



## Jeanne Larson's Legacy and the Formation of the Ruth McKenzie Table

**Mountain Preserve** *Article contributed by John Stebbins, botanist, lifelong SFC supporter, and SFC's first board president*

SFC lost a legendary supporter last fall, Jeanne Larson. Jeanne was a widely known figure on many local and regional issues relating to the natural world, but is perhaps best remembered and appreciated for her monumental efforts and ultimate success in the acquisition and establishment of the Ruth McKenzie Table Mountain Preserve owned and managed by SFC. I first met Jeanne as a lowly botany student in the 1970's toiling late at night trying unsuccessfully to key out native grass samples that I had collected in the foothills. I was convinced that it could not be identified, when in walked a lady I had never seen before. She looked over my shoulder and said "oh that's bent grass". I about fell over, and upon recovery we became lifelong friends. Of course she knew that grass, because at the time she was a range scientist at the San Joaquin Experimental Range. Although we did not always share the same opinions on everything, we always agreed on the need to learn about and protect nature. We took many trips together, often with groups like the California Native Plant Society, botanizing the environs of our nearby counties. A particularly favorite jaunt was to the Central Camp cabin region where we explored the Sand Creek and meadow habitats.

Unquestionably one of Jeanne's greatest achievements was the effort to save Big Table Mountain. In the early 1980's a proposal came up for approval at the Fresno County Board of Supervisors to dump millions of old tires on top of Big Table Mountain (out of sight out of mind!). Many of us scientific, academic, and agency resource types showed up to contribute impassioned comment about the very significant biological resources that were present in these highly specialized habitats. We all observed "how their eyes glazed over during our presentations". Jeanne, however, took a very different approach, accusing the County officials of giving in to greedy developers and special interests with little regard for anything else, especially nature. As you can imagine the comment was not well received and she was cut off for "taking too much time." At that very moment Ruth McKenzie arrived, a well-known and somewhat feared legend in the foothills. She marched right up and told the Supervisors that they had just been "disrespectful to the previous lady" and then pointedly called them idiots for even considering the proposal adjacent to her beloved land. She said the Table Mountains were "God's creation where his creatures ran free". Not ten minutes later, the Board Chair motioned to deny the project and it passed unanimously. The company representative was dumbfounded and so were all of us. Meanwhile, Ruth McKenzie had already left the building.

That day I realized that in order to permanently protect this unique and special place, Ruth McKenzie must be integral part of any effort. I remember several discussions with Jeanne relaying many stories and tales surrounding Ruth McKenzie, who was descended from an early Fort Millerton pioneer family. Jeanne volunteered to visit Ruth at her little south Fresno home, and they became "kindred spirits" as Jeanne called it. They both agreed that the "local political and government officials were essentially corrupt and could never be trusted." Ruth confided in Jeanne that "the only ones that she hated more than the government (after all, they stole her father's land for Millerton Lake!) were her own distant greedy family members who had been trying to get her land for a long time". Over time we strategized with Jeanne and she provided Ruth direct contacts from the Nature Conservancy. Jeanne said that Ruth appeared "somewhat receptive" because TNC was a non-profit and most importantly, not the government. However, she never divulged her intentions publicly prior to her death. Jeanne visited Ruth in the hospital and took her a bouquet of foothill wildflowers in her final days.

Sometime after Ruth's death her attorney notified TNC that Ruth had left her 2,000-acre property and a substantial sum of money to them. This development accelerated the effort to form a local land trust, and in 1996 Sierra Foothill Conservancy was established. I was honored to serve as the first Board President. Shortly thereafter, TNC transferred the property title along with permanent conservation easements and an endowment to SFC. The Ruth McKenzie Table Mountain Preserve became the first preserve owned by SFC and in many ways it is the "crown jewel" of our nature preserves due to its assemblage of extraordinarily diverse habitats supporting many species, interesting geology, well-preserved history as a working ranch, and close proximity to urban Fresno. We are all eternally grateful to Jeanne Larson for playing such an important role in its formation.