

NATIVE FLORA & FAUNA WITH SIERRA FOOTHILL CONSERVANCY

The White Mountain Rose: Part 2

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Sierra Foothill Conservancy docent

Swedish botanist Dr. Gustav Eisen may have fallen under the same spell that later captivated Clarissa Kneeland, for he promptly harvested and shipped for distribution nearly twenty-five pounds of carpenteria seed. Some of it found its way to England where it became quite the garden celebrity. "People lined up for blocks [at the Kew Royal Botanical Gardens] to see the mystery shrub with the spectacular flowers," John Stebbins, a Fresno State botanist, told the Los Angeles Times.

Two of carpenteria's cultivars, including the popular Elizabeth (honoring California botanist Elizabeth McClintock) received the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit. Now carpenteria is more commonly found in specialty nurseries (including Intermountain Nursery in Auberry) and gardens (including this reporter's) than it is to be seen in the foothills. It is designated a threatened species by the State of California due to its limited native habitat.



Elizabeth Carpenteria .

Black Mountain, however, has been carpenteria's special home and repository. The local newspaper carried Clarissa's affectionate stories of her "white mountain rose" which she found to be a source of comfort during World War II. To protect the carpenteria and the other flora and fauna of Black Mountain, the Kneelands expanded their private sanctuary to 1220 acres. Following their deaths in 1950, however, the homestead fell into disrepair, the land parceled and sold off.

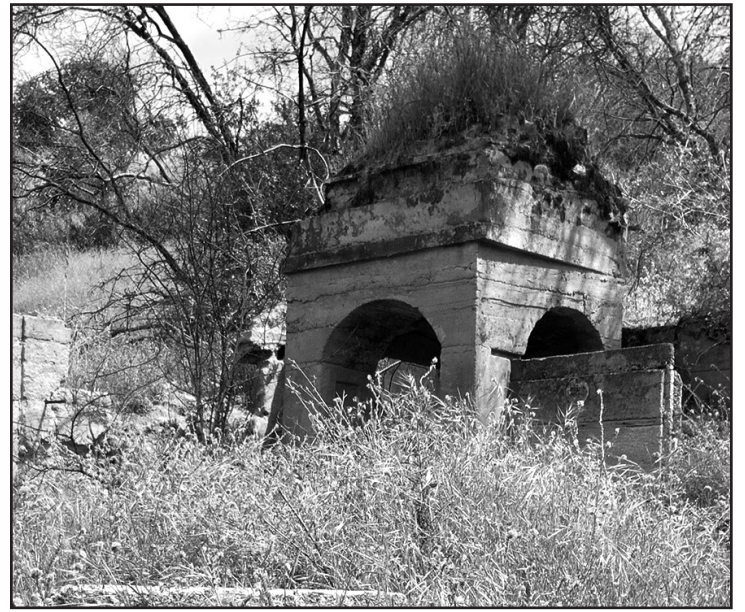
Despite its rarity, the carpenteria is a hardy plant: drought-tolerant and deer-resistant. It thrives on wild-

fires, including the Black Mountain fires of 1928 and the Goose Fire of 2016. Each time it has re-emerged more populous than before.

Similarly enduring has been the vision of preserving Black Mountain and its native wonders. In the 1960s, Bill and Mary Elizabeth Miller reacquired some of the acreage that the Kneelands had once held, again with the dream of protecting the mountain's natural bounty and its signature plant, the carpenteria.

Following Mary Elizabeth's death and in her memory, Bill donated their land on Black Mountain and provided a major endowment to the Nature Conservancy. In 1996, Sierra Foothill Conservancy assumed ownership of the original 360 acres. Since then the Mary Elizabeth Miller Preserve on Black Mountain has expanded to over 4,300 acres.

Atop Black Mountain stands the abandoned fire lookout built on land donated to the Forest Service by the Kneelands following the devastating 1928 fire. The ruins of the Kneeland Homestead cling less conspicuously to a hillside below. Claris-



The Kneeland Homestead site.

CHRIS VELEZ PHOTO

sa's favorite White Mountain Rose remains nearby.

The carpenteria are now in full blossom on the Preserve, which, sadly, is closed to the public. So we are limited to a glimpse of these blooming beauties along the Four-Lane, until we can return to Black Mountain to marvel at the beauty of this potent force of nature.

John McDaniel is a recently retired lawyer, and a newly hatched docent for the Sierra Foothill Conservancy. John and his wife, Andrea, are attempting to raise several Elizabeth Carpenteria at their Fresno home. To support Sierra Foothill Conservancy or become a member, please visit sierrafoothill.org



Clarissa's favorite Carpenteria, in 2020, pre-bloom.

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