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# Mary Agnes Chase

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## **MARY AGNES CHASE (1869–1963): FROM ILLUSTRATOR TO DEAN OF AMERICAN AGROSTOLOGISTS**

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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  
1900 Illustrates plants in C. F. Millspaugh's *Plantae Utowanae* for the Field Museum of Natural History  
1901 Hired by the U. S. D. A. as a meat inspector in the Chicago stockyards (-> 1903)  
1903 Illustrates plants in C. F. Millspaugh's *Plantae Yucatanae* for the Field Museum of Natural History (->1904)  
1901 Hired as Assistant in botany at the Field Museum in Chicago  
1903 Moves to Washinton, 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  
1922 Visits European herbaria and museums (-> 1923)  
1923 Promoted to Assistant Botanist  
1924 Collecting trip to Brazil  
1925 Appointed Associate Botanist  
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.

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| 1906. Notes on genera of Paniceae. I. Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington 19: 183-192, her first scientific paper               | 1911. Notes on genera of Paniceae. IV. Proc. Biol. Soc. Washington 24: 103-160.  |
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