

Calendar

Dusty Mother

Kate Sessions Walking Tour



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

Lark Holden at Kate Sessions statue, Balboa Park

Local Events
page 77

Classical Music
page 89

Art Museums
& Galleries
page 91

Theater
page 93

Pop Music
page 98

Restaurants
page 127

Movies
page 142

LOCAL EVENTS

People are dismissive of Kate Sessions, says Lark Holden. “Oh, yeah, she planted trees, right?” they’ll say. People don’t realize she planted thousands of trees, and not just in Balboa Park but around the whole city. She considered all of San Diego to be her back yard.”

Horticulturist Katherine “Kate” Olivia Sessions, who was born in 1857, is one of several “personages” whom Holden introduces on the two-hour walking tour

she inaugurated last month in Balboa Park. The SDSU theater major doesn’t portray Sessions dramatically, but she has modeled her period costume exactly after the one worn by the bronze statue of Sessions on Laurel Street across from Founder’s Square. To spot her at the tour’s starting place at Laurel and Sixth Avenue, look for a woman in a white blouse and a wide skirt. That skirt has a foot-long pocket, says Holden, in which Sessions kept her hand tools, pencils and paper, English rock candy, and dried fruit. She wheels “a granny cart” with a bike rack on top, which contains her hanging files of “visuals” — copies of vintage photos of the park in its early years. “What I’m trying to do,” she says, “is to present a ‘mini-documentary’

that tells the story of how a barren mesa got turned into one of the most unusual parks in the country.”

Sessions came from San Francisco to San Diego in 1883, shortly after her graduation from Berkeley, where she studied agriculture. She opened a nursery on Coronado in 1885. Other nurseries would follow, in Mission Hills and Pacific Beach, but the most important one she established was in Balboa Park. In 1892, Sessions succeeded in convincing the city to lease her 30 acres of City Park (as Balboa Park was originally called when it was established in 1868) for a commercial and experimental nursery. In exchange she agreed to plant 100 trees in the park each year for 10 years and to donate 300 others for planting on city streets and in plazas and playgrounds.

But how dirty did Kate Sessions get her own hands? Who did the physical labor of the plantings? “Oh, she did!” says Holden. At least she did some of it. “Descriptions of her say her clothes were rarely pressed and always dusty. This was someone who wasn’t into ‘fussy doodles,’ as she called any kind of societal finery. She was a straight shooter, unimpressed with titles. She treated everyone the same.”

Holden also describes Sessions as a woman of strong opinions. “She had a driver drive her around, so she could

peruse people’s yards. Elizabeth MacPhail [in her book, *Kate Sessions: Pioneer Horticulturist*, published by the San Diego Historical Society] tells the story that Sessions was once being driven up Fifth Avenue when she spotted a fellow planting a tree that he had bought from her a couple of hours earlier. She used to say, ‘You plant a fifty-cent tree in a five-dollar hole.’ So she jumps out of her car and chastises him for the way he is planting it. And she proceeds to dig a hole that’s deep enough, and then she says, ‘Okay, now you can go ahead and plant it.’”

Sessions “hated” grass, says Holden. “She thought it was a terrible waste of water. She really liked ice plant. She wanted people to plant what was appropriate to their area.”

To that end, Sessions is credited with popularizing the jacaranda and the Brazilian pepper tree in San Diego, as well as poinsettias and the bird-of-paradise. At its peak her nursery in Balboa Park contained multiple varieties of eucalyptus, acacia, and bamboo; also Eastern elm, Spanish cork oak, Azorean honey plants, and Hawaiian kukui trees. Many of the Torrey pines, Monterey cypresses, and oaks now growing in northwest Balboa Park were planted during Sessions’s tenure, although park administrators say they don’t have the historical records that could help

determine which ones.

What about Balboa Park today would displease Sessions? Its original 1400 acres have, after all, been chipped away — especially during the post-WWII years when about 109 acres were deeded or leased to freeways and another 92 acres went to the naval hospital. Current total acreage stands at about 1173, of which 11.5 percent is parking lots and roads. Does Holden get into any of those profiteers-versus-preservationists issues on her tour? “No, I don’t,” says Holden. “I want to show the park’s metamorphosis, but I don’t want to get into politics or any icky-sticky things.”

Sessions never married. She called her plants “children.” Eventually she was dubbed “the mother of Balboa Park.” She died on Easter Sunday, 1940.

— Jeanne Schinto

Time Traveler Historic Walking Tour: “The Creation of Balboa Park”
Every Wednesday through Sunday

11 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Meet at the southwest corner of Laurel Street and Sixth Avenue
Cost: \$15; \$13.50 for seniors, military, and students
Information and reservations: 619-291-9825