

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

(The following transcription of the recorded oral interview has been lightly edited, and with some additions/deletions for clarification.)

Kelly Comras: This is Kelly Comras interviewing Laurel Woodley at her home in Torrance on November 28th, 2022. This is for the Southern California Horticultural Society's Archives. Laurel, we're going to start off by asking you a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up.

Laurel Woodley: I was born in Fresno, California. I stayed there approximately a year, which of course I don't remember anything about, and then the family moved to Ogden, Utah. We were there for a year. My dad was in civil defense, and so that's why we were moving around.

Kelly: What year were you born?

Laurel: I was born on September 27th, 1941; so a year in Ogden, Utah, and then we moved back to Los Angeles. When we moved back it was to a house that my mother owned on Greenfield Avenue in West LA.

Kelly: Do you remember the address?

Laurel: I think it's 3206, but I think I have that somewhere in the documents you'll be getting. My youth was there up until about the fourth or fifth grade and then we moved to Brentwood (a suburb of Los Angeles). During the time period of coming back to Southern California from Ogden, the folks realized that people in Utah had kept saying, "Oh, you're from LA. What a wonderful place to be." They thought, "We need to buy some land."

They bought five acres in Bundy Canyon, and it's that last strip of property that ends at where Chalon Road comes in at the very end of the canyon. We had five acres there, and it was all virgin chaparral, and the family would go up on weekends. I remember driving up Sepulveda Boulevard and going up to the property, which we called Back Achers for a very good reason.

The family got tired when they were whacking away at the chaparral trying to open it up so they created pathways throughout the property so they could actually see what the land looked like, and the pathways expanded into clearings and kept on expanding. My dad eliminated the poison oak on the property, so we didn't have to deal with that.

One of the cool features of the property was that it had the original dry stream bed for runoff from the canyon. We preserved that stream bed, we left it alone, and planted around it. I have photographs that show what the property looked like at that point.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Kelly: Laurel, did you have siblings?

Laurel: Yes. I had a half-brother. He's now passed away. His name was Warren Bauer; my dad adopted him when he married my mother. My mother's first husband had what they called, at that time, consumption. We now know it is tuberculosis. That took him. He died from that. My mother then had to bring up a child by herself. We're talking about post-depression.

Those were tough times. She worked as a seamstress in a little shop in Beverly Hills and fixed corsets, and then also washed corsets, which was not a particularly pleasant thing to do. That's how she made do.

She and my dad met at University High School, taking an adult evening class in horticulture offered by Al Roberts, who was a fern propagator, with a nursery on National Boulevard in the West Los Angeles area. My mother fell in love with ferns, and she decided to try to propagate them.

Al would not give her any clue about how to propagate ferns, but she figured it out on her own. She got so successful at it that eventually my dad quit doing work for North American Aviation and became a full-time nurseryman. They ran a mom-and-pop fern propagation nursery, all wholesale, for close to 40 years.

This was on in the Bundy property. We stopped calling it Back Achers once we moved in. My parents had cold frames in a very low-tech propagation system, at the front of the property next to Bundy, all behind a fence so people couldn't see it. We got a variance with the neighbors indicating that they would have no difficulty in a nursery being run there, but we couldn't have deliveries of fertilizer or soil, nor could we bring in big trucks to be a commercial operation.

Everything went out in a station wagon and my parents produced as many as 70,000 liners per year, which are two-inch pots, of little ferns. My dad took them to local wholesale nurseries and sold them and that was the livelihood for my parents for all that time.

Kelly: What year did they start the nursery?

Laurel: They started when they were on Greenfield, about the late forties. I think we moved into Bundy in 1953.

Kelly: You were about 12 then?

Laurel: Yes.

Kelly: Did you help in the nursery?

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: Oh yes, all the time. It was part of my chores, which I resented quite a bit, at the time, because it took me away from play, which is what kids like to do. I had to be responsible for certain things in the nursery, one of which was sifting the soil which was taken off the hillside in the lot next door. I'd sift the soil and put it in a huge bucket. When I was younger, my dad would carry it down the hill, but as I got older, I carried it down the hill. That was the part of the potting soil that my mother used when she was mixing the soil for the ferns.

Kelly: When you were 12, where were you going to school?

Laurel: I started school while living at Greenfield and I went to Charnock Road School, which was a temporary school at the time, near Palms. Then, when we moved to Brentwood and the Bundy house, I went to Brentwood Elementary School. I was there, I think, close to two years and I was academically not doing well at Charnock Road School. I was set back a grade and so I became a winter student rather than a summer student on graduation.

When I moved to Brentwood, it was like night and day. They really were much better teachers and I just blossomed there. After Brentwood Elementary, I went to Emerson Junior High School for a year and a half, because that was the closest junior high school and, of course, that's south of Westwood, so it's quite away away, and then they built Paul Revere Junior High School, and I was there for a year and a half.

I was in the third graduating class of Paul Revere Junior High School, which is much closer to the Palisades. I went to University High School (Uni) because there was no closer high school at the time. Uni was a huge high school. It had a very large service area and we had primarily people from Bel Air, Brentwood, Palisades, and all the way down to the Sawtelle district on the west side.

Kelly: How long did your parents run the nursery?

Laurel: About 40 years. A long time.

Kelly: Why did they close it?

Laurel: They just got elderly, and it just was too much for them to continue. My dad had two hip replacements. He wore out the first one after seven years. Then he had to have a second hip replacement and the surgeries just took their toll.

Kelly: Was your half-brother also working in the nursery

Laurel: No, he was 11 years older, so he was off on his own by then. He didn't spend much time living at Bundy. He was pretty much moving on in life.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Kelly: When you were in high school, were you interested in plants on your own?

Laurel: No, no, I was absolutely not interested in plants.

Kelly: What did you think you wanted to do?

Laurel: I was interested in animals, and so I turned out to be a zoology major. When I graduated from high school, I went to Santa Monica City College for two years, which was a good thing, because I think the transition, going from a high school environment, right into a university environment, is a pretty tough transition for a lot of students. You're going from a highly structured teaching situation to one which is not structured at all. You may have your whole grade dependent upon a midterm and a final, and that's scary. [laughs] During my two years at Santa Monica City College, I worked in the geology department as a student assistant. Then I transferred to UCLA, and the first semester I was there, I took entomology, which I totally loved. Then I took medical entomology, I kept taking all the entomology they had, which was not too much. At that time, most of the entomology had moved to UC Riverside, where the focus is on economic entomology.

Kelly: Did they have an Entomology Department at UCLA?

Laurel: No.

Kelly: What department was that?

Laurel: It was part of Zoology or Life Science. Later on, it became Molecular Biology and Environmental Sciences. It's gone through an evolution, all the department names.

Kelly: Did you take many botany classes while you were at UCLA?

Laurel: When I took Entomology, I discovered that many of the insects are found only in certain plants. They are very specific that way, feed on that plant, or always associated them. Then it became apparent to me, I needed to know more about plants. I took a Botany 1 class, and it was a piece of cake for me. [laughs] I loved it, because it was something I was much more familiar with than I realized.

Kelly: Do you remember who taught the classes?

Laurel: Yes, his name was Hammer. He was a well-regarded botanist from that department. Then I took Field Botany and that was another fun experience because we were out field tripping a lot, which I love. Bill Emboden (William Emboden) was the teaching assistant. He went on to teach at Cal State Northridge for many years. We remained friends for years after that and were in touch until the day he died. I have some plants from Bill's research.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

There are some Bursera's in my backyard that actually came from his field research.

Kelly: Mildred Mathias - was she there or did--

Laurel: Oh, yes, she was very much there. To back up, at Emerson, I met Julia Hassler, who was Mildred's daughter, one of four children. She was a twin. Her brother's name is John, so they were fraternal twins, not identical. Julia and I became fast friends and are friends to this day. That has lasted for a long, long time. I was friends with the family, and I'd be over hanging out at Mildred's house with the kids. She was very much a good mother and she was really a great, fine person and her husband was also a very good caring husband and father.

He was Gerald Hassler, and he taught or did research in the physics department at UCLA. His interest was in osmosis, reverse osmosis, trying to turn seawater into fresh water. That research goes way back, so he worked on that research for a long time.

Kelly: You focused on zoology with entomology and botany, then what do you remember that really stood out then for your coursework as an undergraduate?

Laurel: What I realized was that I really was a field biologist. I loved being in the field, and I also knew I loved teaching, and I had known that for a long time. When I was a child at Bundy, I would gather the neighborhood kids together and I'd take them on field trips in the canyon. The pattern was embedded in me very early on and it was just a matter of how I was going to manifest this in my adult life. [laughs]

Anyway, the field botany and Mildred, of course, was an inspiration. I took her plant taxonomy class, and to help me learn the plant families, which is the focus of the curriculum, I started taking pictures of the different flowers. I had always been interested in photography. My dad gave me his old Argus C3 camera, and I was even taking pictures at Uni High School of the athletic events.

I was in athletics there as well, more specifically in Girls' Athletic Association, and Letter Girls at Uni High School. I loved high school; I really enjoyed the experience immensely. Anyway, Mildred instilled in me the plant family knowledge and she gave an excellent course. I later took a seminar class, where I worked in the herbarium, and I focused on insectivorous plants. I reworked the herbarium sheets and made sure they were curated properly. I got pretty involved with the botany department at the time.

Kelly: Then you went ahead after graduating and took an MA?

Laurel: Yes, I did my student teaching, and the experience was not good for me. I had dreamt of high school teaching being the most wonderful thing in the world that I could be doing. As it turned out, and the reality of it was too much of hall monitor duty and

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

checking the restrooms and being a policeman. I was much more interested in teaching content and ideas. Community college became my focus. I had a lot of community college teaching friends as it turned out.

Kelly: This is in between your bachelor's and your master's?

Laurel: Yes. This is how I progressed to the master's, and you don't need a bachelor's to teach in high school, but you do need a master's to teach at community college. I went into the master's program with Entomology as my specialization. I did it by exam, which forced me to take a lot more courses. That was fine because I loved the breadth of the courses I was taking. I took Advanced Ornithology, Animal Behavior and Herpetology - I took things that were not part of my normal, core curriculum. I think that helped me immensely when I did get a community college job because I had a very broad coursework background. Rather than focusing on doing a thesis, which is a very specific question you're answering, I did something a little different because I had the option, and that was take more coursework, and then, of course, I did have to take both a verbal and a written test, as part of the master's program.

Kelly: That was like an exit exam?

Laurel: Yes, I passed the exam (my lead instructor John Belkin said it was at the PhD level) and he was trying to encourage me to go on to Cornell or Kansas and go into entomology and research. I worked for John Belkin early on in my Upper Division at UCLA. When I took Belkin's Entomology class, I think it was the next semester that he asked me if I would be a student assistant in his lab. I worked in mosquito taxonomy, mostly mounting and labeling slides and pinned specimens.

Kelly: That was at UCLA?

Laurel: Yes. All the time I was there I was working in entomology, yes.

Kelly: What were you doing for fun outside of school?

Laurel: I liked to go to movies. I enjoyed all that. I enjoyed social activities. I had friends that I'd hang out with and do things with.

Kelly: Were most of your friends in the sciences?

Laurel: Yes.

Kelly: It was that kind of community?

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY by Kelly Comras, FASLA

Laurel: Yes. Well, I met-- probably the closest long-term friend I have now is Robert Gustafson who I met in entomology my first year at UCLA and we are still in communication on a daily basis. We're very fast friends.

Kelly: Oh, that's lovely.

Laurel: It's a long friendship.

Kelly: Yes. You went ahead and you took your exit exams, passed with flying colors, but decided not to do a PhD? Your parents were still alive?

Laurel: I was still helping in the nursery and still living at home.

Kelly: You were close enough to campus to be able to do that?

Laurel: Well, I was part of the nursery to start with, the folks really relied on me. Summers, I was full-time working in the nursery. My teaching began at LA City College because I knew Barbara Joe Hoshizaki and I knew Bob Lyon who was the chairman, and they needed somebody to teach a Wednesday night General Biology class. They said, "Why don't you come and teach for us?"

Kelly: What year would that have been?

Laurel: I'd have to check my record. It's on my CV.

Kelly: When did you get your MA, your master's degree?

Laurel: '67, I believe.

Kelly: You would've started in '67.

Laurel: Yes, maybe in '68, something like that, I think I started. Anyway, I went on Wednesday nights. My first teaching experience was the non-major's course. Wednesdays, as it turns out, was the evening that Bob Lyon would stay late because he had a class too. During the break, which was about 15 minutes, we would take a three-hour class at night, so you don't want to be looking at people for three hours. You'd lose interest and you're in a hurry [chuckles] after that. We'd take a break.

In the break time, I'd go to his office, we'd sit down and chat. He was in entomology, it turns out. His specialty was cynipid gall wasps, which are specialists on oak trees, the genus *Quercus*. We became fast friends talking about wasps, and I found that fascinating. Each gall is different appearing, depending upon the species. It's easier to tell the species by looking at the shape of the gall than looking at the insect.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

He said that's how specific it is. Then he informed me there was a long-term sub-position opening at Valley College. This is LA Valley College in Van Nuys. I applied for that opening. One of the faculty was going on sabbatical for a year, and he was studying snow algae, it turned out. Anyway. I got the job at Valley College. I taught there for a year. There's where I really blossomed and grew as a teacher, I think. The staff was very supportive. My office mate was a microbiologist, Lois Berquist. They had me teaching everything.

I was doing a lab in botany. I did just about every kind of course they had for that year. There was a museum there, which I loved. Anyway, that was a wonderful experience. I really shed a few tears after I left that job. Then the position opened at LA Southwest College, which is the result of the Watts Riot. There was a lot of pressure to bring a community college into South LA and so LA Southwest College was born. I was amongst the third group of faculty hired at the campus.

One of the staff members was Sue Verity, who I had known briefly as she had married David Verity. This is 1969, when I got that position at Southwest. I taught there for 17 years, and then transferred to LA Harbor College and taught there for 18 years. I have 35 years of teaching in the district. I've taught on four campuses of nine campuses in the LA Community College District.

Kelly: During this period of teaching, were you traveling? Were you doing any individual research on your own? Were you still working for your parents?

Laurel: I was working for my parents up until roughly the time I transferred to Harbor, helping them with deliveries and loading and driving the truck. We had a Suburban for a while. I guess we called that the truck. Anyway. It's a big station wagon. I was still helping at home. I didn't really have time for any research.

Community college teachers do all their labs. We do have lab techs that help with the preparation, but you're teaching all those labs yourself and you're doing the lectures. I got very involved in other things.

In 1971, we started the Gold Creek project, which is a pretty good size piece of land in the area of Little Tujunga Canyon. We turned that into a field station and it's still going today.

Kelly: Who owns the property? Do they use it for field studies?

Laurel: Well, it was originally part of the LAUSD (L.A. Unified School District), but LAUSD shed the community colleges and we became our own district. The property was purchased with community service money, so the property had to go to the community colleges. LAUSD lost that. They kept Cold Creek, which is a much higher

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

elevation teaching site, but Gold Creek, which is off Little Tujunga Canyon Road went to the community colleges. The problem was the faculty knew nothing about that. We discovered it by accident.

Somebody at Pierce College said, "Oh, we have a field area." That let the cat out of the bag. The faculty heard that, and we all jumped on board. It was almost sold. But because we developed a proposal for the use of it, they had to cancel the sale. We barely survived that one. The Gold Creek Committee has been self-driven and is still self-driven to this day. There is no administrative pushing. You must go to this meeting or anything like that. It's a totally self-driven group of faculty from all the campuses on the committee that help to steer the use and care of the site.

Kelly: How do faculty get onto the committee? Are they appointed or do they volunteer?

Laurel: They volunteer. It's all volunteer. They must have some interest in fieldwork; some of them are environmentalists, that's their interest. Yes, we've had not only biologists, but we've had earth science teachers, we've had anthropologists.

Kelly: Who pays for the maintenance and upkeep of the property?

Laurel: The LA Community College District. They have a budget for it. That was a hard one too. I was the first director of the field station; the first coordinator is what we called it. That year we had what they called a 100-year storm that blew out the road. Part of my job was to hire a tractor driver to redo the road and get access again. There's a lot of angst in that process, but anyway I got through it.

Kelly: It's still there?

Laurel: It's still there, yes.

Kelly: Are you still active in that group?

Laurel: No, because it's no longer realistic for me to be doing anything there, but I do get the minutes. They keep sharing emails with me, so I'm very much in touch with what's going on, but I don't need to step in. They've got it under control. It's time to pass it on to the next generation. I'm talking about 1971 right now. It's been going on for a long time.

Kelly: A lifetime ago.

Laurel: Yes.

Kelly: You've told me that in addition to this, you've also been the head of other organizations, so I thought maybe you could tell me a little bit about some organizations

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

that you've headed up. And I'd like for you to tell me a bit about your personality and why you think it worked that you became a leader – there are many people who never head up anything, then there are others like yourself.

Laurel: Well, I guess heading up something started in high school. I was president of the Letter Girls' Association. Just something about me likes to get people together. One of the things I discovered when I was working in the LA Community College District is that these biology faculty didn't know anything about other biology faculty on other campuses. There was no communication at all. I met them because I was interviewing, or I had some reason to go visit that campus.

Well, Gold Creek stimulated that because when I was coordinator, one of the jobs I had was to promote its use. I went visiting all the campuses. What I came to realize was these people don't even know each other and they'd probably enjoy each other if they did. [chuckles]

Kelly: Did a lot of these people come through the UCLA system?

Laurel: No, they've, from all different systems. Community college hires from all kinds of backgrounds. No, I wouldn't say it was anywhere driven by UCLA. No. Anyway, I do have, and have had most of my life, this interest in getting people together. That's probably why I'm an organizer in a way of people. That's one of the skills you need if you're going to be a leader at all. It started with Letter Girls, and then where did it go? Well, I was the first lady president of the Lorquin Entomology Society, which was the entomology group that met at the LA County Museum of Natural History.

Kelly: What is the meaning of the word, "Lorquin?"

Laurel: Lorquin is the name of a person who was a butterfly collector. They named the organization after this famous butterfly collector. It's one of the oldest entomology groups around, and it's still going, but barely. It's because of COVID. It's been tough. They've had to go to Zoom meetings and things like that.

Kelly: You headed that as well?

Laurel: I was president of that. I was the first female president of the Lorquin Society. I don't remember which year; you're probably going to ask of me. I've been trying to dredge up what year it was, and I have no idea.

Kelly: What was it like to be a female and have leadership qualities in those earlier years?

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: I didn't pay any attention to that. It wasn't even on my mind. I was proud of it, I was pleased that I was accepted and could do it, but I didn't think of it as a woman's gender issue or anything like that. Just did it.

Kelly: Were there a lot of women in entomology?

Laurel: More boys, but there were a few women, and they're a lot more now. I'm looking at things I see posted for the Bohart Museum of Entomology at UC Davis. There are a lot of women doing entomology there, which I'm so pleased to see. It was not that common for a woman in that timeframe, going back to the '60s.

Kelly: I was just thinking, especially in a leadership position, there might have been women in the field, but how many were running things?

Laurel: Yes. Well, the Lorquin Society, it was just a group. It's a social group, but it's an avenue for exposing youngsters who have a passion for bugs to the field, to all the different kinds of insects there are. The people who come to those meetings are very nurturing and encouraging for youth. I think still doing that today, but probably it's harder because people in LA don't want to drive long distances at night, and so it's probably putting some pressure on it.

A lot of groups are having difficulty with that. It's not just entomology groups. What also comes to mind bringing this up is that when I was at UCLA taking entomology that first semester there, Dr. Belkin said, "There's a field entomology class being taught out of UC Davis, it's called Entomology 49." It was at that time. Dr. Belkin said, "If any of you were interested, you might want to consider taking it," so two of us did.

Lynn Tillett and I decided to take the class, and it was offered out of Sagehen Creek Field Station, which is north of Truckee, California, and it's a five-week class. I was just all excited about the summer class there. It was my first time away from home, and the folks were supportive. It's one thing I have to say about my folks, they were always supportive of my interests, even though they wanted to keep me in the nursery, but they did support things like this.

They drove me up to Sagehen Creek. They wanted to see what this place looked like. They brought me up there and those are probably the five happiest weeks of my life. We collected insects all day and we went out in different field excursions. It wasn't just at the field station. We would go all over the place. We went to Pyramid Lake, which I didn't know anything about.

Kelly: You were still a student?

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: I was at UCLA still. This was like the summer after my spring entomology class. I transferred over in the spring and so we went field tripping during the day, came back to the field station started mounting the insects, and ran black lights all night. We collected nocturnal insects into the evening hours. Then it was up again the next morning and doing it all over again for five weeks.

I was a happy camper. I kept that collection. It was all in student boxes, I kept that collection all these years and so when Dave Verity's collection went to UC Davis. I said, "I have a collection from Sagehen." Do you want it? I gave it to them. The collection is now properly curated, and they were delighted to have it. One reason was, they said it was the best broad student collection they'd ever seen.

Secondly, it gives them a time capsule for the 1960s of what insects were around at the time. Now it's like a benchmark for seeing global warming effects. The changing distributions, moving north of more southerly populations. Of course, there's a lot of concern about insects fading out right now. The populations are not what they used to be on the earth. Anyway, that collection is in a good place. It's at UC Davis, which I'm glad about

Kelly: Your interest in insects has been a dominant part of our conversation, but you are being interviewed today at the request of the Southern California Horticultural Society. Did you find that as time went on, horticulture was where you were focusing your scientific interests? Or does this just happen to be one of the things as your life progressed that you've stayed interested in as one of many other things. Was there a focus on horticulture?

Laurel: I stayed interested in it because, as I said in part, the appreciation for the plant material grew as I aged a bit. When I was in the field, I particularly was appreciative of what desert plants must go through to survive, where there's really no water, years of no water, no rain. and I became very interested in what are the strategies these plants are using to survive. What does it take? Would they drop their leaves, or do they have underground water storage? What do they do?

My focus really began to increase in cacti and succulents. While I was at UCLA, of course, I knew David Verity, who was interested in succulents, but I also met and got to know John Bleck. John Bleck was very much into cacti and succulents, particularly succulents. Again, John and I are still in communication all these years later. He was extremely generous. Anytime you went to see him, or if he saw you, he'd be bringing plants, or you'd always come home with something to play with, including names and such.

I got very involved with cacti and succulents, and I joined the Sunset Succulent Society, which met at Jocelyn Hall in Lincoln Park in Santa Monica at the time. John was going

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

to the meetings, and David was too. A lot of people were interested in cacti and succulents. My plant interest really grew in that area specifically. Then I ended up teaching for UCLA Extension. I taught field courses there, but I also was part of the horticultural certificate program.

I taught how to grow cacti and succulents. One of my first students was Seymour Lindon, who later became president of the CSSA, or the Cactus and Succulent Society of America. I was very proud of the fact that I had a student in my class who became president of the national organization.

Kelly: When were you president of CSSA?

Laurel: 2009. Somewhere between CSSA and Lorquin, what other organizations or departments did you head up?

Laurel: Well, at Southwest College, they didn't really have a department chair system there, but it was a rotating thing through the department, and so I was, for one year, I think, it was department head. Then when I transferred to Harbor College. Whenever you go to a new facility, you must make a whole new cadre of friends and acquaintances and all the time, of course, you're teaching, you're doing your teaching responsibilities. At meetings, different administrative meetings, I would meet people, and eventually, I was offered the position of Staff Development Chair.

Staff development was a concept in the community colleges where it's very much like in-service training. It's like your own college within a college. It's where you try to keep the staff up to snuff with what's new in education. At the time we had a lot of faculties that knew nothing about Microsoft and Word and Excel. One of the things I did was I tried to offer a lot of workshops in Microsoft Office. It was not popular.

You were taking those faculty kicking and screaming the whole way to get them to go to these workshops, but I kept offering and cajoling. Then of course they had to show proof that they had done it. That helped. I had a very good little Staff Development committee. Again, we would meet every week. The only thing that I would do is bring bagels and they'd have a bagel lunch in one of the labs that was cleaned up. This little group would come every Wednesday and we would have our meeting and we'd talk about staff development projects.

Kelly: Would this have been around the mid-'80s?

Laurel: '90s. Well, I transferred over in 1986, I believe, to Harbor College, so it was probably very late '80s and going into the '90s. I did staff development for six years and it was just getting to be overwhelming because there was so much pressure to get new activities. I was trying to teach at the same time and do this other project and it was just

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

too much overload on me. Anyway, I ended up just quitting. I just said, "I'll finish the end of the semester and you have to find somebody else."

Six years was it, and then I laid fallow for at least a year. Then the department chair position came up and I ran for that. I was department chair six years at Harbor College until I retired in 2004. That's more leadership. [chuckles]

Kelly: When did you start taking trips and being a group leader or teacher on the travel?

Laurel: Well, trips started with Mildred Mathias. She was teaching after she retired, teaching in UCLA extension. The first trip was to Africa. It was Zimbabwe and Botswana. That was a delightful experience.

Kelly: It was a plant class?

Laurel: It was a very broad-based, but natural history. Of course, with Mildred, it's going to be plants. [chuckles] She can't help it. I fell in love with that whole thing and so any time I could get on one of those trips where it was convenient in the summertime particularly, where I was not teaching, that's what I did. Then later, there were staff that would cover my classes where I later reciprocated.

Kelly: This is though extension? or travel study?

Laurel: UCLA extension. That's what they called it at the time. I took two sabbaticals while I was at Southwest. They were half sabbaticals. The first one I took in the spring semester. One of the things that prompted that was I wanted to go whale watching. Well, the whales are only around in Magdalena Bay and San Ignacio and Scammon's in February. That's when you must go. Well, that's when I teach. It's hard to do both. It was two weeks there and I think that was a UCLA extension class if I recall.

Anyway, then UCLA was offering at the time something called the Field Biology Quarter. Of course, anything with the word field in it got my attention. I took the half sabbatical and waited a full year. Then I took the second half sabbatical again in the spring and took the Field Biology Quarter. There I had Henry Hespenhide, and we had a trip to Cave Creek in Arizona. I did a study on buprestid beetles and wrote a paper.

Kelly: So it was a whole quarter away?

Laurel: Yes.

Kelly: It wasn't in here, here?

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: Well, it was I think two weeks away and then back into the classroom to work on your research paper. It was a quarter, so it wasn't long-- I don't remember the exact length or month--

Kelly: 10 weeks is a quarter, but if it was a special field class, it might have been--

Laurel: It was a special field class. I don't know if they're still doing that or not. I'll have to ask.

Kelly: What other trips? I think you mentioned you went to Madagascar.

Laurel: Yes.

Kelly: Was that also through extension?

Laurel: Yes. Mildred led that trip, and I was a co-leader at that point because, of course, I knew Mildred since I was a kid so was practically a member of the family. Her children never went on any of her trips. I always thought that was curious, but I loved her trips. They were just so much fun.

Kelly: Did any of her kids go into the sciences?

Laurel: The eldest daughter, Jane, went into linguistics and was a distinguished linguistics professor at the University of Arizona, Tucson. She has now passed away. John became a physician and he's practicing still in La Jolla, I believe. Julia went into US Geological Survey, but not as a researcher. She was an administrative assistant type, but her husband was a paleontologist and worked in trilobites. There was a science connection with all the kids. Then there was Tim who passed away, sadly, in his youth. Only three of the children we can talk about here.

Kelly: Reached adulthood.

Laurel: Yes. Anyway, they never went on any of her trips that I'm aware of. I was always there supporting her when needed. Finally, she just put me on as an assistant, as a teacher. The last year we were supposed to be doing a trip to Costa Rica together. We were working on that. That's when she had her stroke and then two weeks later passed away.

Kelly: They canceled the trip?

Laurel: Oh, yes.

Kelly: What year would that have been?

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022
SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY
by Kelly Comras, FASLA

Laurel: '95.

Kelly: '95. Okay. Why don't we take a break for a minute?

Laurel: Okay.

Kelly: Resuming our conversation. I'm going to go through a list of some questions maybe to prompt something that we hadn't covered, but SCHS had wanted to know whether you considered yourself a plant nerd when you were a child.

Laurel: No.

Kelly: When did you consider yourself a plant person?

Laurel: Well, it's literally grown with time. After I retired, I was visiting the South Coast Botanic Garden with a friend and railing at the labeling and saying, "This needs to be labeled." Long story short, I volunteered to become involved in labeling for the garden. I think at that point, I really turned the corner and got a real crash course in horticulture and particularly Southern California horticulture. It was a matter of trying to track down names of things and Bob and I would go visit the Arboretum or we'd go visit the Huntington to see if we could find plant names.

Kelly: This is Bob--

Laurel: Gustafson. We would try to find the name. He was always my resource person because he was a trained botanist. He trained under Mildred, and he worked as the plant collections manager at the LA County Museum of Natural History for his entire professional life and went to Hawaii and I traveled with him to Hawaii.

If I had a question about the name of the plant, I always would run it by him just to make sure it was right. He and another individual and I became involved in trying to get names for the plants at the botanic garden (SCBG). I really believe at that point I realized that I had shifted. I was not doing things with insects or butterflies or anything else that I was really into plants.

People ask me to this day, do you miss teaching and I say, no. I'm still doing it. I'm doing it on Facebook and Instagram. They're like little, short vignettes, but I photograph something and then I put a few lines describing the plant and how it grows and that sort of thing. I do that posting sometimes daily, but at least every two or three days I put something up.

During COVID of course I've been doing it in my backyard. Being sequestered at home during the pandemic has been a chance to really reconnect with your own local

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

environment and that's what I've done. I've gotten to know my plants very well. I go out and take field trips once or twice a day in my backyard.

Kelly: Relatively late in life is when you began to think of yourself as a plant nerd?

Laurel: Right.

Laurel: I have been a nerd about a lot of things. I've got so many interests, not that I can't focus, but I'll focus on something, and then I'll move on to something else and learn about it. I love learning.

Kelly: Did you know many landscape architects? or were you ever considering your work in terms of its use in the landscape?

Laurel: I paid attention to that, and we had a Southern California Horticulture (I guess you'd call it a workshop or a seminar) where the society, the group got together after a tour of the Huntington. There were like three of us on the panel and we were asked to talk about landscaping with plants and I focused on succulent landscaping because that was my interest.

I have paid attention to how plants are put into the ground in local gardens, so I think that's probably something from my mother because she landscaped our property all by herself. She didn't have any professional help. She just did it. She'd see how things were done in magazines and things like that, so she tried to emulate that, and she liked it.

Kelly: Do you remember the names of any landscape architects she may have worked with or come across during the years you were working?

Laurel: I think Bill Paylen was probably one of the people. He was probably regarded as an architect, but he did part of the installation. I think he did consultant work for the Getty, or he was a resource person for the Getty Brentwood. He was a consultant for Ganna Walska at Lotusland and he did a project at Firestone Vineyard.

Kelly: The Getty Center or the Getty--

Laurel: Getty Center. I don't think he did anything with the Villa. Bill Paylen was probably the one person that was involved in landscaping that I knew, but I really didn't have a lot of landscapers in my circle of friends.

Kelly: SCHS asked that you to consider what the horticulture field was like in the days when you were young. You had mentioned that there were several nurseries located near your parent's fern nursery. Could you talk a little bit about what some of those were? We had considered maybe the Evans family and Paul Howard.

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: Paul J. Howard's was in the neighborhood where we lived on Greenfield. Regarding Evans, I don't have any memories of the Evans nursery, I do remember Paul J. Howard's though. One of the nurseries that I remember from the early time was Harry Johnson's Water Gardens and Cactus Gardens in Paramount. That was a special place, he was one of the first people to really promote plants with a catalog.

He, I think, was probably the first one to use catchy common names for things, like Miniature Joshua Tree, or he'd come up with these catchy little things that he used for marketing basically for the nursery catalog. I have scanned some documents from Harry Johnson and one of the things I came across was a family pedigree I did on Harry's family and his father and his grandfather and grandmother as well.

Kelly: They were all involved in nursery work?

Laurel: I don't know about that, but Harry was. He's famous for his Paramount hybrids, the *Echinopsis* hybrids, that were done. Later, Bob Schick did more with it and some of those Schick hybrids. I think they're still at the Huntington and I don't know if they're being distributed anymore now, but they were at one time.

Kelly: You said there was a nursery over on San Vicente?

Laurel: There was David Berry who had California Jungle Gardens, or something like that, it was called. He had tropical plants, and he was good friends with Victoria Padilla who also lived in Brentwood.

Kelly: Did Victoria Padilla have a nursery?

Laurel: No.

Kelly: How did she come to be involved in writing her book on all the different nursery people?

Laurel: She was an English teacher at LA City College and so she was a good writer. She had a rather spacious backyard which she had full of bromeliads. She just really loved bromeliads as I think David Barry was bringing in some things which she would try out in the landscape. Her backyard was nicely landscaped as I recall and maybe her brother had something to do with that, I'm not sure.

Kelly: What did her brother do?

Laurel: I don't remember.

Kelly: Oh, so you mean he just did it on his own?

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: Yes. I think he's probably helped her with the heavy work and that sort of thing. I don't know if he had the design concepts, or I think it was probably mostly Vicky, but I don't know for sure.

Kelly: Was anybody dealing with bamboo for instance at the time, in a specialized way?

Laurel: Nobody was interested in bamboo except Irving Sherlock.

Kelly: I know that Evans was specializing a bit in things like hibiscus and philodendron. Were there any other specialty nurseries you remember?

Laurel: I know Karl Wagner was one of the first people that I knew about that he and his wife Marion would go down into Mexico and they'd collect philodendrons and monstera and things like that and bring them back. I think they had a nursery. I can't remember anything about the nursery.

I must have been too young or maybe they had it, but it was closed by that time I don't know. The Wagners were responsible for bringing things in from Mexico. They especially liked *Spathiphyllum* and named one "Marion Wagner" which was published in *Exotica*.

Then Irving Sherlock was also a collector who lived in the Palisades, and he would visit all the nurseries and he loved exotic, interesting, wonderful, strange things and would bring them back to the palisades and try growing them.

He was frequently visiting with us at the Back Achers property. Just spontaneously would pop in on the weekends to visit with us along with Clyde Drummond and Barbara Joe Hoshizaki, all these people would come and visit us on weekends because they knew we were up there working on the property. I was surrounded as a child with a lot of movers and shakers at the time not knowing it, of course, not realizing it. I was just living it.

Kelly: Do you look back and realize how it might have impacted the fact that you became a scientist but then also interested in horticulture?

Laurel: Oh, yes. Absolutely. All these people help shaped me. We are the product of our environment. When you're surrounded by it all the time, it's part of your norm.

Kelly: Do you remember anybody who might have been particularly significant in influencing you to be interested? You mentioned there was someone who brought you books.

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: That was Clyde Drummond. He was a retired dentist, and he is responsible for starting the LA International Fern Society (LAIFS) along with help from Barbara Joe Hoshizaki.

Kelly: Your parents would've been involved in that?

Laurel: They didn't have time to start a club, they were just too busy working in the nursery.

Kelly: How many species of ferns did they sell?

Laurel: You will find that on the list. I've given you three lists that I have scanned of all the different ferns that we grew. That's on the PDF file. I can't remember it. There was a time when dish gardens were very popular, and so my mother was growing a whole lot of fern species, and then other times when they were not popular, we grew much fewer varieties of ferns, so we followed the market basically that way.

Kelly: Some of these miniature ferns were in dish gardens? Terrariums were very popular for a long time.

Laurel: Absolutely. We would practice with bowls to try things out ourselves, so my mother loved doing that sort of thing.

Kelly: You were helping with her with that too?

Laurel: Oh yes. I was always there.

Kelly: Let's see what else. SCHS has asked me to have you talk some about your interesting colleagues of the past, and I know you've touched on some, but can you think of say the top two or three that you remember working with that stick in your mind?

Laurel: Colleagues in my teaching career?

Kelly: Yes, or horticulture?

Laurel: Of course, working with Sue Verity, I couldn't help but be working with Dave Verity, so it was just natural. Dave was a major part of my background experience. We had a lot in common because he collected insects and succulents and I collected insects and succulents, and I had met him at the Lorquin meeting and later at UCLA where he worked. When I was in high school, I joined the Lorquin Society, so I had known Dave for a very long time, and then in '69, I think he and Sue married.

Then of course I was at Southwest College and there was Sue, who was my colleague.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Kelly: What was she teaching?

Laurel: She was teaching non-majors biology and I taught the majors biology. She also taught botany, so in a way, we were in competition. I was teaching the majors biology and she was teaching botany. By and large, my classes were larger because of the nature of the subject matter. Nothing to do with anything else. She taught botany too. Sue and I worked together for 17 years at Southwest College. I learned a lot from being around her.

Kelly: She was a biologist?

Laurel: Actually, her training was in public health, but she could teach biology because she had the master's.

Kelly: The master's was in biology?

Laurel: I'm not sure if the master's-- I don't remember that detail of her. I could probably find out, but I don't remember.

Kelly: Who else besides Sue and Dave then a couple of others that you remember being particularly significant?

Laurel: In my teaching world?

Kelly: In horticulture.

Laurel: Oh. Bob of course, very significant.

Kelly: Bob?

Laurel: Gustafson. He was very interested in Hawaiian plants, and so he would take trips to Hawaii, and he would invite some of the docents who were working at the Museum of National History, and so he invited me to go along, and so I would go off for a couple of weeks with Bob and this little group of people from the museum and trek all over the mountains of Hawaii.

Looking for rare and endangered plants. His goal was to photograph them and of course, I would photograph them too, so we both took pictures. He eventually published books on the flora of Hawaii, and he had a big art showing of his photographs at the museum. It was a big thing.

Kelly: Is he still alive?

Laurel: Yes, he is. I talk to him every day.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Kelly: That's right. You've told me that. I've met him a few times over the years, so he would've been an important--

Laurel: Oh, he was very important. He had the botany background, so I would learn things from him.

Kelly: Did he also teach?

Laurel: No.

Kelly: He was working full-time.

Laurel: Right.

Kelly: One more, so the Verity's, Bob Gustafson, and let's name one more in the horticulture world.

Laurel: Mildred. Definitely.

Kelly: Talk about her a bit.

Laurel: She was a huge influence.

Kelly: When she did the book on Color--

Laurel: Flowering Plants in the Landscape.

Kelly: Were you part of that group that put all that together?

Laurel: I wasn't part of the group, but I was there when it was being done, and it came out in what we called fascicles, did basically a chapter at a time, and David Verity did a lot of the work on that. It wasn't just Mildred, so David was doing a lot of the gathering the pictures and I think--

Kelly: Ralph Cornell?

Laurel: Cornell pictures were in there.

Kelly: Ralph Cornell's materials are also at UCLA which makes sense.

Laurel: Absolutely. Samuel Ayres was perpetuating this whole thing because he was very interested in seeing new materials being used in Southern California horticulture. He was well travelled and so he would come back with coral tree seed from different parts of the world. I think he really was something of the impetus of it, but Mildred carried the ball forward as editor, so each fascicle came out and then eventually they

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

put the whole thing together as a book which they entitled *Flowering Plants in the Landscape*.

Kelly: I think it's still in print somehow.

Laurel: I've got a copy of it.

Kelly: Original, probably. I have a sense already from what we've talked about how this answer might go but I want to hear you talk about it. Do you consider yourself a collaborator or a work-alone kind of a person, a professional?

Laurel: I tend to be a collaborator. I like working with a group on something. I can work alone and certainly, I've done that at South Coast Botanic Garden. The issue of getting labels on plants got cleaned up, but we would still find more to do when they'd clean out an area, they'd find something buried deep in the bowels of the botanic garden that had been swamped out by their plants, and then it was, "what's this?"

You always start by looking for that dog tag that they had put on a low branch of the shrub or tree or whatever it was, and of course, most of those branches have long since fallen to the ground, so to find dog tags you start scraping the ground under the tree looking for that tag and sometimes you'd find it, so I did a lot of that kind of work.

Kelly: In a way, you were doing a history of the plants, too, finding out where they came from?

Laurel: Absolutely. Absolutely. At the time, I think when the botanic garden was getting started, I think the arboretum was sharing a lot of things with South Coast Botanic Garden as a more coastal try-out of new material that they had, so early in the game, the Arboretum is sharing six of this and seven of that all depending on how many they had.

Kelly: Had you ever been over to the Virginia Robinson Gardens?

Laurel: Yes. I was there with Mildred.

Kelly: That would've been quite a while ago then, the county took it over in the '70s, I guess.

Laurel: I don't remember that, but I've been to the gardens.

Kelly: What did you think of the gardens? They were partly botanic garden.

Laurel: I like the Palm Grove. That was my favorite part of it.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Kelly: It was mostly king palms.

Laurel: It was beautiful, it was very nicely done. Nicely landscaped and gave you a great feel going through it.

Kelly: That was designed.

Laurel: I'm sure.

Kelly: This is slightly same but different question about the she seminal moments in horticulture: I know right now we're talking about sustainability, but looking out over say the past 40 or 50 years, do you see moments in horticulture that stand out?

Laurel: I think the trend towards water-wise is probably the biggest seismic shift in the gardening in Southern California, the realization that water is finite, and we need to try to incorporate a landscape that doesn't have to be native plants, it can be a mix of Mediterranean, native or just Mediterranean, but something that is more sustainable.

Kelly: Do you think the trend is likely to be successful? Do you think that this push to change people's perceptions away from lawns and--

Laurel: It'll be a gradual change, and probably it'll take a few generations to do that.

Kelly: SCHS said it might be silly, but maybe revealing, if you could be any plant which one would you be and why? [laughs]

Laurel: Probably a bulb. They can go underground and survive. [laughter]

Kelly: I'm going to ask a different question of my own, but if you were to be writing Victoria Padilla's kind of book today, who would be in it?

Laurel: A lot of the people I knew in Hortus West would be in it because they in their own way have done things significant in horticulture.

Kelly: Like Bill Wilk? Why would Bill Wilk be in that book, for instance, Victoria's style of book?

Laurel: I'm not sure. He's not commercial, he's a hobbyist, but people that are passionate about the plants and Bill's done a lot with day lilies and he loves plumerias. He has a lot of interests that are diverse, and he has more than dabbled with cacti and succulents, mostly succulents. I don't know. One could justify that he's not a nurseryman or he's not in the industry or anything like that, so he's more of a hobbyist, but he's a really good quality hobbyist.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

The fact that he's using his materials on a street and for the whole neighborhood to see, he's really demonstrating through action what is possible, and I think there's a lot to be said for that. People who are willing to try interesting new materials and sometimes it's successful and sometimes it isn't, but at least you're out there trying.

Kelly: Bill Wilk. Then maybe a couple of others, who else? If you were to put them in Victoria Padilla's today book, who else might you put in there and why?

Laurel: Jim Jaeger comes to mind. He certainly, through his teaching efforts at Santa Monica College was introducing people to different collections, and again, different plant materials is the spirit of adventure, of trying new things. There's Harlan Lewis who was very active. He started with clarkias and navy plants, but if you looked at his garden, he had all kinds of interesting plant materials that were very new that he was trying out.

I don't know how much of that got salvaged and brought back to UCLA.

Kelly: We were talking of Bill Wilk and Jim Jaeger

Laurel: Then, I talked about Harlan Lewis. He I think was president of the Southern California Horticultural Society for a while, so he's been in horticulture a long time. He's now deceased.

Kelly: What about Bob Perry?

Laurel: Don't know Bob Perry. I know his book, and I certainly used his book a lot, but I never knew him. Art Schroeder, he taught a class in, I guess you'd call it economic botany at UCLA, but he was bringing into the class things like jicama which was very new at the time. Now we see it all the time in the produce department, or we used to. Anyway, but he worked of course with avocados, and he made a lot of contributions more in I guess you could say, a produce related way, not so much landscape material, but avocados are used in the landscape too. You do have to give them a lot of space underneath because they produce a lot of leaf drop and they shade out things, so might try *Heuchera* underneath them, but I don't know what else-- *Clivia* might do well.

Laurel: Anyway, of course, Dave was in Hortus West, Dave Verity. Phil Rundel is part of Hortus West. He's still with us. Of course, his specialty is Mediterranean climate plants. He's perfectly positioned to give advice about what would be good for the water-wise type garden.

Kelly: You knew Phil Chandler?

Laurel: Yes.

EDITED INTERVIEW TEXT

LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Kelly: Was he a trained botanist, or how did he come to be a part of this group of horticultural--

Laurel: There were two groups. In the beginning, I was aware of a group called the Leaf Eaters, and Phil was part of the Leaf Eaters, and Mildred was part of that group, and Don Woolley, and I think Elmer Lorenz may have been a part of it. Midge Davis, I think was part of it. That was the social group that got together, and they talked plants, but they were a closed group.

They were not searching for more members, so a second group started up, and that group was called Hortus West. It was called West because it was mostly people from the west side. That was part of the criteria. You had to have a house or live in the west side. That group got started in 1962. I was at that time of course transitioning from my zoology to more of a botanical interest, but the aspect of that group was people were invited into it, but you needed to have a living room or a space in your house big enough for the group.

It was a group that met once a month at somebody's house, and it rotated for month to month, so if you knew that it was your time to do a hosting. Typically, it was evening because we needed to have darkness because we had programs, we had speakers, or we had a topic we'd talk about.

My family and I were not able to go to it because it conflicted with the meeting of the Lorquin Society, so it knocked out Dave Verity and it knocked out the Woodley's. The group decided to change when they met. It was easier for them to do it than change Lorquin, so they changed the meeting date. It was the first Friday of the month, and Lorquin was the fourth Friday. We went into a change mode, and then when that happened, the Woodley's and the Verity's were able to go.

From that point on, we were active members. Hortus West still has membership now, but we haven't been meeting.

It's just everybody's getting older, and people have actually moved out of the west side, and they haven't been excommunicated for having done that, so they're still in the group, but it's just been really hard to meet. It's fading away.

Kelly: Did you live with your own parents at Bundy? For how long?

Laurel: Up until about the time I transferred to Harbor College.

Kelly: What year would that have been?

Laurel: I think 1986.

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Kelly: You lived with your parents all the way through to '86, and then when you moved out, how much longer did they keep the place?

Laurel: My mother died in 2002, so we're talking about that time.

Laurel: Dad pre-deceased her? Yes.

Kelly: She stayed on through to the time of her death in 2002?

Laurel: She had a stroke. She was in the hospital, and she had a stroke. We had to put her into a facility for a short time. Then my brother got her transferred down to Ocean Hills and there was a senior retirement community down there and then she had to have full-time caretaker because she was in a wheelchair.

Kelly: What happened to the property?

Laurel: My brother sold it. He was the executor, so he sold it.

Kelly: I see. How did you feel seeing it go?

Laurel: I wasn't happy, but the reality was I couldn't take care of it. It was a full acre, and it was just more than I could handle.

Kelly: It was five acres to start.

Laurel: Right, but we sold off all but about an acre and a quarter.

Kelly: That didn't get sold until the 2000s? That was quite a long time. For Los Angeles, that's a dynasty.

Laurel: That's true. It was a lovely piece of property. The new owner contacted the Huntington much to my surprise, and Jim Folsom contacted me. He said, "We've been invited to come over to your folks' place to collect plants." I said, "Wonderful." They did remove enormous tree ferns that they took to the Huntington, and I don't know what all else they took, but they took whatever they could. Probably some of the cycads.

Kelly: What about all the records, the nursery records, and catalogs and--

Laurel: I have what's left of it.

Kelly: You do?

Laurel: I do. I don't know what I'm going to do with it, but I have it.

Kelly: The Huntington might want it, but--

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LAUREL WOODLEY ORAL INTERVIEW on November 28, 2022 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY *by Kelly Comras, FASLA*

Laurel: I don't know. I have a bill of sale for plants to Myron Kimmach. I've given that to you on a PDF and Shirley Karen's bill of sale to her for the Huntington plant sale. We were selling ferns to the Huntington.

Kelly: Oh, and what was the address of the property?

Laurel: On Bundy? It was 1250 North Bundy.

Kelly: Was it a single owner that bought the whole acre.

Laurel: Yes, and then I think they subdivided it and sold the lot next door for a home site.

Kelly: You haven't been back?

Laurel: I haven't been back. I prefer to remember it the way it was.

[01:22:46] [END OF AUDIO]

NOTE: PHOTOGRAPHS AND DETAILED CAPTIONS FOR THE PHOTOGRAPHS ACCOMPANY THIS INTERVIEW AND PROVIDE IMPORTANT SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE CAREER AND COLLEAGUES OF LAUREL WOODLEY.