very dark orange.

The early Spanish explorers apparently also fell in love with them, for in their journals they described the foothills of the Coast Range as having limitless fields covered with "copper-hued poppies: open mouthed to the sun" (Saunders, *Western Wild Flowers*, 1). These vivid oranges and yellows were so intense, they were painful to some eyes. Some sailors called this land La Tierra del Fuego, the Land of Fire (a name already given to the southern coast of South America). Other sailors referred to this land as La Sabanilla de San Pasqual the Altar Cloth of St. Pasqual-in reference to the shepherd saint in Spain who, far from village and church, knelt in fields of flowers to commune with God. The area where the largest and most brilliant stands of poppies grew was known as Rancho San Pasqual. We now know the area as Pasadena, Altadena and Sierra Madre. Bright orange swaths of color that looked like horses' tails spilled out of the foothills and could be seen 25 miles away from the ships at sea (Saunders, *With the Flowers*, 104). The Spanish name for poppy was *amapola*. Some people called them *dormidera* (the drowsy one), because the flowers close up at night, when the wind blows or when there is cloud cover. Other names were *torosa* or *toronja*. Some Americans called them *copa de ora*, which means cup of gold.

Despite the attention given the poppies by the early Spanish, it was not until 1792 or 1793 that Archibald Menzies, surgeon and naturalist on Captain Vancouver's ship, collected poppy seeds at various locations in California. Believing the plant to be a variety of the European plant called celandine, he gave the seeds to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew, London, where they were planted with little success. Some 20 years later another botanist, Adelbert von Chamisso, with the Russian scientific expedition under the command of Otto von Kotzebue, collected poppy seeds along with a number of other flowers in November among the sands of the San Francisco Bay. Because of the late season, von Chamisso was totally unaware of the spectacular displays this flower can provide. In 1820, a description of the plant was given with a scientific name, *Eschscholtzia cali/ornica*. The name was given to honor von Chamisso's friend, Dr. Johann Eschscholz, who had been the surgeon with the Kotzebue expedition. David Douglas, botanist and seed gatherer for the London Horticultural Society, later described the beauty of the California poppy fields and popularized the flower in European gardens.

Even though it is not unusual for scientific names of plants to change many times over the years as new information is developed, *Eschscholtzia cali/ornica* has not only remained, but botanists have found many other species of the *Eschscholtzia*. The *Jepson Manual* lists 11 species found in California, the most common of which is *E. minutiflora* or small gold poppy. The *Eschscholtzias* are in the Papaveraceae or poppy family. Most of the flowers in that family have colored juice, showy flowers and many stamens with twice as many petals as sepals. In the genus *Eschscholtzia*, the calyx is shaped like a tall cap and falls off as the bud opens. All have one pistil, made of two or more parts, more or less united. The ovary is superior and is one-celled. The fruit is a long, slender capsule with many tiny seeds. In most flowers, the calyx or external covering of the bud (usually green) continues to be part of the flower as it opens up like an upside down umbrella, but the calyx of the California poppy falls off, and the petals unfurl. The way to identify an *Eschscholtzia* is to look for the pink ring at the base of the cap, flower or seed pod. Leaves are grey-green, sometimes red on new plants, lacy or fernlike. Most of the poppies in the Antelope Valley area



At one time, vast fields of poppies were so intense in color that they could be seen 25 miles away by ships at sea

have four petals. However some may be found with either six or eight petals. Height is from six to 18 inches. California poppies are indigenous to California and to small areas in Arizona, Nevada and Oregon. However there are reportedly large fields of California poppies in Australia and India that have escaped from domestic gardens. Poppies grow at the seashore as well as in the deserts and at higher elevations. (See the *Jepson Manual of Higher Plants of California* for additional botanical information.)

E. californica is exceedingly variable in color and growth patterns. Munz, in his *A Flora of Southern California*, states that there are "over 50 subspecies proposed for the state; much in need of study" (627). But none of these are listed. The *Jepson Manual* indicates "90 taxa have been described" (814). (Each taxa is a separate species.) California poppies may be perennial, annual or biennial. Annuals grow each year from seeds, but the seeds will not sprout unless the right amount of moisture falls at the right time. Seeds may accumulate, lying dormant in the soil for many years. When conditions are right, this accumulation of seeds bursts forth, leading to spectacular displays, such as the ones in 1991 and 1995. Perennials grow up year after year from the same roots with the new plant beginning to grow in the fall as soon as the mature plant dies off. Poppies vary in color from ice white to dark orange and can be many shades in between as well as variegated. The color tends to become lighter as the season progresses. When they receive the proper amount of moisture, they will bloom well into the fall.

Unlike most flowers in the poppy family, California poppies are only slightly narcotic. However, they are strong enough so that the Indians used the foliage as a toothache remedy, pushing the leaves into the offending cavity. The tea made from the leaves was used as a lineament for headaches and as a sedative for babies. Some tribes ate the foliage as a vegetable. Cahuilla women living in Palm Springs used the pollen as a facial covering or cosmetic. The early Spanish believed that it would grow hair. They would put suet or lard into a pan, sprinkle many poppy petals into the pan and simmer until the mixture became firm. They called the concoction *Pomade de Amapola* and would faithfully rub it into their balding heads.

For as long as there have been travelers and settlers in the Antelope Valley, people have been amazed and delighted with the great golden expanses of California poppies covering much of the west side in the spring of wet years. Because of this floral phenomenon, hundreds of acres were set aside as the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve located on the Antelope Butte at about 135th Street West off of Lancaster Road. But this reserve did not just happen.

In the beginning there was Jane Pinheiro-known to some as the Great Poppy Lady-and then there was Dorothy Bolt and a host of dedicated citizens with one goal in mind:

To establish a poppy reserve to protect and honor the state flower. (The California Legislature had officially designated the California poppy as the state flower in 1903.) **Jane Pinheiro** was a self-taught wildflower artist and botanist, beginning her watercolor painting in the 1940' s while living on Poncho Barnes Ranch (now part of Edwards Air Force Base). In the 1950' s she was already concerned about how urban development might destroy not only the poppy, but also the Joshua tree and many other of our important wildflowers. In 1960 Jane successfully persuaded the state through Assemblyman Allen Miller-to set aside 2,720 acres to protect the Joshua tree. This area is now called Saddleback Butte State Park. Political lobbying and the support of citizens and local groups as well as the Theodore Payne Foundation, the Nature Conservancy and other national preservation groups led to eight additional wildlife and wildflower areas being set aside in the Antelope Valley between 1960 and 1964. They range in size from 40 to 455 acres. Jane credited librarian Anna Davis and the local Native Daughters of the Golden West with the original dream of establishing a poppy park. Jane Pinheiro kept this dream alive for 30 years before it became reality.



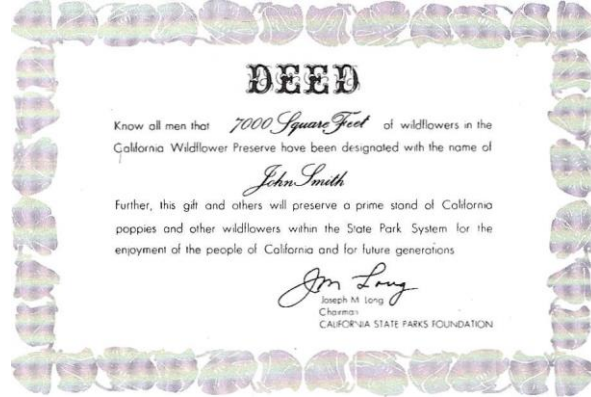
Jane Pinheiro's drawings and paintings of desert wildflowers were a catalyst for the movement to create the Antelope Valley California Poppy Reserve

In 1963 Pinheiro, together with members of the Lancaster Women's Club, including Dorothy Bolt, established the first Antelope Valley Wildflower Center. Jane rented a building on Sierra Highway on the present site of the A V Convention Center. Jane's paintings were on display along with identified wildflowers in small containers. Directions were given as to where to find the best wildflowers. The popularity of the center grew so that, after several years, the Chamber of Commerce agreed to pay the expenses to have the center in a large building on the fairgrounds. The Women's Club continued to provide the staff. During the wildflower season it was not unusual to see a dozen tour busses in the center's parking lot. Later, the center moved to the Essex Hotel. When the chamber could no longer afford to pay the expenses, the center was moved to a small building on Avenue J and later to the Fairmont store near the present location of the Poppy Reserve.

A botanist from UC Davis visited one of these wildflower centers and, after examining Jane's watercolors, urged the Women's Club to buy as many as possible so as to preserve them for public view. He declared them to be botanically correct and really quite a treasure. In 1970 Dorothy Bolt, as chair of the Conservation Committee of the Women's Club, spearheaded a plan to buy the watercolors. Jane agreed to sell 125 of the paintings for \$5,000. Dorothy was able to involve 14 other local organizations to form the Wildflower Preservation Committee, an ad hoc committee of the Women's Club. The purpose was to raise the money to buy the paintings. About this time, Jane was sent a copy of a five-year study done by the Resources Agency of the California Department of Parks and Recreation which recommended that the best location for a state park to preserve the state flower was around the Antelope and Fairmont buttes, 14 miles west of Lancaster. In view of this recommendation, the Wildflower Preservation Committee decided that, once they had raised the money to buy the paintings, their objective would be to raise money to buy land for the poppy park.

The Wildflower Preservation Committee undertook many fundraising projects over the years. Dorothy Bolt contacted Mr. Long, President of the State Parks Foundation (a private organization designed to raise money to benefit state parks), and persuaded him of the merits of the project. The foundation set the poppy park as its second highest priority. The committee developed brochures and "I GAVE TO SAVE" decals (designed by Jane) to advertise their efforts. The local schools joined in by starting the "Pennies for Poppies" program. Local school children raised \$1,400 by saving up pennies. The state superintendent of schools agreed to make this a statewide program, raising an additional \$14,000. People donating to the project were given "deeds" to land. Five dollars "bought" you 300 square feet; \$625 bought a whole acre. One brochure suggested donating money in memory of deceased loved ones would be very appropriate. Altogether, the local group raised about \$67,000. The State Parks Foundation received large donations from corporations, totaling \$350,000. Tills money, along with state and federal matching funds, led to the purchase of 1,755 acres on Antelope Butte. Augusta and Vernon Thompson, then co-chairs of the Wildflower Preservation Committee, did the actual negotiations for the land. Nine hundred and ninety acres were purchased from the Munz family. Forest Godde made two large donations of land. The dedication ceremony--held April 24, 1976--was a bicentennial event where the State Parks Foundation officially turned the land over to the State of California. During the ceremony it was announced that the interpretive center to be built on the reserve would be called the Jane S. Pinheiro Interpretive Center and that it would house, among other things, the Pinheiro paintings purchased by the Wildflower Preservation Committee, which would be donated to the state.

A fifteen-member Antelope Valley State Parks Advisory Committee was formed with Jane Pinheiro as chair. The purpose of the committee was to provide local input in the development of state parks. After Jane died on October 14, 1978, I was elected chair. During my tenure, we developed plans for the interpretive center. The energy-efficient building was dedicated and opened for visitors April 17, 1982. A group known as the Poppy Reserve Interpretive Association (now the Poppy Reserve/Mojave Desert Interpretive Association) was organized to operate the gift shop.



The Lancaster Women's Club spearheaded the drive to raise money for the poppy park. Above is a sample "deed" sold in the effort.

Works Cited

- Hickman, James C., Ed. *Jepson Manual of Higher Plants of California*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1993.
- Munz, Philip. *A Flora of Southern California*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1974.
- Saunders, Charles Francis. *Western Wild Flowers and Their Stories*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., 1933.
- Saunders, Charles Francis. *With the Flowers and Trees in California*. New York: McBride, Nast and Co., 1914.