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## EXPLORER AND BOTANIST: MARY SOPHIE YOUNG

by Nicole Elmer, January 2, 2017

In 1912, Mary Sophie Young became the first official curator of the relatively new herbarium at UT, when the university was only 29 years old. In the short amount of time Young worked at UT before succumbing to cancer in 1919, she increased the holdings of the herbarium from 2500 specimens to 16,000 through her own collection as well as establishing an active exchange program. Young amassed much of this collection here in Austin as well as in West Texas, at a time when her destinations required difficult travel.



Young in West Texas with her team of donkeys during a summer collecting trip (*The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*)

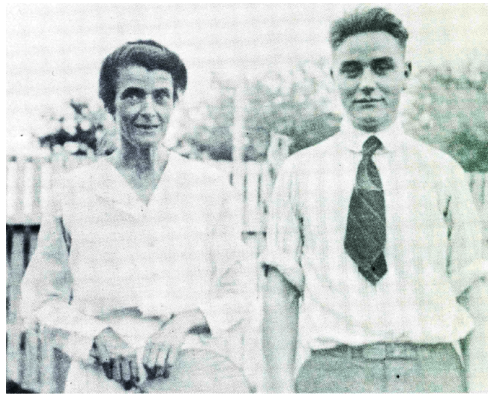
Born on September 20, 1872 (some accounts list 1870) in Glendale, Ohio, to Episcopalian minister Charles Huntington and his wife Emma Adams Young, Young was the youngest of eight children. Her older siblings were all brothers and she often forced them to play with her. Young attributed much of her ability to withstand rugged traveling to her experiences with her older brothers. "I knew that [if] I ever offended once, I should be barred from going again," Young said of playing outdoors with them, "and though I was wearied many a time to the point of exhaustion, I would have died rather than admit it to them."

Young had an active interest in education. She attended public schools in Ohio, Harcourt Place Seminary, and Wellesley College, from which she received a B.A. in 1895. From 1895 to 1906, she taught schools in Missouri, Illinois, Kansas, and Wisconsin, and took correspondence courses from the University of Chicago. She officially attended the University of Chicago from 1906 to 1910, and received a Ph.D. from that institution. Her master's thesis and doctoral dissertation were on the morphology of the *Podocarpaceae* under the direction of Professors J.M. Coulter and C.J. Chamberlain. Young's colleagues noted her to be a quiet but dedicated student.

Young's involvement in education would continue in the fall of 1910 when she joined the UT faculty as a botany tutor. In the following year, she was promoted to the rank of instructor. During this time she had full responsibility for the introductory botany laboratory class. Her teaching methods were considered progressive for the time, and often involved answering students' question by posing her own questions to make them think through the answer on their own. Young also invited students to attend hikes around Austin for collecting plant material for class.

Despite the difficulties of traveling even within the city during the early 20th century, Young collected plants in and around Austin. Austin's location straddled a diverse border between Eastern and Western flora and provided many different previously-uncatalogued specimens Young would introduce to the herbarium. Her research on Austin plants resulted in two publications. She often addressed herself in her business correspondence for these publications as "M.S. Young," leading others to believe she was a man in her letters, something in which she took a lot of spiteful pleasure.

Young's favorite area to collect was West Texas, and she traveled there during the vacation periods of the summers of 1914, 1915, 1916, and 1918. Traveling alone as a woman during this time was looked down upon, especially in the rugged territory of West Texas. Young would hire a younger man to accompany her, usually a university student, to assist with hunting and setting up camp. Young also paid part of her expenses on these collecting trips and donated her time. While in West Texas, she collected from ferns, grasses, cacti, large trees, and sedges.



Young and UT student Carey Tharp who would assist her 1914 trip to West Texas (Texas State Historical Association)

With touches of humor and self-awareness, Young writes extensively in her journals about her 1914 trip to West Texas. These pages lined with her minuscule handwriting shed light on the difficulty of collecting specimens in this region in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

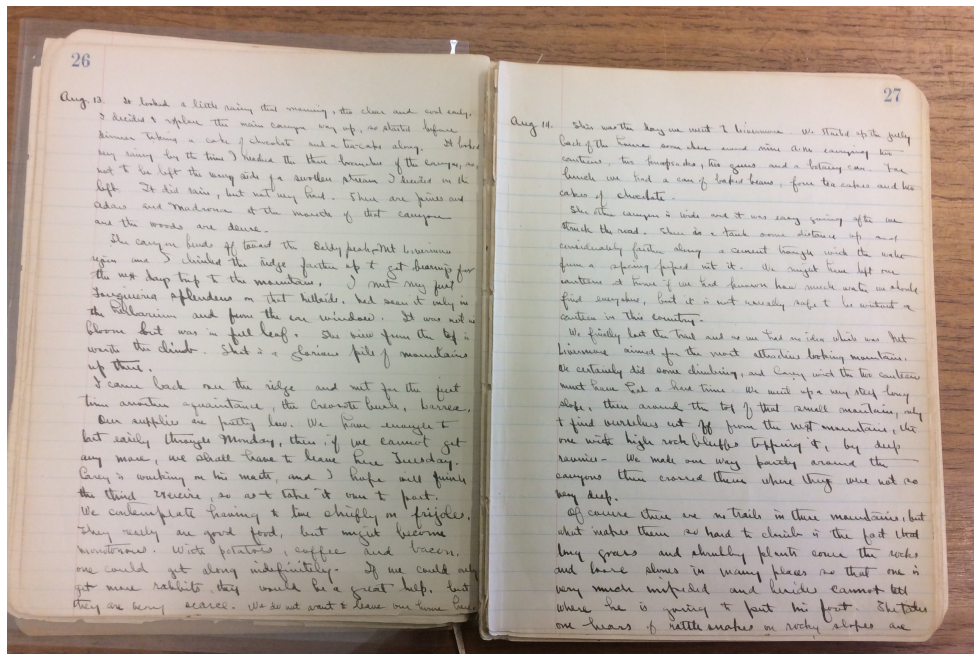
In an old buggy she bought for \$10, she and UT mathematics student Carey Tharp would roam West Texas, with two stubborn and sleep-prone donkeys Young had named "Nebuchadnezzar" and "Belaam." Of the first donkey, she writes:

"If our Lord rode as lazy a beast as this one, the triumphant entry into Jerusalem must have taken a long time."

Young and Tharp slept in abandoned adobe huts or under their buggy, rationed their supplies they bought from ranchers and hunted rabbit. Young carried a shotgun with her at all times, but did not have it on hand when she had a close encounter with a black bear. The two encountered many wild animals as curious in them as they were in their food, with a group of wild horses stealing bread and butter during the night.

Young also expresses awe at the landscape they traversed. At times, she wrote eloquently of the sensation of being in the vastness of West Texas at the turn of the century:

"It's about five o'clock now. The 'lonely' time is beginning. The air is very transparent and very still and everything glistens. There is something of that uncanny felling of the consciousness of inanimate things."



A page from Young's 1914 journal (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, UT Austin)

Colleagues noted Young's propensity for charity, as she often allowed students room and board in her home very cheaply or loaned money without interest. She also cared for animals, and adopted an abandoned litter of kittens. Raising the only one that survived, she taught it to roll over and lie down much like a dog. Young also adopted a stray dog she named Santa Claus who grew so attached to her, he would break his chain to run after her on campus. Santa Claus would often take the elevator of the Old Main Building to the third floor where Young had her office.

In February 1919, Young went to the doctor for what she believed was a minor operation. Accounts state that the surgeon actually found cancer in a very advanced stage. He immediately closed the incision in her

abdomen and could only administer painkillers. When Young was ill in the hospital, her dog Santa Claus was reported to often run back and forth from Young's home, then near 21st street, to the Old Main Building, looking for her in vain. Young would die on March 5, 1919, only a month after her doctor's visit. She is buried in Oakwood Cemetery in Austin, Texas, the oldest city-owned cemetery in Austin located close to the UT campus.



1914 postcard offering a view south campus from Old Main Building where Young worked (UT History Corner)

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