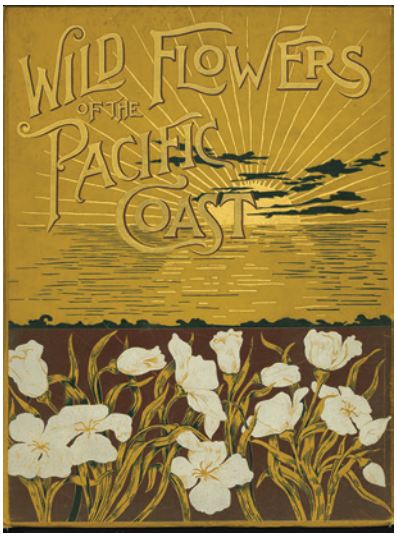
WOMEN BOTANISTS and BOTANICAL ARTISTS

By Brian R. Thompson

THIS PAGE RIGHT: Thimbleberry, with mystery grass, by Emma Thayer.
FACING PAGE CENTER: Drawing of *Fremontodendron* by Margaret Buck, from Parsons' field book.



Wild Flowers—Pacific Coast

"On the very top of the mound grew this fine salmon blossom, and a few feet away a bed of tall pink grass, the finest I had ever seen. It waved and nodded in the warm breeze, as if inviting me to select its finest bunch to keep company with the pretty white blossoms that had been its neighbors, and from whom it was loth to part company."

Emma Homan Thayer (1842–1908) wrote these illustrative words, and painted these neighborly plants, while visiting Astoria, Oregon in the 1880s. Her "Wild Flowers of the Pacific Coast" (published in 1887) is the earliest guide to the flora of the West Coast in the Miller Library collection. I hesitate to call it a field guide. Instead, it is a series of short travel essays, each tied to a local wild flower. Often the description of the people Thayer encountered is more detailed than that of the flowers. The stories are mostly set in California, but she did make the one visit to Oregon, including a trip by boat from Portland to the mouth of the Columbia River.

In an appendix of "botanical descriptions," the "fine salmon blossom" is identified as thimbleberry or *Rubus nutkanus*, but the identification of the grass is not attempted. Do readers of the "Bulletin" have any suggestions?

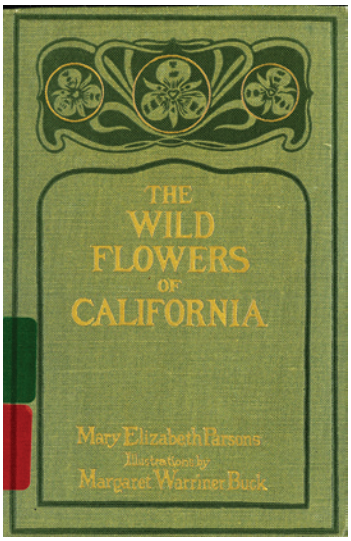
Born in New York, Thayer went back to school after her first husband died, attending Rutgers and area art institutions. Late in life, she established a reputation as an author of novels. However, it is for this book —and her similar, earlier book on the wild flowers of the Rocky Mountains—that she is best known. While her impressionistic style of illustration lacks the fine detail necessary for certain identification, her books were an introduction, especially for East Coast audiences, to the splendors of the western flora.

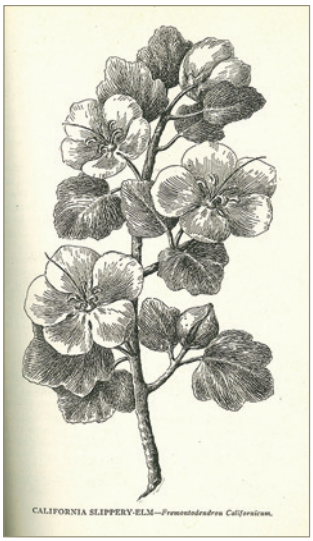
Wild Flowers—California

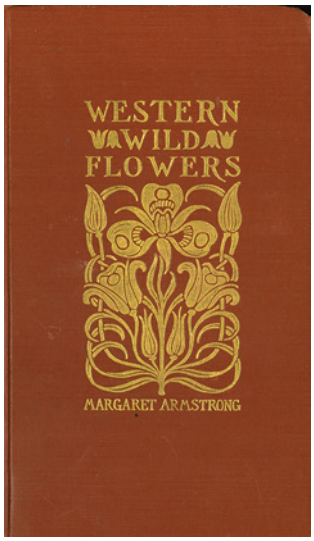
"The Wild Flowers of California: Their Names, Haunts, and Habits" was the earliest (1897) West Coast book published in a recognizable field-guide format. The author of the text, Mary Elizabeth Parsons (1859–1947), hailed from Chicago but spent most of her life in California. She was a keen student of the

state's botany and studied with noted botanist Alice Eastwood at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco.

Her book reflects her scientific discipline by including a "How to Use the Book" introduction, a glossary of botanical terms, and keys to distinguish plant families. She goes on to describe these families—of flowering plants only—with a count of the genera and species known worldwide and in the state at that time. This makes the book a useful time capsule of botanical history.







Parsons also studied art, but she asked Margaret Warriner Buck (1857–1929) to illustrate the book and accompany her explorations of the state. With few exceptions, Buck drew her simple but effective pen-and-ink drawings in the field. All these efforts paid off, as the "The Wild Flowers of California" remained a standard reference through several editions into the middle of the 20th century. Later editions included color plates by Buck, also known for her work with "Sunset" magazine during its early years.

Parsons not only brought great attention to detail to her subject, she also captured the joy of being a field botanist. "Every walk into the fields is transformed from an aimless ramble into a joyous, eager quest, and every journey upon state or railroad becomes a rare opportunity for making new plant-acquaintances—a season of exhilarating excitement."

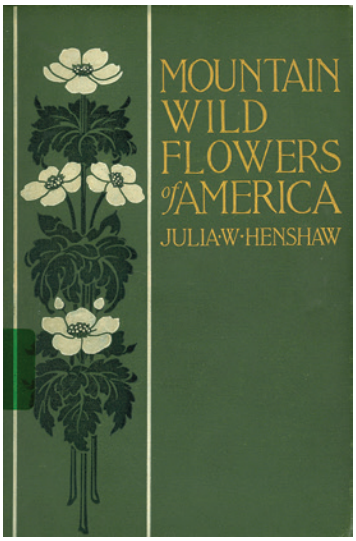
Wild Flowers—Western North America

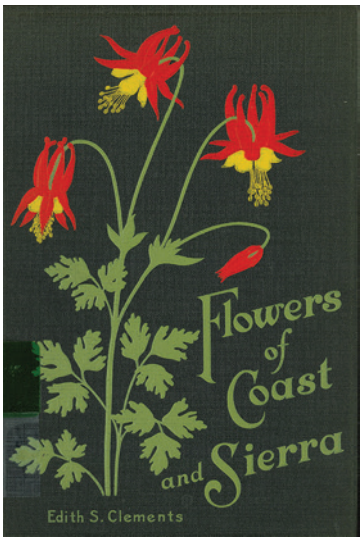
"This is the only fully illustrated book of western flowers except Miss Parsons' charming book, which is for California only." This is how Margaret Armstrong (1867–1944) describes her book, "Field Book of Western Wild Flowers" (1915).

Armstrong was from the Hudson River Valley of New York; she explored the West as part of an extended adventure, but never settled here. She traveled from 1911 to 1914, often with two or three female companions, exploring all of the states west of the Rocky Mountains and into Canada. She was possibly the first woman of European descent to travel to the floor of the Grand Canyon, where she found, described and illustrated several new plant species.

She had considerable training as an artist and is perhaps best known amongst bibliophiles for the more than 300 book covers she designed—an art form mostly lost in the 20th century with the development of dust jackets. She also wrote biographies in her 60s and mystery novels in her 70s! Her schooling was in art, but she understood botany practices very well, collecting and pressing some 1000 herbarium specimens. Many remain in the New York Botanical Garden Herbarium.

She lists John James Thornber (1872–1962), professor of botany at the University of Arizona, as a co-author of the "Field Book," and credits him and many others (including botanists Alice Eastwood and Julia Henshaw) for assuring the accuracy of her text.





"But it is her illustrations that make the book so appealing," according to Bobbi Angell's review in the December 2018 issue of "The Botanical Artist." These include some 500 pen and ink drawings and almost 50 watercolors, all drawn or painted on site. While there is a glossary of terms and a short set of keys, the book relies more on its illustrations for identification than the others in this review.

Wild Flowers—Mountains of North America

Photography was a major innovation for field guides in the early 20th century. Julia W. Henshaw (1869–1937) was an early adopter with her 1906 book "Mountain Wild Flowers of America." While her title implies inclusion of alpine plants all across Canada and the United States, Henshaw lived in Vancouver, BC and gives special attention to our regional mountains.

Born in England, she studied art in her home country but didn't take up photography until she moved to British Columbia around 1890. Her images are in a studio setting, in grayscale with a neutral gray background. The guide is ordered by flower color, and it is not too difficult to imagine the appearance of the living plants from the grayscale photos.

Like Thayer, Parsons and Armstrong, Henshaw had abundant energy and a wide variety of interests. Daphne Bramham writes in the "Vancouver Sun" (published September 8, 2014) that Henshaw was "an explorer and general outdoorswoman" who climbed in the Rockies and mapped much of the interior of Vancouver Island. A strong advocate for participation in World War I, she drove an ambulance at the Western Front in Europe and spoke across Canada of her experience to encourage more involvement in the war effort. She had her indoor pursuits, too, as a theater critic (using Julian Durham as a pseudonym), writing novels, and founding a social club for women—the first such society in Vancouver.

Other than the use of photographs, Henshaw's field guide is very similar in style to the ones described above. Though she wrote it for a general audience, she acknowledges a respectable list of botanists and naturalists as scientific advisors. That said, she is at her best when her descriptions veer towards the subjective. For example, in reference to *Erythronium giganteum* (now *E. grandiflorum* var. *grandiflorum*)—which in Henshaw's day was burdened with the common name "yellow adder's tongue" (now "glacier lily")—she writes, "Late at evening, when beneath the star-sown purple of the sky you return from making some alpine ascent, the pure flames of these wild Lilies gleam in their leafy setting with a pale golden light, and illuminate the green brink of your path."

Wild Flowers—Coast and Coast Mountains

Another of these intrepid writers and artists was Edith Clements (1874–1971). Her botanical education was the most formal; she received a Ph.D. in botanical ecology from the University of Nebraska and spent her life in various academic and research pursuits, typically in conjunction with her husband, Frederic Clements (1874–1945), who was also a plant ecologist. Together, they published "Rocky Mountain Flowers" in 1914, a botanically detailed flora of the flowering plants, including trees but no conifers or

ferns. This is not a field guide, but the watercolor illustrations by Edith Clements are exquisite—typically showing several plants from the same family together. On her own, she later published "Flowers of Mountain and Plain" (1926), a book for a more general audience using many of the same illustrations.

Willa Cather was a classmate of Frederic and a good friend of Edith, and it's likely their scientific knowledge influenced the environmental aspects of the novelist's writing. In an interview by Eleanor Hinman in the "Lincoln Sunday Star" (November 6, 1921), Cather expressed her love of Nebraska wild flowers, concluding, "There is one book that I would rather have produced than all my novels. That is the Clements' botany dealing with the wild flowers of the west."

I think Edith saved her best work for West Coast readers in "Flowers of Coast and Sierra" (1928), which includes the mountain ranges of Oregon and Washington. She was self-taught as an artist and comfortable driving throughout the West to paint from living specimens. While clearly steeped in botanical knowledge, she sought to reach a general audience with both her art and writing. Like Julia Henshaw, she was also impressed with the glacier lily, saying these "will spring up by the thousand and carpet the earth with smooth green leaves which can scarcely be seen for the myriad bright-yellow blossoms nodding above. On the slopes of Mount Rainier, they unite with the white avalanche-lily (*E. montanum*) in turning the scene into fairyland."

Bibliography

Armstrong, Margaret, in collaboration with J. J. Thornber, A.M. "Field Book of Western Wild Flowers." New York: C. P. Putnam's Sons; The Knickerbocker Press, 1915.*

Clements, Edith S. "Flowers of Mountain and Plain." New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1926.

Clements, Edith S. "Flowers of Coast and Sierra." New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1928.

Clements, Frederic Edward and Edith Schwartz Clements. "Rocky Mountain Flowers: An Illustrated Guide for Plant-Lovers and Plant-Users." White Plains, NY: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1914.*

Henshaw, Julia W. "Mountain Wild Flowers of America: A Simple and Popular Guide to the Names and Descriptions of the Flowers that Bloom above the Clouds." Boston: Ginn & Company; The Athenaeum Press, 1906.**

Parsons, Mary Elizabeth and Margaret Warriner Buck, illustrator. "The Wild Flowers of California: Their Names, Haunts, and Habits." San Francisco: California School Book Depository, 1921.**

Thayer, Emma Homan. "Wild Flowers of The Pacific Coast: From Original Water Color Sketches Drawn from Nature." New York: Cassell & Company, 1887.*

*Rare Book Room collection, viewing by appointment only
**More recent copy, available in Miller Library