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Mary Agnes Chase

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Mary Agnes Chase was born in 1869. Her father died when she was quite young, which unfortunately put her and her family on a pathway of financial insecurity that precluded higher education. In 1903, shortly after the death of her husband, Agnes Chase moved to Washington, D. C. as a scientific illustrator for the Department of Agriculture. Botany was an acceptable career for women in those days, especially if it meant becoming a botanical illustrator. Becoming a real botanist who explored for plants, described new species, and published papers was an entirely different matter. In 1905, she started to work for Albert Spear Hitchcock, one of the country’s leading botanists and a world-renowned expert on the grasses. Being a person of great intelligence and sensitivity, she fell in love with grasses. So began a distinguished botanical career of her own. She became Hitchcock’s scientific collaborator and was a major force behind the publication of The Manual of Grasses in 1935. Chase was an avid field botanist, often paying for collecting trips with her own money. She retired as Senior Botanist at the Smithsonian in 1939, having become the successor to Hitchcock. She stayed on as an unsalaried research scientist, working five or six days a week, until her death in 1963.

One of her greatest accomplishments was the revision of The Manual, which appeared in 1951. Many of us, wanting to give her the recognition that she deserved, always call it “Hitchcock and Chase.” A year before her death, Chase and Cornelia Niles published the Index to Grass Species, a photographic reproduction of about 80,000 index cards that showed where the scientific names of grasses were first published and additional items of nomenclature. Admittedly, it was not an instant best-seller, but for those of us who delve into this arcane subject, the Index is an invaluable resource. I am not sure that any other major plant or animal group ever had such a reference.

Her pen and pencil illustrations have been preserved in the Hitchcock-Chase Collection of Grass Drawings at the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation of the Carnegie Mellon University. If you look carefully, you will discover that a number of the beautiful grass illustrations in the two volumes of the Flora of North American North of Mexico are reproductions of her originals.

In her later years, Mrs. Chase might have been seen as the type specimen of the pleasantly eccentric little old lady. She even brought in home-made cookies for her colleagues in the Herbarium. But as a young woman she was not all that shy and retiring. She was a suffragette and a pacifist. On two occasions she was jailed for helping at the public burning of copies of speeches by President Woodrow Wilson and for picketing across the street from the White House in support of a woman’s right to vote. She went on a hunger strike, was force fed, but apparently not subjected to enhanced interrogation. She was active in a number of suspect organizations with questionable objectives – the Women’s Party, the Women’s Christian Temperance Union, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Socialist Party, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. She was opposed to the use of alcohol and tobacco. Government officials in the U. S. D. A. raised the issue of her continued employment. Her boss, A. S. Hitchcock, came immediately to her defense. The crisis passed. She would spend the rest of her life defending and supporting women’s causes, particularly in attracting more women into the sciences.
TIMELINE

1869  Born in Iroquois County, Illinois
1888  Marries William Ingraham Chase, who dies a year later of tuberculosis
1890  Hired by the Inter-Ocean newspaper in Chicago as proofreader and typesetter
1897  Begins her formal recording of her collections; begins collaboration with minister-botanist E. J. Hill
1899  Illustrates plants in C. F. Millspaugh’s Plantae Utowanae for the Field Museum of Natural History
1900  Hired by the U. S. D. A. as a meat inspector in the Chicago stockyards (~1903)
1901  Illustrates plants in C. F. Millspaugh’s Plantae Yucatanicae for the Field Museum of Natural History (~1904)
1901  Hired as Assistant in botany at the Field Museum in Chicago
1903  Moves to Washington, D. C. and is hired as botanical illustrator by the U. S. D. A.
1905  Begins association (artist -> scientific colleague) with A. S. Hitchcock
1907  Appointed by Hitchcock as Scientific Assistant in Systematic Agrostology
1911  Excluded from expeditions to Panama because of her gender
1913  Collecting trip to Puerto Rico, her first extended foreign trip
1915  Spends 10 days in jail for helping to burn copies of President Woodrow Wilson’s speeches
1918  Arrested a second time for attending a rally in Lafayette Square picketing the White House
1923  Visits European herbaria and museums (~1923)
1924  Promoted to Assistant Botanist
1925  Collecting trip to Brazil
1929  A second collecting trip to Brazil; scales Mt. Aconcagua, the highest in South America
1935  A second trip to European herbaria
1936  Appointed Senior Botanist in charge of all Systematic Agrostology
1937  Appointed custodian of the Section of Grasses at the U.S. National Museum
1939  Retires, but stays on as Research Associate at the U. S. National Museum
1940  Collecting trip to Venezuela, her last major expedition
1956  Receives Certificate of Merit from the Botanical Society of America
1958  Receives honorary Doctor of Science from the University of Illinois, her only college degree
1959  Made the eighth Honorary Fellow of the Smithsonian Institution
1961  Becomes Fellow of the Linnean Society of London
1963  Dies in Bethesda, Maryland; her ashes are interred beside her husband’s grave.

PUBLICATIONS


1940. Report to the Minister of Agriculture of Venezuela. Forage Crop Gaz. 4: 7-10.


**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


