

## Susanna Bryant Leaves Botanic Legacy

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Editor's Note: The following article is the last installment in a three-part series on the history of the Bryant Ranch property. The research and writing for the stories was mainly done by Dolly McKenna, a Yorba Linda resident and a former member of the recently disbanded Cultural Heritage Committee, a city appointed group concerned with preserving Yorba Linda's history.

The last article discusses the Rancho Santa Ana Botanical Garden, which once flourished on semi-arid eat Yorba Linda ranch land owned by C.W. Associates under the name Lomas de Yorba or Yorba Hills.

Ernest Braunton, a professional landscape architect in the early 1900s wrote the following about her:

“If that woman builds such a garden she will be the greatest benefactor the field of botany has ever known and when she passes away will leave a lasting monument by which the world of science will for all time do her honor.”

That woman was Susana Bixby Bryant, former owner of the Bryant Ranch property recently annexed to Yorba Linda after a lengthy court battle with the City of Anaheim.

The garden referred to was built and did become an institution devoted to public service, research, conversation and education in the field of California botany.

Susana Bryant's botanic legacy is no longer growing where she first planted it, though. That original location was the Bryant Ranch property, a 3,300-acre parcel that was part of the 13, 328-acre Spanish land grant made in 1809 to Don Jose Antonio Yorba and his nephew, Don Pablo Peralta.

In the granting of the lands after the secularization of the missions, the property was decreed to Don Bernardo Yorba, son of Jose Antonio in 1834. The grant was confirmed by the U.S. Land Commission in 1854, and finally patented by the United States in 1866.

It is in the confines of this historic rancho that the Botanic Garden was located.

John W. Bixby, Susanna's father, who came to California from Maine in 1873, bought the rancho from the Yorba heirs in 1875. Bixby became a wealthy man from raising cattle and buying land. One of his other land holdings was Rancho Los Alamitos, where Susanna was born in 1880. Bixby and his wife, Susan, also had a son, Fred.

Upon graduating from a finishing school in Boston, Susanna toured Europe with her mother, followed by a trip around the world with friends.

In 1902, she returned to California and lived in San Francisco. She proceeded to enjoy life on a sizeable inheritance from her father, who died at the age 39.

Two years later she met Dr. Ernest Albert Bryant, and married him the same year and set up house in Los Angeles.

When Susanna's mother died, she and her brother shared ownership of Rancho Santa Ana. Eight years and two children later, Susanna tired of her social life in Los Angeles and decided to take on active management of the ranch.

Within a year she had planted the first citrus orchard and built a small house. Eventually she bought out her brother and became the sole owner.

Inspired by a desire to memorialize her father, who is said to have been a great lover of the outdoors, and at the same time to establish a collection of California natives for scientific study, Susanna began building the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden.

She chose the 200-acre site for the garden herself, 70 acres of which were “fairly level, high, table land of excellent soil (from 500 to 600 feet above sea level and some 20 miles inland from the ocean),” according to a book written on the garden by Lee W. Lenz.

Her idea was to grow drought resistant pines on the hills, desert flowers, cacti and succulents on the lower and drier slopes, and on the table lands, varieties of native plants from other parts of the state.

Active work on the garden wasn't started until 1927. Two years earlier Susanna had started communicating with people she thought could help her realize and develop her idea. Several noted botanists of the era came to her aid, including such men as Theodore Payne, a noted horticulturist, Brauton, the landscape architect, who designed the garden incorporating ideas of Willis Jepson, a UC Berkeley professor and dean of California botanists.

Jepson was perhaps the most influential of the early garden supporters. He wrote to Susanna that “such a garden, holding our prized native flora, will be the pride of all Californians.” Another time he wrote: “Ever since California was born it has needed more than aught else, nearly, a botanic garden.

California did, indeed, get what it needed nearly more than aught else.

More than 45,000 native plants were propagated in the garden, as well as a large and varied collection of cacti and succulents.

On a hill overlooking the garden, Susanna had an Assembly Hall built by a crew of Mexicans who set to work making adobe bricks for the structure which was completed in 1928. The hall once played host to hundreds of visitors and commanded an expansive view of the citrus groves that covered the family ranch.

A house said to be the Hearst Castle of Southern California also was built, but was torn down in the 1950s. The Assembly Hall still remains, though, and has been recommended for preservation because of its historical significance.

The garden continued to be developed through the 1930s and 40s but the war years took their toll on the botanic project. Programs were drastically cut or reduced and help was in short supply. And then, in November 1943, Santa Ana winds dried out the hillsides and a disastrous fire swept through the garden. The following February heavy rains filled the canyons with water, washing away soil, trees, and plants.

The garden is now open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and admission is free.