The Curious Case of the Missing Curator Emeritus

By Carol Barsi

Born in New York in 1849, Frank Stephens became one of America's professional collectors, specializing at first in birds and mammals for museum collections. This portrait may have been taken at the time of Frank's marriage to Elizabeth Fowler, one year before the couple arrived in California, combining their wedding trip with a bird collecting assignment for an eastern institution. Photo courtesy San Diego Historical Society—Ticor Collection.

It was the week Richard E. Byrd began his second Antarctic expedition, the week "Old Ironsides" docked at the foot of the Navy's E Street Pier on a return visit to San Diego, the week "wets" and "drys" battled for votes in six states, votes that would save or end Prohibition. Once again France massed troops along the German border, and midwestern governors beseeched President Roosevelt to protect farm prices. It was the first week of November 1933, a week of ordinary news, a week just waiting for an accident to happen.

For Frank Stephens, the 84-year-old Curator Emeritus of the San Diego Natural History Museum, it was a good week to collect desert fossils. With autumn temperatures in the 70s and humidity low, the days would be comfortable, nights would be cool, and if there had been some early rains, the overburden of soil would be loose and specimens might be removed without damage.

It was the Coyote Mountain region of Imperial County that Stephens wanted to visit: an area that had been investigated by Charles Orcutt in the 1890s; investigated more recently by Charles Sternberg and Stephens himself in 1920; and which was constantly under study by paleontologists from the University of California, the United States Geological Survey, the California Academy of Sciences, and the forceful Kate Stephens, Frank's wife.

Mrs. Stephens (the Museum's Curator of Marine Invertebrates), famous for her forthright manner, absolutely forbade Frank to make collecting trips alone. Not until Lewis Gunn, a young volunteer in the Paleontology Department, was approved by her as a suitable field partner for this trip did preparations begin.

Kate Stephens had good reason for concern. Frank's age may have been one factor; he was somewhat older than Kate who had been the teacher at Witch Creek School when they first met and whom Frank married after the death of the first Mrs. Stephens. Frank's health was also suspect; earlier in the year while collecting fossils on the steep slopes of Point Loma, he had collapsed with a heart attack.
There was also the more serious matter of Frank's driving habits. Witnesses have described it as both effective and terrifying. One young man pressed into service on a different collecting trip reported that Frank's car—an old, very old, Reo—had to be overhauled before the trip. It was a job Frank did himself by taking the car apart and putting it back together. The only way Frank, afflicted with bad hearing, could be sure the engine was running was to race it very fast and feel the vibrations.

On that trip, the witness tells us, the drive from San Diego to Ramona was made in low gear, then the Reo shifted into high for the climb to Julian—at strolling speed with engine boiling—before the final plunge down Banner Grade. Even in low gear this was a thrilling descent, the passenger holding the door open, ready for a life-saving jump.

Why then, if Mrs. Stephens was anxious about Frank, did she allow him to go at all? It is possible that Frank Stephens was just as stubborn as Kate, but more likely that Kate encouraged, even urged him to expand the Museum's paleontological collections with more of the Pliocene and Pleistocene material that was her own specialty. For it was Kate who had first interested her husband, a long-time collector of desert birds and a world renowned authority on California mammals, in the study of fossil marine invertebrates.

Preparations for the trip could not have been lavish; the Stephens' combined income was small and the Museum's budget was meager. The Bay City Market specials in that week's grocery advertisement featured bacon at 19 cents a pound, apples at two cents a pound, and canned corn (the camper's staple) at two cans for 20 cents.

On Thursday morning as Stephens and Gunn left town, newspapers headlined the indictment of an Ohio senator suspected of accepting a $1,500 bribe, and President Roosevelt opened a study on repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment, just in case state elections the following Tuesday should produce three states in favor of repeal. California was not one of the states holding an election this November—California was already in favor of repeal.

On an inside page with other local notes, the Natural History Museum's schedule of November events opened with the promise of a bird walk on Saturday. However, this was Thursday, November 2nd, the second day of duck season. The two men already headed toward the desert were more interested in fossils than feathers.

It was believed that their original intention was to follow the narrow twisting highway up into the mountains, cross over the pass, go on down into the Colorado Desert and head toward Coyote Mountain. At some time, perhaps before reaching the foot of Mountain Springs Grade, they had decided to spend part of their time at Painted Gorge.
Meanwhile, back at the Museum, Kate was at work. Like all other curators and full-time employees, she often taught classes at the Museum, which was now in a spacious modern building, its fourth home in Balboa Park. When the collections had been moved into the first of these—the Nevada Building in 1917—Frank Stephens had been Museum Director, collector and carpenter. And Kate, the Curator of everything.

A month after that first move was completed, the minutes of the Trustees' meeting (January 18, 1918) recorded, “The report of the curator, Mrs. Kate Stephens, was exhaustive, covering the installation of the material in the new building, lists of donations, and the work done by Mr. Frank Stephens in making cases and mounting specimens. The moving was accomplished without damage in great part owing to the help of two school boys.”

This latest move had involved a much larger staff, a new generation of school boys, and professional movers. Sternberg's dinosaur, of course, caused trouble but this time it was going to stay put.

If the building and ample storage space were a comfort, salaries were not. The Depression had stopped the gradual salary increases which Kate and Frank had once enjoyed. One year, 1921, Frank's annual salary had risen from $1,485 to $1,500, while Kate's had shot from $580 to $720.

Expecting to hear nothing from Frank until his return on Sunday night, Kate was able to concentrate on her work. For now, she was concerned with the extent of this particular fossil collection on which a forthcoming publication, reflecting years of work, would be based.

Much of the work had been done in the region Frank would be investigating. The Coyote Mountains of Imperial County had long been choice collecting sites, highly fossiliferous relics of a time when the Gulf of California washed against the hills of Riverside County. After the waters of the Gulf receded, this ancient sea floor with its coral reefs and oyster beds slowly turned to sandstone, rich with the sand dollars, urchins and molluscs typical of a Pliocene sea. Later a large freshwater lake, Lake Coahuila, covered part of the same area, but this had disappeared less than 500 years ago, leaving a treasury of its own typical fossils.

The dominant physical feature of the area was now the long, island-like mountain called both Coyote Mountain and Carrizo Mountain. The former name
seemed favored by geologists and paleontologists, the latter by map makers. Everywhere in the region the old sandstone bluffs with their wind-carved hollows had taken on the rich colors of desert paintings, the sort found in garish gas station calendars, too vivid to be believed. One of the most brightly colored areas was the fossil-studded Painted Gorge.

While Friday's newspapers made no mention of the Stephens-Gunn field work, they were full of Byrd's departure for the Antarctic. Sailing from the Canal Zone, Byrd carried supplies and equipment to last his crew for two years. Also given front page treatment was the week's first major accident; near Avalon a plane had plunged into the sea leaving two dead. But by now the men from the Museum were collecting in Painted Gorge with considerable success.

Sometime during the morning on Saturday, Stephens and Gunn separated by agreement, each taking a different direction after first settling on an hour and a place to meet in the afternoon. While Gunn was the younger, and surely the stronger of the two, Stephens was by far the more experienced. A veteran of collecting trips ever since he had crossed the Plains and traveled into the Southwest during a time of buffalo stampedes and Indian raids, he had collected for this Museum for over half a century.

At the agreed time Gunn returned to the meeting site. Stephens was not there. After a wait of several hours with still no sign of Stephens, Gunn hurried to Coyote Wells, a watering spot nearly five miles from Painted Gorge and about four miles from the United States/Mexican border. At Coyote Wells two men offered to search the gorge with Gunn but by dark they had failed to find any trace of Stephens. Gunn now went directly to El Centro where Sheriff George Campbell organized a posse and the caravan returned to the gorge. Equipped with flashlights, lanterns and ropes, the searchers divided into groups, their work hampered by the fact that the missing man would be unable to hear their shouts.

Police teletype spread the bad news to San Diego with astonishing rapidity. Local officers called on Mrs. Stephens to see if she could offer any information or suggestions. It is quite possible that Museum Director Clinton Abbot, who had risen early on Saturday to preside—in suit and necktie—at the Balboa Park Bird Walk, was also informed and asked to be kept abreast of developments.
After retiring in his 80s, Frank Stephens continued as an active collector for the Museum until felled by a San Diego streetcar in 1937. The widow Stephens lived on, as outspoken as ever, until she died at the age of 106. Photo courtesy San Diego Historical Society— Ticor Collection.

Once San Diego newsmen discovered the story, probably on the police teletype, the Union, a morning paper, had just enough time to revise page one before the presses rolled. After stressing the worst possibilities (a fall or a heart attack), the story ended with a comforting reminder that Stephens had specialized in desert bird collections and was familiar with most of the wasteland south of the Tehachapi.

As the posse spread methodically over the desert, beams from many flashlights laced across the shadowed sandstone, until one of the deputies stopped to examine a strange stain on the ground—a spot of blood! Led by Deputy Frank McCaslin, the searchers located still another bloodstain and another. Following this grim trail they discovered a dazed Frank Stephens, blood streaming from a deep gash in his forehead. Though weak and confused from loss of blood, he had built a small fire and was huddled close to the blaze to keep warm in the cold desert night.

He had fallen from a steep slope early in the day, striking his head on a rock or on his geologist’s pick, “and thereby rendering himself unconscious,” as one reporter phrased it. Later he had spent considerable time staggering in a direction opposite to the point where he was supposed to meet Lewis Gunn.

By midnight Saturday when the good news reached San Diego, there was no hope of stopping the presses. Scandals, the farm crisis and even the results of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Second Annual Baby Parade with 160 floats, featuring historic and fictional themes, had been shoved aside to make room at the center of the front page. As subscribers bent to lift the Sunday paper from their porches next morning, they saw this headline just above the crease:

CURATOR OF S.D. MUSEUM MISSING ON EXPEDITION

People all over San Diego telephoned the Museum, the Director and Mrs. Stephens that day asking for more news, wanting to help. Only the assurance that Frank Stephens had been found after his 12-hour ordeal in the desert and was now safe and resting comfortably in the Imperial County Hospital, kept many from rushing straight to Painted Gorge to join a search.

Deprived of a tragedy or even an ongoing emergency—a two-day search for the missing curator would have been helpful—California journalists focused on the happy ending. It was, however, an inside-page story and somewhat shorter than the earlier account which had gone by teletype to papers across the country.

Director Abbot was kept busy again on Monday answering phone inquiries, many from callers in other states. By Monday evening Frank Stephens was back home at 3746 Park Boulevard. It is not known whether Kate Stephens wept over him or fussed and scolded. However, Frank had brought back the fossils.

The following day was November 7th. Voters called for repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment and the papers had new headlines.