Brief History of the Suksdorfia Chapter of the Washington Native Plant Society

In the late 1800’s Wilhelm Suksdorf, a botanist was frequently seen tramping the pastures, meadows, and forests of the Columbia Gorge and around Mt. Adams. Despite opposition to his botany interests by his family he collected in five states and became famous internationally for his fine specimens. As a German immigrant, he never mastered written English enough to become published in professional botanical journals in America. Many plants bare the suksdorfii name in honor of his role in finding, identifying and propagating them. Just before a tragic train accident on October 3, 1932 ended his life at age 82, he willed his entire herbarium of over 150,000 collected plants and drawings to what at that time was Washington State College in Pullman, Washington.

Time passed. Dell Blackburn became biology instructor at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington. In addition to his official teaching responsibilities he led wildflower hikes, gave community lectures, and started a botany club he encouraged his students to participate in. “We had great times in the gorge ‘doing botany.” They named the new club “Suksdorfia” after Wilhelm Suksdorf and Del served as its president for several years until it became more organized and became an official chapter of the Washington Native Plant Society (WNPS). To be closer to the wildflowers of the Columbia Gorge he and his wife built a weekend cabin in a Dalles Mountain canyon on what is now Columbia Hills State Park. Many others who became involved with the evolution of the chapter credit Del with nurturing their initial wildflower interests. When Del retired he moved with his wife to Worley, Idaho where he continues to manage a hundred acre tree.

In 1973 Keith Chamberlain formed a very active Mid-Columbia Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Oregon. At the time they held meetings in a school house in Mosier, Oregon, just across the Columbia River. Since native plant communities refuse to recognize state boundaries or even the boundary of the very wide Columbia River, there is much more similarity between plants encountered on both sides of the Columbia than similarity with plants encountered further west in Vancouver, a significantly wetter climate. As a result many Washingtonians from Goldendale, White Salmon, and Bingen became affiliated with the Mosier group since the Washington Native Plant Society (WNPS) had no active chapter in the area at the time. The Mid-Columbia Chapter is still active under the presidency of Sara Wu of Goldendale who is an avid herbalist.

One couple who went on field trips with Dell was Mike and Nancy Fahey also of Vancouver. Mike was a retired chemistry professor from University of Oregon. “Dell took us to a bog area where there were some rare plants. We got hooked.” They began making trips all over Oregon, Washington, and other places. Nancy would spend hours with plant keys trying to identify each specimen while Mike concentrated on taking photographs. Mike told me, “Often while camping I would wake in some wee hour of the morning to find Nancy still at the picnic table with a camp lantern working at keying wildflowers we had seen the previous day.”

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In 1980 without a local WNPS Chapter wildflower lovers from Vancouver and clear to the coast had to make trips to Portland to attend NPSO meetings there. Mike decided to try establishing a Vancouver based chapter. By that time he already had the experience of being president for one term at the state level of NPSO. The decision was made to give the new chapter a broad geographical base extending across southwestern Washington from Klickitat County all the way to the coast. In 1984 the group adopted formal bylaws and honored Wilhelm Suksdorf by officially becoming the Suksdorfia chapter of the Washington Native Plant Society. The focus of the chapter, both then and to the present, has been on wildflower hikes and some limited conservation projects with a minimum number of meetings.

Mike and Mildred knew just about anybody who had anything to do with botany in the area. They were good friends with Russ Jolley who would eventually write the still popular book *Wildflowers of the Columbia Gorge* (1988). Russ was very active in wildflower conservation projects on both sides of the Columbia River including getting the wildflower rich steppes of what is now Catherine Creek Day Use Area fenced to keep out cattle. “The rock there was so hard he had to bring in jack hammers to make holes for the fence posts. Often they just gave up and created rock cribs” (still existent today).

Krista Thie was another charter member of the Suksdorfia chapter when Mike Fahey was elected as its first official president. Krista had taken a botany class in Yakima in 1975. Inspired she went on to obtain a degree in botany from University of Washington (1978). She remembers seeing bulletin board reports of beginnings of a new statewide Washington Native Plant Society.

After her finishing her degree in 1978, Krista and her husband Daryl had moved to White Salmon, Washington where she taught botany classes with Lynn Kilgore at the Bingen School. They managed to borrow a dissecting microscope and some specimens from Clark College through Dan Spatz who was a student of Del Blackburn.

Krista’s interest in ethnobotany and the study of the medicinal uses of herbs eventually led her to author the book *Medicinal plants of the Pacific Northwest: a digest of anthropological writings about Native American uses* (1999). Krista and her husband, Daryl, continue to be heavily involved in botany projects at the professional level, operating a company that specializes in trail building. She remains active with the Suksdorfia Chapter as its current treasurer.

Good friends of Mike and Nancy Fahey, Russ Jolley, and Krista Thie were Stuart and Mildred Chapin of White Salmon, WA. With her long standing interest in botany Mildred too joined the new chapter as one of its founding members. Stuart become very interested in botany about the same time the chapter was formed and also joined. Like Mike and Nancy they did a great deal of botany field work on both sides of the Columbia River, carefully recording the genus, species, location, and date of each wildflower found. Stuart would take the pictures and Mildred would do the identification. “There are a lot of flowers in the Gorge that you don’t get anywhere else in the world,” Mildred commented. Stuart eventually published four small monographs on wildflowers of the...
mid-Columbia, still available at the White Salmon Community Library. He is quick to
give Krista Thie credit for his botany interests and knowledge. “Everything I know about
botany, Krista taught me.” Stuart, now 98 years old, still attends wildflower programs of
the Suksdorfia chapter.

Eventually Keith Chamberlain died. When the Mosier School District decided they no
longer wished to host evening groups Mid-Columbia NPSO Chapter moved its meetings
to The Dalles, Oregon. Travel distance to meetings became a stretch for some
prospective Washington members from the White Salmon and Bingen area.

Mike was able to keep the chapter going in Vancouver for many years. But “it was really
tough maintaining the interest level,” he told me. We tried switching the meeting place
around some. “We had several meetings up in Longview, a few here in Vancouver, and
even tried one out in Camas.” But like the Mid-Columbia area many members became
involved with the Portland NPSO Chapter which had a much larger membership base,
more programs, and more activities. Like the Mid-Columbia area some Portlanders
joined and retained membership in both societies. Gradually the Suksdorfia chapter lost
activity and leadership.

In 2011 Krista Thie invited a few people to her home in White Salmon for a discussion
about the chapter’s status. By then the Vancouver-based chapter leaders had either
retired or moved away and no one agreed to fill empty slots. While eager to have the
chapter continue there was reluctance among those who met at Krista’s to formalize a
chapter with bylaws and officers. Dan Richardson, at that time an intern at the
Underwood Conservation District and now a permanent staff member with them, began
publishing a monthly blog called the “Suksdorfia.” He continued this valuable service to
the essentially defunct chapter until his internship finished. He was unable to continue
when he became a permanent employee of the conservation district. He continues to be a
chapter member keeping its leaders up to date with knowledge about different
conservation projects Suksdorfia members often participate in.

Finally in 2013, left without a formal person to declare as the contact person for the
Suksdorfia chapter, WNPS proposed disbanding it. Reaction was swift. A “save the
chapter” campaign was launched, and in October an annual meeting was called, revised
bylaws were adopted, and officers were elected (Don Hardin, president; Jon Arp, vice-
president; Dottie Moulton, secretary, and Krista Thie, treasurer). Goals for the coming
year were brainstormed. Members expressed a preference for more activities like hikes
than presentation style programs.

Some on both sides of the Columbia River maintained and still maintain dual affiliation
with both WNPS and NPSO. Rowena-based environmental-activist Barbara Robinson
has been particularly active in conservation projects and encouraging native plant interest
on both sides. For example one of her more recent activities has been to restore
balsamroot to the Catherine Creek area. Part of this area was once named Sunflower Hill
because of its bright yellow displays each spring. Heavy cattle and sheep grazing, before
it was bought by Trust for Public Lands and later turned over to USFS, had all but

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exterminated balsamroot and much of the lupine from the area. Barbara has quietly led volunteers in replanting efforts for the last few years. She hikes extensively providing a rich dialog of botanical knowledge to those who are privileged enough to hike with her. She has also been very active with the Klickitat Rails to Trails Organization and Columbia Land Trust.

Another current Suksdorfia member, Jeanette Burkhardt is occasionally involved with chapter activities and very active at professional levels with conservation projects in the area. One of her more notable ongoing projects is the restoration to natural habitat of the disturbances caused by removal in 2011 of the infamous Condit Dam on the White Salmon River. Suksdorfia chapter members have volunteered time on this project.

The revitalized Suksdorfia chapter sponsors one or more hikes each month during wildflower season, participates in multiple conservation projects, and even has a few programs. Most members cross fertilize with and enrich multiple other environmental organizations in the area. To be sure, it will face challenges as it moves ahead. It lacks, for example, the long term stability of the Mid-Columbia Chapter with its many professional botanists as members. But for now it is alive and well.

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