



**25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Article Series: Bill Miller and SFC's Black Mountain Preserve** *Article Contributed by John Stebbins*

I first met Bill Miller in about 1977 when his wife Mary showed up in my office with a few plants that she said she had gathered from her foothill home on Black Mountain. She wanted to know what they were because she liked them. Among the plants was *Carpenteria californica*, our beautiful local endemic species with the spectacular white flowers. Having recently finished an extensive graduate research project on the species I was able to tell her about some of its most significant botanical and historical attributes, including the fact that Black Mountain was at the center of its very limited range.

Within less than an hour Bill showed up and introduced himself, and then he sat down and demanded to know everything about the plant. He insisted that I show him all the “evidence” that I had on the rare species. He also asked if I could find anything that was ever published on it, which I eventually did by contacting other institutions for the available literature. By comparison, this species had very little available information - probably because the plant's location was quite distant from most major research institutions. Bill and Mary continued their periodic visits, usually with specimens from their beloved Black Mountain property. Mary liked to draw many of the plants surrounding their “home on the hill”.

Bill was an organic chemist who said that his favorite class to teach was glassblowing, a standard requirement for early chemistry students who had to make their own lab tools. Bill was very proud of his involvement with the first earth day in 1970 at Fresno State where he showed off his solar oven made from recycled materials and warned of the dangers of pumping excess greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. Mary often hung around campus and would meet Bill at the end of the day before heading back up to the hills in Bill's 60's era VW bug. They were cheerful and easily recognizable together, her in what could best be described as a “high school cheerleader ensemble” and he in his secondhand thrift store clothing.

One spring day Bill asked if I wanted to go up to Black Mountain with him. I jumped at the chance as I had never been up as far up as his place. He showed me his house that was built to his specifications in the shape of a benzene ring, his favorite organic compound. He was well aware of the fire danger up there so much of the house was built of asbestos! It had a great view and was later used as SFC's first office; it still stands

today. We had a great day looking around at *Carpenteria* and many other plants. He invited me for “lunch” which consisted of crackers, government surplus cheese, and spring water!

Later in the 80’s Bill bought some land near Glen Ellen in Sonoma County, as Mary was not feeling very well, especially during the summer heat. He planned on retiring there, which he eventually did. Unfortunately, Mary grew increasingly ill, was diagnosed with cancer, and died a few years later. Bill was devastated but gradually turned his efforts back to Black Mountain. He often said “I have to protect it” but neither of us had any idea how to do that.

He came to me once and said maybe he should give it to Fresno State for research and student use - certainly a noble idea. As tactfully as possible, I told him the story of “The Huntington Lake deal” in which Fresno State had been given significant lands at Huntington Lake in the early 1920’s to be used for students and staff. The property was used often during the hot months for a variety of summer school classes and science research projects. I told Bill how the President in the early 70’s quietly sold off the property to developers. Bill insisted I show him, so we planned a “research trip” with a few other interested folks and went up there. He was shocked when he saw the extensive new condos and the few remaining remnants of the old school facilities. The whole way back he fumed that the “traitor President” probably gave the money from that obscene sale to the “blankety blank football team”.

Eventually I helped Bill get in touch with the Nature Conservancy, who negotiated a deal to accept the 360-acre property in 1990 and agreed to turn it over to Sierra Foothill Conservancy once it was established. Some time later during a retirement ceremony for Bill in the Fresno State library, the current President showed up for a few minutes to give his customary laudatory statement. Afterward, Bill got up and said, “Well thanks, but John Stebbins told me what you guys did at Huntington Lake so, I’m giving all my property to the Nature Conservancy for permanent protection!” As all the heads turned around, I shrunk down and kept a low profile for a long time afterwards.

The next few years involved many dedicated individuals working to establish SFC and in 1996 the Mary Elizabeth Miller Preserve was transferred as promised. Bill became increasingly interested in and somewhat frustrated by the slow pace of the extremely complicated negotiations involved in acquiring additional lands that he felt were necessary to fulfill his wishes. He was particularly interested in the old Kneeland homestead lands ([Click here for a fascinating detailed historical reference article](#)) near his original property. He closely identified with the well documented peaceful and pacifist personalities of both Kneeland siblings. He pressured many of us with calls, letters, and donations to “speed things up”. He called the desired acquisition of the Kneeland homestead property his “holy grail!” From 2000-2004, SFC conducted the

“Black Mountain Campaign” to raise over \$900,000 with the bulk coming from Bill. He had inherited some money (which embarrassed him) and he eventually donated over \$750,000. The funds were used to purchase additional lands along with much appreciated grants from the Packard Foundation, the Wildlife Conservation Board and others.

Bill was no longer driving, so I asked my son Adam who was an undergraduate student at Sonoma State University to go visit Bill and assist him with errands. Adam and some of his friends became regulars at Bill’s place and they told me “that guy is really cool and really smart!” Bill told me he loved getting those visits and one time he hiked all those boys up to a ridge behind his small house and showed them a large Tuscan style winery mansion that had just been built in the nearby valley that totally disgusted him. He called it “the Taco Bell house.”

I last saw Bill in early 2007 shortly before he died of cancer at the Friends House, an eldercare hospice facility in Santa Rosa. I took him a *Carpenteria* from Intermountain Nursery that we planted on the grounds there. I recently checked on it and it is still thriving beautifully.

In 2008 Art and Helen Staebler donated their directly adjacent 60 acres on Black Mountain to the Preserve. Art was a Fresno State Biology professor who had used Black Mountain as a field studies laboratory for many years. Art told us that Bill’s efforts inspired him, so he made his much-appreciated decision. In 2010 Bill’s fervent wish was fulfilled and the 358-acre Kneeland property was added to the Black Mountain Preserve at last, supported by a grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board. Several of us friends and SFC members gathered near the old Kneeland homestead and scattered Bill’s ashes under a large blooming *Carpenteria*. Over the years, several additional large parcels on Black Mountain were acquired either by donation, grants, or purchase. **Today the total land on Black Mountain protected by conservation easements or fee titles totals over 4,500 acres!** We will always remember Bill Miller as the visionary catalyst for permanently protecting a living legacy of incredible natural diversity.

Kneeland article link: <https://www.latimes.com/local/la-xpm-2011-jun-12-la-me-wildflower-20110612-story.html#null>