

CLAREMONT'S TREES

Uniform Tree Planting Program - Mary Ilsley*

This is August 30, 1976. Caroline Beatty, representing the Friends of the Library Oral History Project, is interviewing Mary Ilsley, who came to Claremont in 1928 with her husband, Dr. Morrill Ilsley. Mrs. Ilsley was chairman of the tree planting committee of the Claremont Citizens Planning Commission formed in 1944. Her leadership in the tree planting program continued through the late 1940s and when a new commission on parkways and trees was created by the city council in January 1951, Mayor Wheeler named her to a two-year term on the commission. In doing so the mayor referred to her as a "tireless worker on behalf of a uniform tree planting program." She served on the commission until July 1958.

Q Please tell me a little bit about your background--where you were born, how you happened to come to Claremont, and how you happened to become so interested in trees and city beautification.

Ilsley I lived in New England where we had plenty of trees and beautiful things. We came to Claremont and it was very barren except for College Avenue with its eucalypti and Indian Hill with its elm trees. We came because my husband came to organize the health work for the Associated Colleges. It was the first year of the association and Scripps' first year. At that time we were just a little village, and I think there were about 3,400 people here and everyone was interested in the village itself and so it was very easy to work on anything that had to do with the town.

Q Can you think of anything in your childhood and when you were growing up that made you more interested in trees than some other people?

Ilsley No, I don't think so.

Q Did you get interested in gardening? I remember your garden parties.

Ilsley I always liked to garden.

Q What was Claremont like when you got here?

Ilsley It was very barren. The trees were scattered, a great many acacias that were dying because they had lived their life out here. At that time the council was not doing very much about trees and so we organized a committee of one hundred who were supposed to steer where we should go and at that time we asked that a committee be organized for the beautification of the town with trees. Clary Stover, who was a builder here, and Bradley, the realtor, were interested and so the three of us were on a committee to get some ideas to do it, along with my husband. We decided that the best way to do it was to get a backlog of money and then to go to the council with an offer and with a request. So we went around town and tapped people on the shoulder and asked them if they would give \$25 or so toward our project and we got over \$3,000 and then we had to make some arrangements about watering. So Clarence Wagner, who was an orange grower in town, said that he would be willing to water the trees for us from

*Part of the tape from which this transcription is taken is defective but the transcriber was able to get almost all of Mrs. Ilsley's words by slowing the tape.

his tank truck. So we went to the council and we said, "Will you give us the right for a uniform tree planting program if the first year we water the trees and take care of them and if at the end of the year the city will agree to take over the watering?"

Then we chose Berkeley Avenue and Tenth Street for beginning planting, with crepe myrtle on Berkeley and purple plums on Tenth Street. We approached everybody in homes along those streets and told them what we were going to do. Claremont being the way it was, a very nice village where everybody liked everybody else and wanted to do things, they almost all agreed. There were two or three who were actively opposed but we had the city's permission to go ahead and so we managed to ignore them. When we went around to the homeowners on those streets, we told them what we wanted to do, and we said, "On your street there are so many poor trees. We'd like to take those out and we'd like to do uniform planting. The way we'd like to do it is to have you buy the tree that we want you to buy and plant the tree--because we had no way of planting it at that time--and when the tree is in, we will water it and take it over in time. It won't be your tree; it will be the city's tree and the city will have control of it." So we went ahead with the plan, and it was comparatively easy to do because everybody was so cooperative.

After we got the trees planted, we had the problem of watering. Clarence Wagner would go around where we would tell him to go and water the trees. We tried to catch the gophers that came and ate the tree roots. An interesting thing was that we had two little Boy Scouts who would catch gophers for us at 25 cents a head--a tail. They were supposed to bring me the tails to prove they got them. I found that one little boy came very often with a whole handful of tails. It wasn't until I took the tails away from him that his "catch" decreased. He was repeating tails.

Q Did Clarence Wagner do his work free?

Ilisley Yes, he did, and when we found that a tree was needing water, we would tell him and he would go over and water it. He gave a great amount of time to the project. And Clary Stover and Claude Bradley gave a great amount of time to it. They went out with me to plant trees and to replant them and to do things like that.

Q There wasn't much of a budget for trees in those days, was there?

Ilisley No, we had, I think, \$3,200 which we spent very gingerly, trying to get everybody to pay for things so we wouldn't have to use that. The Baughman tract was being developed at that time by Claude Bradley in the northwest part of the city, and he had the people who owned the Baughman tract agree to uniform planting. That was the first tract planted uniformly. In 1944 we got a city director who said that the developer must plant the tree that the committee selected.

Q I think it was in 1949 that you got an ordinance that required the subdividers to present a plan for the trees on their streets before the subdivision plan was finally accepted.

Ilisley After that they planted the trees in the subdivisions. We had quite a bit of trouble with vacant lots until they were built upon, and we used to have to water the trees there through the efforts of Mr. Wagner.

After Tenth Street and Berkeley were planted, we took one or two streets at a time and started to work on them. We found that we could not take the consensus of opinion of the occupants. They were too diversified. We had to make a rule and say that would be it. We took College Avenue and wanted to extend the planting beyond the gates of Pomona College, and at that time we decided to plant eucalyptus of a different variety but eucalyptus. We had a great deal of trouble with some of the residents on College Avenue, but we finally got the trees planted.

We just picked a street and tried to plant it until we got the ordinance through in the 40s sometime that the city could require what tree had to be planted and the subdivider must plant that tree subject to the approval of the tree committee before his tract was accepted. That was really the best thing that we did because that put enough power behind our request so that they carried it through.

Q Claremont was far ahead of most cities in California in this program, wasn't it?

Ilsley Yes, many cities came and tried to follow our example. We got the advice of people all around. People who ran the parks in Santa Ana and San Bernardino came. Dr. Samuel Ayres, who was one of the first people to be interested in trees in Los Angeles County, was one of our particular friends and was a great help to us. He wanted native trees for the most part. They aren't so good for city trees because they grow better in desert spots. But he was very helpful and enthusiastic about our project.

Q In one of your reports, Mr. Baber made the comment that there was no one perfect tree. The carob tree has a bad odor, the sycamore a blight, the olives cause a mess on the sidewalks, the Dutch elm disease is a threat to the elms. He said, "We can only do our best to select the trees which have more virtues than faults." You are saying, aren't you, that native trees wouldn't have grown as well, and so you had to select what would grow best?

Ilsley No selection of trees is perfect but many cause lesser damage. We couldn't plant some of the trees that can be planted in Pasadena and LaCanada and that region because we have cold spells here. We planted Eighth Street with the butterfly orchid and the first year they almost all froze. Mr. Popenoe, who was head gardener at Pomona College, raised some butterfly orchids in his place at the college. They were white ones and he gave us those. They were hardier and withstood the frost. Some of them are still there.

Q One of your reports stated that you would have liked more flowering trees but that our inland climate didn't permit some of those trees to grow. Will you speak a bit about how you tried to preserve the mountain view?

Ilsley In our first plan we were anxious to plant all the streets running east and west with flowering trees which would be lower and then our north and south streets we were going to plant with trees which could be higher for avenues. That worked out quite well, only so many of the trees we ended up using turned out to be big trees because the hardy trees were big trees. We planted a great deal of liquidambar for color and we planted the butterfly orchid trees and we planted flowering chestnut. The residents on one street objected strenuously to the flowering chestnut because they said they were an ugly tree. They brought pressure to bear and saw that they were neglected.

So the trees died. That was down south of the tracks in a tract down there.

Q What did you do about objections?

Ilsley I was practically run out of town by some people because they thought it was a personal thing that we wanted ourselves. The only way we could do it--and you can't do it now--was to go and talk to them. We said Claremont belonged to all of us and we were trying to make Claremont a garden. People usually cooperated if you approached them right. We had the backing of the council, of course, and finally they took over the watering of trees. We watered them ourselves for two years.

Q Were your contributions small, or were some large?

Ilsley Not one large one--\$10, \$25. It pays the city to spend money on its trees because so many of the people who come here and go to the Chamber of Commerce say they want to live in Claremont because it's such a beautiful city and reminds them of the East. The city has found out that in monetary value it has paid to do what has been done.

In the beginning the Southern California Edison Company came in and pruned the trees and they pruned them poorly. They would just come along and slash the branches off on the side where the wires were. We finally got an ordinance through stating that before the Edison Company could come in and prune the tree committee had to be notified so that they could supervise what was being done. It was too late for some trees. For instance, our elms on Indian Hill were really murdered by the Edison Company before we got after them. They just slashed them at the wires. When we got the ordinance through, then someone from the city or the tree committee had to be present when the pruning was done.

Q In the fall of 1928 there was an article about the beauty of some of the trees in the city. Included was mention of the elms and "a beautiful clump of sycamores in front of W.S. Palmer's home on Indian Hill." Was that the house that you later lived in? [southwest corner of Seventh and Indian Hill]

Ilsley Yes. Dr. Blaisdell was trying to find us a good house. The Associated Colleges were just being organized. He found us one but it had only the kind of gas heaters that you plugged into the wall. At that time Vina Frederickson said that her mother owned a house on Indian Hill and she thought she would rent it to us, and so we rented it and lived there until we were able to buy the lot farther up Indian Hill. Later we got the house for our son when he came back to practice in Claremont.

Q Do you know how old that clump of sycamores is?

Ilsley No. They were there when he built and he built it well over seventy years ago. Vina lived there when she was little.

Q Your home at 1111 Indian Hill was a beautiful one. When do you think the elms were planted?

Ilsley They must have been planted about 1918. At that time Aleck Thorburn worked for the Armstrong Nurseries; he was the manager. That's why he was interested, and he got those planted.

Q An article in the Courier in 1938 said that the elms had been trimmed and braced under a WPA project.

Ilsley The WPA work was very poorly done. They had no expert supervision. We could have done so much at that time, if it had been done properly.

Q The minutes of the Parkways and Trees Commission in 1957 mention that Percy Everett read a report on the biological control of elm scale. The commission was concerned all along about those elms, wasn't it? In 1959 Mr. Bachelor talked about the growth habits of elms and the city's inadequate equipment for trimming them properly. Please speak about the commission's concern while you were on it for those elms.

Ilsley We were always concerned about them. Of course, there never was any danger of the elm tree beetle out here. At that time it wasn't anywhere in California. Now it's up north; we don't have any down south here. A great deal of this talk about the elm tree beetle, in my opinion, is too much. If proper care is taken, if the trees are braced when they need it, and only those that are really dying taken out, we would be lots better off than we are now.

To control the beetles we bought lady bugs and let them loose but the trouble was, with all of the orange groves around, when the bugs were released, they went up north to the orange groves to settle. We wanted them to stay down in this part of the town.

Q Whose idea was it to bring in the lady bugs?

Ilsley That was Morrill's idea. He bought the containers of lady bugs for a number of years and let them go in the region around where we lived. Morrill was the first one to use them. He was intensely interested in them.

Q Where did he get the idea of using the lady bugs?

Ilsley He read it. He read about things like that.

Q When the city didn't have enough money to buy trees and you had run out of the original \$3,000, what did you do?

Ilsley We tried to get the people to pay for their own trees. When they didn't want to pay for the trees or insisted that they couldn't pay for them, Dr. Ilsley was glad to buy the trees to fill in the spaces. That was one method we used for filling in bare spots, and when we would come along to a street where everybody would cooperate except maybe one or two people, that's the way we would get our tree to put in and we could force them to the tree because of the ordinance.

Q Why was there argument about having eucalyptus on Foothill?

Ilsley Those on the sides had been planted early. The merchants weren't very anxious to have more planted in the center strip. We replaced the ones that died on the side and we had a difficult time because the wind would blow the trees over. We had to keep them staked and Dr. Ilsley would look them over every week and see whether they needed staking. If they did, he called the city and asked them to stake them.

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Q I read references to the possibility of planting palm trees on Yale Avenue but it was pointed out that palm trees don't give shade over sidewalks. Do you remember discussions about what to plant on Yale Avenue?

Ilsley Yes, we had a terrible time trying to decide what to plant. Almost all trees would uproot sidewalks. Any tree you planted cost about \$100 and we didn't have the money.

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In spite of the good city budget for trees now, the trees don't get properly watered. There are so many trees all over town. The city really tries hard but they don't have the people to do it.

I think it is interesting that we got a regulation that if any one knocked down a tree, they had to buy a tree of comparable size. We were glad of that. Sometimes there were vandals. One time they came along Eighth Street and cut down butterfly orchids during the night. We found out who did it and they had to replace the trees. Then there were motorists who carelessly would run into a tree. When they found what replacing a tree cost--\$75 to \$100--they felt different about it.

Q Sometimes you raised the question about what could be done to plant trees in parking lots of shopping areas.

Ilsley We tried to get information about what could be done. At one time the parking lot west of the post office was offered to the city if the merchants would open their back doors onto the lot. I think it was Clary Stover who owned that lot. But the merchants wouldn't do it and so that's why that fell through.

Q Did you participate in the Memorial Park project?

Ilsley Not too much.

Q You were chairman of the Women's Committee on Beautification. That committee was interested in beautifying parking lots, wasn't it?

Ilsley Yes, but we didn't have enough power to force anything through.

Q If it hadn't been for you and Dr. Ilsley, we wouldn't have a lot of the beautiful trees we now have.

Ilsley I think people who do many of the civic things do it for themselves as much as for the city. It is not only gratification to the person, it's for the betterment of the city. I think, from my experience over the years, that the average citizen, if he's approached properly, will cooperate.