

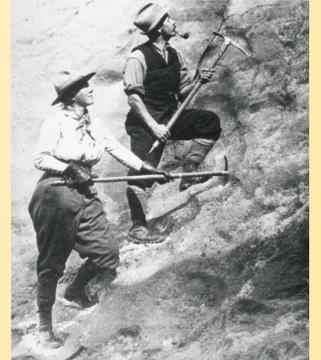
Mary Vaux Walcott (1860-1940)

“The Audubon of Botany”

Author/illustrator of the 5 volume *North American Wild Flowers*, Smithsonian (1925-29)

Featured in *Montana's Pioneer Botanists: Exploring the Mountains and Prairies* (2017)

The collection contains watercolor plates and narratives for each plant, the majority from the Northern Rocky Mountains of British Columbia and Alberta. These volumes are unique in comparison to the scientific and precise taxonomic treatments describing regional floras during her lifetime. Her watercolor sketches were intended to introduce the diversity and beauty of North American plants to the general public while maintaining the rigor of an accurate botanical illustration. *Smithsonian*



Mary came under the spell of the Canadian Rockies when her well-to-do Philadelphia Quaker family first visited in 1887, and she continued to come back many summers until her death 53 years later. Mary and her brothers soon noted the retreating glaciers and started photographing and measuring them, a project continued by family into this century. A founding board member of the Alpine Club of Canada, Mary was the first known woman to summit a 10,000' peak in Canada when she climbed Yoho National Park's Mt. Stephens in 1900.

top l- photographing glaciers above Lake Louise, courtesy of Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies; r- Smithsonian Institution



Wild flowers were a joy and inspiration in the happy days of childhood when I was taught to observe and sketch them ... Years passed before a botanical friend at Glacier, British Columbia, asked me to portray a rare and perishable alpine flower so as to preserve its beauty, color and graceful outline as a living thing ... I painted other rare specimens until many of the “living flowers that skirt the eternal frost” in the wildflower gardens of the Canadian Rockies were transferred in color and form to the East, where sketches of the native woodland and meadow blossoms soon began to join them.

During the past ten years I have spent from three to four months each season in the Canadian Rockies ... covering in all more than five thousand miles on the mountain trails ... my aim being to depict the natural grace and beauty of the plant without conventional design. Many of the western sketches were made under trying conditions. Often, on a mountain side or high pass, a fire was necessary to warm stiffened fingers and body. In camp, the diffused light of the white tent was a great handicap...

-Foreword, Mary Vaux Walcott, 1925

Our experience with sagebrush mariposa was a revelation of nature's methods. Our camp had been pitched on a dry bench fifty feet above the Kootenay River near Canal Flats, British Columbia where sparse vegetation indicated a lack moisture. One night a heavy storm of wind and rain came up. A few days later the miracle was manifest, for all around the tent the buds of the sagebrush mariposa were almost ready to unfold, and soon the plants were in perfect bloom ...



The glacierlily seems to radiate the spirit of the high places, and with bright sunshine and pure air helps to entice the lover of nature to the mountain tops along the edges of the melting snow. The pointed green, daggerlike leaves push upward, often through the snow itself, and soon the flower bursts into bloom, exhaling a delicious fragrance quite distinct from any other we experience in the mountains. Carpeting the ground with gold, the plant may be found even in mid-summer, along with springbeauties, yellow violets and buttercups, where the spring avalanches have lodged their load of snow and thus held the early flowers in cold storage

The glacierlily ... no doubt survived the glacial period close to the edge of the ice from Wyoming to Washington, having since pushed northward into the mountains of British Columbia and Alberta.

The specimen sketched was ... on the slopes of Mt. Wapta, above Emerald Lake near Field, in the Canadian Rockies at an altitude of 6,000 feet.



Over vehement objections from her autocratic father, Mary, at the age of 54, wed paleontologist Charles Doolittle Walcott, Executive Secretary of the Smithsonian. She joined his groundbreaking work at British Columbia's Burgess Shale, which shed light on the Cambrian explosion of life. *Smithsonian*

Mary packed glass plates in her saddle bags and developed film in cold tents at night during month-long trips in the mountains. l- Whyte Museum; r- Smithsonian



More about Mary Vaux Walcott:

Jones, Marjorie. 2015. *The life and times of Mary Vaux Walcott*. Shiffer Publishing Ltd. Atglen, PA

Smith, Cyndi. 1989. *Off the beaten track: Woman adventurers and mountaineers in western Canada*. Coyote Books, Lake Louise, Alberta, Canada

Vaux, Henry Jr. 2014. *Legacy in time: Three generations of mountain photography in the Canadian west*. Rocky Mountain Books. Victoria, B.C., Canada

<http://burgess-shale.rom.on.ca/en/history/context/03-mary.php>

<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=5197> and lots more on the web

Poster by Rachel Potter and Elizabeth Bergstrom

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