

A Life Redeemed: Susan Delano McKelvey and the Arnold Arboretum

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Fleeing a broken marriage in middle age, a wealthy New York socialite came to Boston and created a wholly new life as botanist at the Arnold Arboretum

Towards the end of the First World War there came to the Arnold Arboretum a thirty-six-year-old woman whose life had just fallen to pieces. To be sure, she could command resources to cushion the fall that no ordinary person could—great wealth, family name, social prominence—but those resources had been powerless to prevent it. A native of Philadelphia, a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, and a member of New York's social elite (she was, for example, a cousin of President-to-be Franklin Delano Roosevelt), the woman had married a New York attorney in 1907, settling into a comfortable life on Long Island as wife, mother, and socialite. But the Great War soon called her husband away to Washington, D. C., and in 1916 one of her two young sons died. At war's end, upon her husband's return, their marriage broke up. No doubt to escape the tempest their separation would cause in New York society, she fled to Boston, where she apparently had relatives (she was descended from the Adamses of nearby Braintree, for example, and from the Bradfords of Plymouth). In Boston she would create for herself an entirely new life: she would become, of all things, a botanist.

Her training in this new and unfamiliar field started literally from scratch. Not long after arriving in Boston she approached Professor Charles Sprague Sargent, the founding Director of the Arnold Arboretum, about the possibility of working as a volunteer at the

Arboretum—perhaps as a means of forgetting her marital troubles. She wanted to study landscape architecture, too. In any event, “The Professor,” as she came to call Sargent, set her to washing clay pots in the Arboretum's greenhouses, to test her resolve. Presently, at Sargent's urging, she began to study the plants on the grounds of the Arboretum and in its greenhouses under the tutelage of William H. Judd (1861–1949), who was the Arboretum's propagator.

Early on, she took a particular interest in the lilac collection, just then under development. For the next four and a half decades, in one capacity or another, this dedicated, resourceful, and indefatigable woman was affiliated with the Arnold Arboretum. During those decades, which seem to have been happy ones, she became a respected botanist, making many collecting forays to the western United States and writing three scholarly works in her chosen field. Upon Sargent's death in 1927, perhaps out of gratitude for his and the Arboretum's crucial aid in rehabilitating her life, she and her brothers—one of them an internationally known architect—contributed generously to the Arboretum's endowment.

Ultimately, she became a member of the Arboretum's Visiting Committee and a staunch champion of the Arboretum during the painful and divisive court battle of the 1950s and 1960s, the so-called “Arnold Arbo-

return controversy." Her name was Susan Adams Delano McKelvey, née Susan Magoun Delano. Until now, few details of her life have been known. Here, in brief, then, is her life's story, reconstructed from evidence scattered from California and Mexico to Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

Her Early Years: 1883–1919

Susan Adams Delano (as she preferred to be known) was born Susan Magoun Delano in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on March 13, 1883, of "pure New England ancestry—parsons, shipbuilders and shipowners, schoolmasters, bankers, and so forth"—to use her brother William's phrase. She was the fifth child of Eugene Delano (a merchant and banker) and Susan Magoun Adams Delano. Her maternal grandfather, the Reverend William Adams (1807–1880; Yale, 1830), had been instrumental in founding Union Theological Seminary in New York and, from 1873 until his death, had served as its president. While Susan Delano was yet a child the family left Philadelphia for New York City, where she grew up. Entering Bryn Mawr College's Class of 1906 early in the new century, she majored in English and French. In her freshman and senior years she played on her class field hockey team. Taking not a single botany or biology course, she used instead the first-year geology course to fulfill her science requirement. In 1907 she graduated.

On October 8, 1907, she married a young attorney, Charles Wylie McKelvey (1878–1957), and moved with him to an estate ("ten acres on which there is a remodeled white frame colonial house, large farm group and two cottages") in Oyster Bay, Long Island, only a few miles from Syosset, home of her brother, William Adams Delano (1874–1960), an architect. Her husband and her brothers William (who was affectionately known as "Billy") and Moreau (1877–1936; a banker) all were graduates of Yale (classes of 1900, 1895, and 1898, respectively); at Yale, all had been



Susan Delano in 1898, at about the age of fifteen years. Photograph courtesy of Jon Katherine McKelvey.

members of the Scroll and Key senior society, and it was no doubt through the society and her brother Moreau that she met her husband, Charles.

After graduating from Yale, Billy studied at the Columbia University School of Architecture and then at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, from which he received a *diplome* in 1902. Returning to New York, Billy and his friend Chester Holmes Aldrich (1871–1940) founded the architectural firm of Delano & Aldrich in 1903. In the same year he began teaching design at Columbia. Over the next several decades Billy Delano would establish a national and international reputation as an architect. He would design vast estates on Long Island, embassies in Paris and Washington, the Post Office in Washington, D. C., and



Portrait of William Adams Delano (1874–1960), Susan Delano McKelvey's elder brother, by Dunbar Beck. Courtesy of the National Academy of Design.

the Venice Art Gallery; in 1948, at the request of President Truman, he would design the second-story balcony in the south portico of the White House. From 1949 until 1952 would be consulting architect to the Commission on the Renovation of the Executive Mansion and from 1929 until 1946 a member of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. In 1958, toward the end of his long and productive life, he would be able to declare in an interview with the *New Yorker* magazine that "I've known every President of the United States from Teddy Roosevelt to the present day, except Harding."

Some time during the 1910s (the record is unclear on the exact date) the Delanos—Billy, Moreau, and Susan McKelvey—apparently became benefactors of the Arnold Arboretum, responding perhaps to one of Charles

Sprague Sargent's annual funding appeals. Though the record is unclear on this point and an exact chronology probably irretrievable, it seems likely that there was some kind of connection between the Delanos and the Arboretum before Mrs. McKelvey retreated to Boston in 1919. Perhaps her brother William, being an architect and therefore interested in the use of plants for landscaping, had made the initial contact in the course of some routine business. In any event, once in Boston Susan Delano McKelvey was able to start rebuilding her shattered life with the indispensable help of Charles Sprague Sargent and the Arnold Arboretum.

In Lilac Time: 1919–1928

Once Sargent had given her the initial nudge, McKelvey threw herself wholeheartedly into mastering the various aspects of botany, maintaining her zeal for the subject virtually until her death in 1964. She began her career in classic fashion by participating in a botanical "expedition," an arduous, five-week collecting trip to Glacier National Park in August and September 1921. Years before (in the 1880s) Charles Sargent had recommended that the area and its "appallingly grand" scenery "be set aside as a forest preserve." McKelvey was accompanied by her surviving son, thirteen-year-old Delano McKelvey (1908–1965); Professor John G. Jack (1896–1935) of the Arnold Arboretum; and a man she identified in her diary only as "Mr. Dall." [Dall may have been a son of William Healy Dall [1845–1927], the paleontologist who had worked at the Smithsonian Institution and after whom the Dall's sheep was named. A native of Boston, the elder Dall had studied with Louis Agassiz at Harvard and had worked in the West and Alaska in his younger days. Less likely, "Mr. Dall" may have been Curtis B. Dall, a son-in-law-to-be of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose daughter he married in 1926.] In any event, "Mr. Dall" was the expedition's official photographer. Many of his photographs, "taken for Mrs. Susan De-

lano McKelvey," are preserved in the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

Travelling by train from New York City, the party passed through Cleveland, northern Indiana, and Chicago; crossed the Mississippi; and proceeded to Saint Paul, where they boarded the Great Northern Railroad for the last leg of the trip, passing through North Dakota and thence into Montana. All during the trip, Susan McKelvey took careful notes on the landscape and plants she saw from the train's window, notes that show she was progressing well in her study of botany. After three days of travel they were in Glacier National Park.

Because little botanical work had been done in the gargantuan, million-acre Park since it was established in 1910, the expedition offered an opportunity for making original contributions to botany. Travelling first by bus and then afoot and on horseback, the party made well over four hundred collections of herbaceous and woody plants in the Park and from nearby parts of Montana. "There is no time like the present" to collect a plant, Professor Jack had admonished McKelvey on this, her first-ever collecting trip.

Jack introduced her to the rigors of packing and shipping live plants back to the Arnold Arboretum and—worse yet—of pressing and drying plant specimens. "Specimens are placed in manila—labelled—. . .," she wrote in her diary, "and then placed between blotters on driers. These are strapped between the wooded slats and strapped tight. There is plenty of steam heat at Many Glacier which helps in the drying. Mr. J[ack]. suggests standing them sidewise so that the heat can have freer circulation. The driers are changed morning & evening which is quite a job!" A few days later she confided, "Rested in am. if it can be so called as I pressed & dried specimens. Can't possibly label everything now."

In July of the next year McKelvey and Jack made a much briefer collecting trip, to the White Mountains of New Hampshire. Back in



Susan Delano McKelvey as a young woman. This photograph was taken in New York City before Mrs. McKelvey came to Boston. It is used through the courtesy of Jon Katherine McKelvey.

Boston, McKelvey worked up both collections and in March 1923, at Sargent's suggestion, shipped nearly two hundred specimens to Alice Eastwood (1859–1953) at the California Academy of Sciences, initiating thereby a long and friendly association with the renowned California botanist. Early in her career Eastwood had spent three days collecting plants in the Rocky Mountains with Alfred Russel Wallace and in 1914 had collected for

the Arnold Arboretum in the Yukon. "I often see your name on the Arnold Arboretum specimens," McKelvey wrote to Eastwood, "and wish I were as good a collector as I hear you are!"

Despite this early period of fieldwork, however, McKelvey's interest had begun to focus on the Arboretum's developing lilac collection, again at the suggestion of Sargent. In the Arboretum's library, herbarium, and collection of living plants she found "unusual advantages for study." It was in *Syringa*—the lilacs—that she would make her first significant contribution to botany, a monograph on the genus *Syringa*. Nonetheless, she would not forget the collecting techniques she had learned in the wilderness of Montana. They would come into play again before the decade was out.

Over the next seven years she would visit lilac collections in the United States, Canada, England, and France, gathering information for her book. She would visit numerous plant nurseries and would examine preserved specimens in herbaria at Kew and Paris, as well as in the Gray Herbarium of Harvard University, and would borrow specimens from Kew, the British Museum, Edinburgh, and Budapest. She would correspond with Renato Pampanini in Florence, Camillo K. Schneider, Cecil E. C. Fischer, and other specialists, as well as with growers in the United States, France, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and other countries. She would pore over herbals, the early botanical literature, monographs, botanies, floras, and the botanical and horticultural journals of ten countries, as well as the catalogs of well known nurseries in many of those same countries. In 1925 she would describe a new species of *Syringa* (*Syringa rugulosa*).

The resulting book, *The Lilac: A Monograph*, appeared in 1928, published by Macmillan. Ernest H. Wilson, "Keeper" of the Arnold Arboretum, had written a short section for it on the history and distribution of the lilac, and Alfred Rehder had supplied

both a description of the genus and its sections and a taxonomic key, and had helped in many other ways. By the time *The Lilac* was published, McKelvey would be an authority.

The Lilac was well received. *The Journal of the Royal Horticultural Society* called it a "remarkable volume on the genus *Syringa*—a unique monograph which will for many years constitute a monument to the remarkable research and painstaking industry of an American lady-botanist [sic]." *Horticulture, Scientific Monthly, Rhodora, Landscape Architecture, the New York Times and Herald Tribune, the Times of London*, and many other publications—professional and lay alike—lavished praise on it.

In gratitude for Sargent's unstinting support for the lilac project, McKelvey had dedicated *The Lilac* to, simply, "The Professor." But Sargent would not know of it, for he had died on March 22, 1927, in his eighty-sixth year, whereupon Ernest Wilson had become "Keeper" of the Arnold Arboretum. With Sargent's death and the publication of her book, McKelvey would make an abrupt about-face:—she would turn her sights toward the plants of the American Southwest.

The Road to Freedom: 1928–1936

McKelvey in Boston and her brothers William and Moreau in New York contributed, generously but behind the scenes, to the Charles Sprague Sargent Memorial Fund, a successful nationwide campaign to raise one million dollars for the Arboretum's endowment in 1928. In that year she was appointed to Harvard's Committee to Visit the Arnold Arboretum, a position she filled for decades. Then, beginning in October of that year, perhaps by way of a vacation, she made the first (and shortest) of eight trips she would make to the American Southwest over the next eight years.

In August 1928 she had written to Alice Eastwood, asking whether Eastwood would be interested in botanizing for a month in New Mexico and Arizona. "I would get a car,"

McKelvey offered, "and pay for your expenses out and back. If you could pay for your room and food you would not have any other expenses; if you could not afford to do that then for the pleasure of having you along I should do that too." "I am very anxious to study Junipers and Cypresses," McKelvey explained, "but you could collect of course anything you wanted; I would like your help and advice on those two plants especially though." Eastwood replied in the affirmative.

Travelling by train, again via Cleveland and Chicago, McKelvey arrived in Lamy, New Mexico, on October 11, where her faithful chauffeur-*cum*-bodyguard, Oscar Edward Hamilton (whom she called simply "Hamilton"), met her with the limousine he had driven to New Mexico from Boston. Big, broad-shouldered, slow-spoken, and perennially good-natured, Hamilton had been born in the Southwest, perhaps in Arizona or Oklahoma, and he apparently had never been to school. He spoke with a most pronounced drawl that must have contrasted dramatically with Susan McKelvey's clipped, northern speech. Half an hour after Hamilton appeared, Alice Eastwood arrived by train from California. The three of them proceeded to Santa Fe and spent the night there.

Next day the botanizing party started for Las Vegas and from there drove to Pecos Canyon, Puye, Albuquerque, and other sites in New Mexico, collecting plants along the way. Hamilton and Eastwood took an immediate liking to one another. By November 11, when they arrived in Phoenix, Arizona, Susan McKelvey had made four hundred ten collections. That very evening she boarded a train for Boston, and Eastwood departed for California. Though she had not collected a single yucca, agave, or cactus on the trip, it was in these groups—especially yucca—that McKelvey would someday become an authority. *Syringa* was behind her now. The plants of the arid Southwest had just laid claim to her life: over the next two decades *Yucca* would be her principal preoccupation, the Southwest her

special province.

McKelvey must have been very much taken by the Southwest, for in December 1928 she informed Eastwood that "It looks now as though I might go out again, probably to southern Arizona and New Mexico, in January for a trip of about six weeks or two months. Miss Edlmann, who is the Englishwoman I spoke of and Miss Sturtevant's partner in the iris nursery, can go with me. She is much interested in plants." She tried to persuade Eastwood to join them: "Wouldn't you consider it enough spring in those parts to join us. There would be lots of room in the car and you would find her very interested and a nice companion. Just the kind you would like." But to no avail. "I *wish* you were joining us—do change your mind & telegraph," McKelvey implored Eastwood a month later. "Hamilton is driving us again and I am sure will miss you. He surely will see his house."

The Lilac was selling exceedingly well. In fact, McKelvey informed Eastwood in January that "now they are after me about getting out an abridged form of my book for popular use. . . . Most of the first edition is sold & of that there may have to be a reprint before long. As no reviews have come out yet everyone seems to think that is surprising—no one is more astonished than SDMcK!" In 1929 McKelvey received the Centennial Gold Medal of the Massachusetts Horticultural Society for the book, and the Schaffer Medal of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, the first time the medal had been awarded for a book. From the Garden Club of America she received the Emily Renwick Achievement Medal.

She already had "decided, under advice, on the subject of a new book—," she informed Eastwood, "on the non-indigenous trees in the U. S. A. It means seeing the best old specimens & getting their history & photographs & will take the rest of my life." But when she returned to Boston after the second trip to the Southwest she reported to Eastwood that "I am a cactus enthusiast

now—and an Agave one.” By July, after a third trip to the Southwest, this time in the company of Eastwood, she was contemplating a book “on the common trees of Arizona—including such things as Yucca, Agaves, Cacti, etc.,” with Eastwood contributing a section on the herbaceous plants. “I am much more interested in that subject,” McKelvey confessed.

The second trip had lasted for nearly two months (January 16–March 17, 1929). Again travelling by train, McKelvey and her companion, Violet F. Edlmann (*died* 1963), had arrived in Tucson on January 19, remaining in Arizona until March 16. (Miss Edlmann had “left for East” on February 24.) McKelvey made nearly five hundred collections in just under two months, among which were agave, yucca, and cactus specimens.

Violet Frederika Edlmann, a well-to-do Englishwoman, lived in Wellesley Farms, Massachusetts, at the time. An associate of the pioneering iris hybridizer Grace Sturtevant (1865–1947) from 1926 until 1931, she participated in Sturtevant’s iris-hybridizing program at Glen Road Iris Gardens in Wellesley Farms. In 1930 Edlmann accompanied Sturtevant on an iris-collecting trip to California. Then, abruptly, she returned to England, married Sir Mark Edlmann Collet, 2nd Bt., son of a sometime Governor of the Bank of England, and passed the rest of her life on the Isle of Man as Lady Collet. Though she maintained membership in the British Iris Society until her death in 1963, she appears to have lost interest in hybridizing irises.

McKelvey was back in Arizona again by the end of April 1929 for her third foray to the Southwest. In Flagstaff she was met by Hamilton, who apparently had remained behind at his homestead in the Tucson Mountains. He had begun to collect plants on his own in McKelvey’s absence, as well as to photograph them. For a few days they botanized in the vicinity of Flagstaff, the San Francisco Mountains, Prescott, and points between. On May 5, Alice Eastwood joined



Susan McKelvey, impaled by an aggressive specimen of Agave palmeri near Fish Creek, Apache Trail, Arizona. This photograph from the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum was taken on February 18, 1929, by Violet F. Edlmann.

them at Apache Lodge, and next morning they took the road to Sunflower Mine in the Mazatzal Mountains. McKelvey’s field notebook shows that her interest had indeed turned rapidly to cacti, yuccas, and agaves on this trip, though she did not neglect other plants. By the time she left Flagstaff on June 8, she had made more than three hundred collections.

In July McKelvey, by now back in Boston, shipped two boxes of clothing to Eastwood, to replace garments Eastwood had lost in a fire that destroyed her house. “Now I do not want you to give them all away to someone else—,” McKelvey admonished, “unless you do not like them. I chose them out with care and with *you* in mind. . . . You certainly write cheerfully—as you would—about the fire.” This act of generosity seems to have been typical of McKelvey, for she took a sincere interest in Hamilton’s welfare as well. She was sending him to school.

“So far all goes well about Hamilton,” she notified Eastwood in July.

I have started him with a fine teacher—perhaps when he got further along he could go to



O. E. Hamilton, Susan McKelvey's chauffeur, beside a fifteen-foot-tall Opuntia versicolor in the Rincon Mountains of Arizona. Mrs. McKelvey took this photograph on March 19, 1930. From the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum.

high school. She says he is working hard but that his lack is abysmal. She is an older woman and seems to have great insight, and like all who get to know Hamilton she says he is a real gentleman and feels there must be good background somewhere. I believe that the first thing we know she will like him as much as you and I do.

In August, McKelvey wrote a long letter to Eastwood. "You sound as though you had made lots of headway on your plants—having arrived at Compositae. All I have done is to get my specimens of Cacti & Agave sorted &

labelled, with the photographs to accompany them, and sent off to [William] Trelease & [Nathaniel Lord] Britton."

"Hamilton seems to like Boston," she continued,

and talks as though he was here for life. He has not started in on photography, developing etc., but has his hands full with the 3 Rs. He is only in 2nd grade work his teacher says but she is much interested in him and he is making excellent progress. It is really touching to see how hard he works and how seriously he takes it all. Do drop him a line if you get a chance for he thinks you have forgotten him although I assure him to the contrary. That nice Mr. Rehder thanked him so pleasantly, at my suggestion, for the good collecting he had done. I asked Wilson to do so but he said "not to spoil him"! You can imagine how mad I felt. I never believe that anyone is spoiled by encouragement—and am sure Hamilton w^{ld} not be. . . .

McKelvey's next journey to the Southwest (November 24, 1929–April 11, 1930) would be far more than a routine botanizing trip. Indeed, it would take her to Nevada, California, Arizona, and New Mexico and would yield another three hundred specimens, but a more important objective was the divorce she would obtain in Reno on March 3. Susan McKelvey had been separated, not divorced, from her husband, Charles, since she left New York in 1919. In 1927, their estate in Oyster Bay had been sold. Two years later Charles McKelvey would retire from his law practice and move to Vermont and from there to Sweden, where he would remarry in 1932 and—by all accounts—live out his remaining days in luxury, a member of the international "jet set."

Susan McKelvey was acutely sensitive to the complications that her state of marital limbo caused. When a Macmillan trade representative innocently asked her to "write something of yourself as an individual, how you became interested in writing the book,

where you have lived, your association with horticultural interests, etc.," for use in publicity about *The Lilac*, McKelvey flatly refused. "I . . . fully understand your feeling about the publicity," the Macmillan representative replied somewhat gingerly. For McKelvey the impasse must have been an especially onerous burden.

On September 27, 1929, McKelvey had confided to Alice Eastwood that "There have been lots of family things to keep me thinking and acting, too, and I am rather worn out. The long & short of it seems to be that I shall probably go to Reno—by November if possible, & be there 3 months. Every other state requires a long continuous residence before action can even be started and I am not a free enough agent to get away for a long time."

On November 4 she wrote Eastwood that "I am leaving for Reno on the 17th with my brother [Moreau] and a lawyer [A. E. Foster]. It is still uncertain what can be done and will be until I get out there. . . . Hamilton takes the car out this week."

McKelvey did not leave Boston until November 24. The next day, in Chicago, her brother and Mr. Foster joined her. The party reached Reno aboard the Overland Limited on November 27, and McKelvey set up residence in the Riverside Hotel. That same night the two men left.

Hamilton had "left Boston in [the] Lincoln" on November 22, arriving in Reno on December 3. Three days later he and McKelvey departed for the Sierra Nevada and Lake Tahoe, collecting near Portola, California. They collected near Susanville, California, a few days later and over the next three months made many botanical forays in Nevada and California, interrupting them in late February and early March for the divorce proceedings.

Alas, McKelvey's divorce was not to be the private affair she must have fervently hoped it would be. In December a New York paper would report that "Society, especially the old guard of the Washington sq. section, has

learned with much regret that the Charles Wylie McKelveys have reached a parting of the ways after almost two decades of marital bliss [*sic*]. That the breach has widened to such proportions a reconciliation is beyond the realm of possibility is admitted by those close to the McKelveys." In March, the New York papers announced the divorce—"granted on the ground of desertion." "GETS RENO DIVORCE FROM C. W. M'KELVEY," the *Times* announced; "Former Susan Delano Resumes Maiden Name. . . ."

On February 9, McKelvey wrote to Alice Eastwood from Reno, inviting Eastwood to join her for some collecting in Arizona "after I leave here." She reported that, while

Hamilton is well[,] I am afraid his English is hopeless; at all events he does not appear to hear the difference and it often seems kinder to let him go along in happy ignorance than to keep correcting him. I do not see that there is much to be gained by so doing. It is rather pathetic for with a good education and his character and interests he might have gotten further. Still he seems to like the job he has and without flattering myself in any way it is certainly a better one than he has ever had.

From Nevada McKelvey and Hamilton proceeded in the Lincoln to Tucson, via Kingman and Prescott. On March 14, Eastwood arrived from California for a few days of collecting near Tucson, departing on the twenty-third "to see Mr. Rock"—*i.e.*, Joseph F. C. Rock (1884–1962), the plant explorer, who had just returned to the United States from two years of plant collecting in China. Rock had landed in San Francisco on the twenty-first.

McKelvey and Hamilton motored to Kingman again and from there—collecting en route—headed east by way of Holbrook, Arizona ("Commercial & Arizona Hotels!! Drunk men!!"); Albuquerque; Amarillo, Texas; Oklahoma City ("Terrible roads!!"); Springfield, Missouri; Saint Louis (where

they visited the Missouri Botanical Garden); and Urbana, Illinois. In Urbana McKelvey called on Professor William Trelease (1857–1945), a professor of botany at the University of Illinois who had worked on the agaves and yuccas. From Urbana McKelvey went to Chicago and boarded a train for Boston.

Eastwood visited Boston at some point during the fall of 1930—at just about the time Ernest Wilson (who had succeeded Sargent as the Arboretum’s director) was killed, along with his wife, in an automobile mishap on October 15. Early in December, McKelvey wrote Eastwood that “I cannot remember whether the Wilson accident came before or after you were here. It was pretty sad business. The work has been apportioned & goes on well however. [I]t is always a little sad to see how well things go on in the world without any one individual however valuable.”

McKelvey was taking courses at the Gray Herbarium at the time. “The lectures are interesting,” she wrote in the same letter, “& we are at the Liliaceae which comes near my heart.”

McKelvey had become very fond of the Southwest by now. The cold and snow of that New England December made her long for Arizona. But she would have had difficulty moving there. “My brother [probably Moreau] seems awfully loath to have me think of living in the West,” she confided to Eastwood. “It rather takes the heart out of a possible purchase out there to have him feel that way about it.” Despite the impossibility of moving to Arizona, however, McKelvey decided at about this time that she would write a book on the yuccas of the Southwest.

She was beginning to receive recognition for her botanical work and in 1931 was ap-



Susan McKelvey and Hamilton pose before the vehicle that took them to several states in the Southwest in March, April, and May 1932. The trailer on the right holds specimens and equipment. They are shown here at the home of McKelvey’s brother Moreau Delano in Orange, New Jersey, which they visited en route to Boston on June 11. This photograph is used through the courtesy of Jon Katherine McKelvey.

pointed research assistant at the Arnold Arboretum, a humble post she would hold for many years. In 1932 *Horticulture* published an article of hers on pine blister rust, and in 1932 the *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* published one on the taxonomic and cytological relationships of *Yucca* and *Agave* that she had written in collaboration with Professor Karl Sax. By 1934 her reputation was growing: John Hendley Barnhart of the New York Botanical Garden wrote to request personal data about her for his biographical card catalog of botanists, for example. Articles by McKelvey appeared in the *National Horticultural Journal* and the *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* in 1934 and 1935. By 1936, when an article of hers on the Arboretum was published in the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, she had become a staunch partisan of the institution that had helped her to rebuild her life.

From 1928 to 1936 Susan McKelvey would make eight trips to the Southwest (Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, and California). Five trips—those of April to June 1929, December 1929 to April 1930, April to June 1931, March to May 1932, and April to June 1934—had been for the sole purpose of studying *Yucca* and allied genera. Hamilton “made a trip to secure important material” in the summer of 1935, and in late November 1935 through March 1936 McKelvey and her brother Moreau, by now an invalid, spent the winter near Indio, California. “I only got into the field when (rare) conditions made it possible,” McKelvey recorded of this trip, however. During those years she collected thousands of specimens of *Yucca*, pressing them or preserving them in alcohol. The ever faithful Hamilton took thousands of high-quality photographs of the plants and landscapes of the Southwest (they are now in the Photography Archives of the Arnold Arboretum), as well as participating in the collecting and doing the necessary “heavy work.”

The trips went smoothly for the most part, although one (that of April to June 1934)

began most inauspiciously. On the evening of April 3, Hamilton, driving alone from Boston to New Mexico as usual, was held up and robbed by two bandits in El Reno, Oklahoma. Brandishing a machine gun, they forced him off the road and took his watch, seventy-five dollars in cash, and nine bags of luggage containing most of his and McKelvey’s clothes. Fortunately, they spared the microscopes and other equipment.

In December 1936 Moreau Delano died in Boston, leaving McKelvey free to devote full time to her book on the yuccas. She worked on it through most of 1937, and by mid-1938 the first volume (*Yuccas of the Southwestern United States Part One*) came off the press under the Arboretum’s imprint. She was glad, “very glad,” when Alice Eastwood—then in her eightieth year—gave it her stamp of approval. McKelvey launched immediately into *Part Two*, but its publication would be nine years in coming. “I am indeed fortunate in having an interest,” McKelvey commented to Eastwood, “and have clung to that through thick & thin. So many of my friends seem lost without one.”

The Great Depression was in full sway at the time, and McKelvey’s cousin Franklin was President. “You evidently do not care much for the New Deal!” she wrote Eastwood, “& w^{ld} be in the midst of Sympathisers in this section of the country. I sometimes wonder whether conservatives are wrong—whether F. D. R. may not go down in history as a saver of democracy? In the midst of things perspective is impossible.”

A Second Book, a Second War: 1938–1945

Over the next few years of economic depression and war McKelvey continued her yucca project. At some point she transferred her activities from the Arboretum in Jamaica Plain to the Botanical Museum in Cambridge and through her contacts in the Southwest was able to obtain some fine specimens of Indian corn for the Museum’s director, Professor Paul C. Mangelsdorf. By the spring of

Mr. Weeks Asks Himself to Tea

When Edward Weeks, who for many years was editor of The Atlantic Monthly, was serving on the Board of Overseers of Harvard University, he encountered Susan Delano McKelvey during the painful and divisive episode called "the Arnold Arboretum controversy." The following excerpt from his book Writers and Friends (Little, Brown, 1981) demonstrates the strength of McKelvey's commitment to the institution that had played such an important role in her life, as well as her commitment to its founder, Charles Sprague Sargent. The excerpt is printed here through the courtesy of Mr. Weeks.

Each member of the Board is assigned to "oversee" one or more departments of the University and to file an annual report on their condition. In addition he serves as chairman of a Visiting Committee, composed of eminent authorities, not necessarily with Harvard affiliations, who survey a department from the outside, and who meet in Boston and Cambridge at least once a year to concert their findings. My first and most difficult assignment was the Arnold Arboretum, an enclosure of trees and flowering shrubs in Jamaica Plain of which by deed of trust the University was the caretaker. If Harvard was found negligent, the Arboretum would revert to the City of Boston.

Charles Sprague Sargent had been director of the Arboretum for fifty-four years, and it was he who made it internationally known: the park grew from 125 to 265 acres less manicured but not much less renowned than Kew Gardens; a modern herbarium was built and a most valuable library of nearly 50,000 volumes and 22,000 photographs made it a center for research. On Sargent's death in 1927 a memorial fund of a million dollars had been added to its endowment. Then came the Depression, two destructive hurricanes, and the shortage of manpower throughout the war, leaving an urgent need for restoration. The time had come when it was necessary to renovate some of the old collections and to initiate new, extensive plantings.

I did not appreciate this nor did I appreciate the rivalry for funds between the botanists in the Arboretum and the biologists in Cambridge. During [University president James Bryant] Conant's absence two distinguished biologists, Drs. Irving W. Bailey and Paul Mangelsdorf, had compiled a re-

port which the president on his return recommended to the Overseers, saying that "for once I find the biologists in complete agreement." It seemed to me that its main plea was for a new building in Cambridge, and with the others I voted for its adoption.

The Visiting Committee of the Arboretum was composed of twenty-two members, including Henry F. du Pont, Childs Frick, John Ames, Godfrey Cabot, Mrs. Grenville Clark, Mrs. George Agassiz, Mrs. Frank Crowninshield, Mrs. Delano McKelvey, some wealthy, each expert in horticulture. I do not have a green thumb, and while I worship trees, I knew I was out of my depth at the luncheon I arranged for the group at the Harvard Club of Boston. But I did not anticipate their united cold front. The following week I called up Mrs. McKelvey and invited myself to tea. I knew she liked fly fishing, and after a few words about Kennebeco [the area of northwestern Maine where McKelvey was spending her summers] I took the plunge.

"What went wrong at our luncheon? Why were you all so set against me?" I asked.

"There was nothing personal," she replied. "But you must have read the Bailey-Mangelsdorf Report. Don't you realize what it threatens to do to the Arboretum? Many of us on the Committee helped to raise the fund in memory of Charles Sargent. Now, apparently with the president's approval, we're told that Harvard proposes to break up Sargent's priceless library and to spend the money we gave, not to revive the Arboretum but for a new building in Cambridge. It's outrageous!"

As I questioned other members of the Visiting Committee, I was con-

vinced that this was a tempest larger than a teapot. I warned my classmate, Keith Kane, who was a member of the Corporation and the president's assistant in public relations, that these people were really up in arms. Grenville Clark, also on the Corporation, at his wife's persuasion, had changed his vote; so did I in my report to the Overseers, and Conant dubbed us "two-vote men." But the attitude which prevailed was, in the words of one cynic on the Corporation, "Why shouldn't we skun that fat cat!" The Visiting Committee engaged two capable lawyers, Mike Farley and Robert G. Dodge, to resist the Report, and the conflict dragged on for years. The University finally compromised: Sargent's library was left intact and the memorial part of the Arboretum endowment was not spent on bricks and mortar.

I recall this episode not because I like to criticize my alma mater, to whom I owe so much. Had Conant not been distracted by the war his prudence might have restrained the biologists. At the time I speak of, the University had already divested itself of two "outlying provinces" for which there were no longer sufficient academic interest or funds—the Bussey Institute had been closed and the Gray Herbarium gone to seed. In today's pinching economy other endowed institutions will have to divest themselves of provinces they can no longer afford, and will do so, I hope, without infuriating donors whose intent deserves respect.

The remainder of my term was more peaceful. . . .

—Excerpted from *Writers and Friends*, by Edward Weeks (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1981), pages 140 and 141. Copyright © 1981 by Edward Weeks. Used with the permission of Edward Weeks.

1943 her manuscript was ready for publication, but funding was unavailable at the Arboretum because of the war, and so she put the manuscript aside, saw to it that all loan specimens were returned to their owners, and waited for war's end. In any event, she was forced to vacate the space in the Botanical Museum by the Navy in mid-1943.

"At the moment I am working at home, on a quite different subject . . .," she confided to Mangelsdorf in March 1944. "I've no idea when, if ever, my yucca paper will be published—it was handed in last spring—and to tell you the truth (except that I like to complete something that is begun) I'm enjoying my present subject much more." She had begun work on her third and last book, a painstaking account of botanical exploration in that part of the United States lying west of the Mississippi River. "Now I have begun on something else and am thrilled about it," she informed Alice Eastwood. "In fact so interested that I wish I had begun years ago."

Hamilton was a staff sergeant in the Army by this time, connected with a medical unit in France. "He hope[s] to do X-ray work," McKelvey informed Eastwood, "but whether he does that now or other things I do not know; he is not a person who can express himself in writing very well and his letters tell next to nothing. He did write last that the mud reminded him of a day in Arizona when the mud was so bad that it removed one of my shoes."

Crowning Achievement, Crowning Irony: 1945–1956

The enterprise on which McKelvey had embarked in 1944 would materialize in the publication in 1956 of her third and final book, the classic *Botanical Exploration of the Trans-Mississippi West 1790–1850*. It would be a natural outgrowth of her years of work in the American Southwest on the genus *Yucca*. McKelvey was done with the massive (1,853-page) manuscript by late 1951 or early 1952, at which time she submitted it to Harvard

University Press for publication (the Arnold Arboretum was to underwrite its publication costs). The Press rejected it, however, and she sought help and advice from Professor Karl Sax, the Arboretum's director, and from Walter Muir Whitehill, librarian of the Boston Athenæum. Whitehill put her in touch with Frederick W. Anthoensen, owner of the Anthoensen Press in Portland, Maine, who agreed to publish the book. On Whitehill's recommendation she secured the services of Harvard Professor Erwin Raisz, a skilled cartographer who created exquisitely calligraphed maps to accompany her text. Eventually, Professor Richard A. Howard, Sax's successor as director of the Arnold Arboretum, assisted McKelvey during the final stages of publication and in publicizing the book. Though dated 1955 on its title page, the beautifully printed book actually was not issued until March 1956.

It received excellent reviews. In *Rhodora*, Joseph Ewan of Tulane University, an authority on the history of botany, dubbed it "this book-of-a-century." "Only one book of its kind is expected in a century," he wrote elsewhere. For it and her other botanical and horticultural writings McKelvey received a gold medal from the Massachusetts Horticultural Society and the Sara Gildersleeve Fife Memorial Award from the New York Botanical Garden.

The years were years of controversy as well. It was during this period that the Arnold Arboretum controversy occurred. McKelvey, who owed much to Charles Sprague Sargent and the Arnold Arboretum and who had been a member of Harvard's Committee to Visit the Arnold Arboretum since 1928, played a leading role in opposing the Bailey Plan (1945), which would divert Arboretum funds to uses that she considered to be inconsistent with the purposes for which the funds originally had been given. The facts of the controversy are far too complicated—indeed, far too controversial—to be rehearsed here; what is important in the present context, perhaps, are

McKelvey's reasons for taking the position she did. In her own words, written in 1949, she stated that

Because of my long association with the Arnold Arboretum, because of my loyalty to and admiration for its purposes as they were expressed and executed by Professor Sargent, and because of my small part (on the Boston Committee) and the far larger part of my brother [Moreau] (on the New York Committee) in helping to raise the Sargent Memorial Fund, I am concerned to see that the interests of the Arboretum and the intent of the contributors to the Memorial Fund—are protected in the contemplated move to Cambridge.

Edward Weeks, former editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, was a member of the Arboretum's Visiting Committee when the controversy erupted. Recently, in his book *Writers and Friends*, he describes his involvement in the controversy. With his permission we reprint on page 20 Mr. Weeks's account of a visit he paid to the home of the redoubtable Mrs. McKelvey.

The Final Years: 1956–1964

With the publication of her third and last book in 1956, McKelvey, now seventy-three years of age, immediately began drafting her will. The first step was to make an inventory of her botanical legacy of books, letters, records, photographs, and preserved specimens, some of which were in her home, some of which were in the Botanical Museum in Cambridge. The Museum's director, Professor Paul C. Mangelsdorf, considered her collection of yuccas and related plants to be "the most extensive collection of its kind ever made and [to be] quite valuable." Her first thought was to leave the materials to the Museum, but after consultation with various faculty and staff members of both the Botanical Museum and the Arnold Arboretum—who agreed that the materials indeed were valuable and urged that they remain together,

but considered them to be more valuable in plant taxonomy than in economic botany—she stipulated in her will (dated July 5, 1960) that all of her "books, pamphlets, notes, records, photographs, and photographic films, and miscellaneous articles in the field of botany" be given to the Arnold Arboretum upon her death. She did not forget Whitehill's Athenæum in her will, or Oscar Edward Hamilton—"formerly in my employ, whose present address is Blairsden, California."

In June of 1964, Professor Richard A. Howard, the Arboretum's director, received from Mrs. McKelvey a letter requesting her retirement from the Committee to Visit the Arnold Arboretum, on which she had served since 1928, and from her appointment as Research Associate, which she had held since 1931. McKelvey explained that she could no longer do the things she used to do and wanted to make way for someone more active in both of the roles she cherished. A month later, at the advanced age of eighty-one, she died at Phillips House in Boston.

Few individuals have been affiliated with the Arnold Arboretum as long as Susan McKelvey was, and few have done as much for it, in so many ways, as she did. If she was its benefactor and champion, however, it was *her* godsend. The Arnold Arboretum has never meant as much to anyone else—in so many ways—as it meant to Susan Adams Delano McKelvey, née Susan Magoun Delano. In redeeming her life it became her life.

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A Note on Sources

Susan Delano McKelvey's life has been reconstructed from manuscript and published sources in the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum, the Harvard University Archives, the Suffolk County [Massachusetts] Courthouse, Bryn Mawr College, the Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation of Carnegie-Mellon University, the Massachusetts Horticultural Society, the New York Botanical Garden, the California Academy of Sciences, the New England Historic Genealogical Society, and the

Massachusetts Historical Society. Articles in the *New York Times* and clippings from other, unidentified New York newspapers supplied some details, as did Richard A. Howard's reminiscence of Mrs. McKelvey in the *Journal of the Arnold Arboretum* (Volume 46, Number 1 [January 1965], pages 45–47). An interview with Alfred J. Fordham yielded valuable details about Mrs. McKelvey and O. E. Hamilton. The National Academy of Design kindly supplied a photographic print of Dunbar Beck's portrait of William Adams Delano. Among the materials in the Archives of the Arnold Arboretum that were used are McKelvey's field notebooks, photographs, photographic logs, correspondence, manuscripts, and maps. Her preserved plant specimens are in the Arboretum's herbarium.

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