Inventory of the Maunsell Van Rensselaer Collection, 1920-1970

Collection number: 2006-2

Environmental Design Archives
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, California

Processed by:
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Descriptive Summary
Title: Maunsell Van Rensselaer collection
Dates: 1920-1970
Collection number: 2006-2
Creator: Van Rensselaer, Maunsell, 1897-1972
Collector: Environmental Design Archives
Collection Size: 3.5 boxes and 1 card file box
Repository: Environmental Design Archives
College of Environmental Design
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, California
Physical location: Environmental Design Archives
University of California, Berkeley
Berkeley, California 94720-1820
Languages: Languages represented in the collection: English
Access
Collection is open for research.
Publication Rights
All requests for permission to publish, reproduce, or quote from materials in the collection should be discussed with the Curator.
Preferred Citation
Biographical Note
Maunsell Van Rensselaer (1897-1972)
Maunsell Van Rensselaer was born in Los Angeles, California on May 13, 1897. As a direct descendant of the prominent Holland-Dutch family who established the colony of Rensselaerwyck (now Rensselaer, New York), he was the fifth of nine children to James Taylor Van Rensselaer and Agnes Sarah Bradley Van Rensselaer. He was named after his grandfather, Rev. Maunsell Van Rensselaer, an Episcopal minister in Albany, New York. He married Eleanor Olmsted White on May 14, 1921. They had two children, Cortlandt Van Rensselaer and Patricia Louise Van Rensselaer Wilson.
Van Rensselaer grew up and attended school in Fallbrook, California. He enlisted in the United States Army in 1916 during World War I, and was stationed at an army airfield in San Diego, California. In recognition of his skill, he was awarded a
commission as Second Lieutenant and was sent to the University of California, Berkeley for pre-flight training. Then he was assigned to March Field, near Riverside, California, where he received pilot training. While at March Field, he was introduced to his future wife Eleanor Olmstead White.

Following his release from the army, Van Rensselaer resumed his studies at the University of California, Berkeley, where both he and Eleanor attended. He was a member of Alpha Kappa Lambda and Phi Delta Kappa. He graduated in 1923 with a major in physical education. His great interest was in botany and forestry, but his family convinced him that this field would not provide a good living. This resulted in his employment with the City of Berkeley Recreation Department. He also served as Dean of Boys for Berkeley High School from 1923 to 1925.

During this time, Van Rensselaer and Eleanor were given the opportunity to establish the Berkeley summer camp on the Tuolomne River near Yosemite. After managing this camp for several summers, they left Berkeley and founded Lokoya Lodge, a summer resort on Mt. Veeder in Napa County. Van Rensselaer served as Treasurer, Managing Director, and President of the Lodge from 1926 to 1933. He also formed the Mt. Veeder Improvement Association, in which he also served as its president. After Lokoya Lodge failed financially due to the Depression, Van Rensselaer decided to return to his original botanical career interest.

Van Rensselaer then worked for what is now called the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, serving initially in 1934 as Assistant Director, and was then later appointed to Director from 1936 to 1950. He also was instrumental in having the redwood adopted as California’s official state tree in 1937. Serving as its chairman from 1943 to 1945, Van Rensselaer was a member of the Santa Barbara Board of Park Commissioners for many years, as well as a member of the Royal Horticultural Society, the Mexican Botanical Society, and the American Association of Botanic Gardens and Arboreta. In 1943, he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Garden Club of America as the co-author of Ceanothus.

After relocating to Los Altos, California in 1950, Van Rensselaer and nurseryman Ray Hartman co-founded the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation, a non-profit institution located on several acres of land donated by Hartman near the town center of Saratoga, California. The Foundation selected desirable plants, often from mutations, and propagated these with grafting in order to create identical specimens. Several dozen of these plant varieties were patented. Many of the long lines of identical trees, which today shade the streets of the Silicon Valley, were propagated at the Foundation.

While at the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation, Van Rensselaer served as director from 1950 to 1971. Among other accomplishments, he was president for the International Shade Tree Conference in the early 1960s and a member of the Advisory Council of the California Foundation for Horticultural Research and the Arboretum Committee at the University of California, Santa Cruz. In 1965, Van Rensselaer was named to the Horticultural Hall of Fame.

Van Rensselaer authored Trees of Santa Barbara, a profusely illustrated book, which was published in 1940 by the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, Inc. He prepared a revised and enlarged edition in 1948. His major botanical publication, Ceanothus, was written in conjunction with Howard E. McMinn, professor of botany at Mills College. It was also published by the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in 1942. In addition, Van Rensselaer authored hundreds of articles for horticultural publications and made countless presentations on botanical subjects.

Maunsell Van Rensselaer died on August 15, 1972 in Santa Cruz, California.

Sources:
Collection file, Environmental Design Archives.

Scope and Content of Collection
The collection, which spans from 1920 to 1970 (bulk 1920-1945), consists of records, photographs, and publications relating primarily to Maunsell Van Rensselaer’s horticultural career. The collection comprehensively documents his research for the Famous Trees of California project, as well as his student years at the University of California, Berkeley. The collection contains no records pertaining to his work as the Director of the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation.

Notable papers in the first series include the term papers and a field notebook from his studies at the University of California, Berkeley. This series documents his developing passion as well as his keen observations of the botanical field, including pressings of plant specimens and detailed descriptions. The professional papers series is small, consisting of reference materials such as nature guides and bulletins relating to plants and birds. It also includes a notebook bound by Van Rensselaer titled "Trees By Counties," in which he has listed named trees by alphabetical counties in California.

The final series in the collection is devoted solely to the Famous Trees of California project. This is the largest series, documenting Van Rensselaer’s extensive research of named trees, and is largely comprised of photographs and correspondence from Lokoya and Santa Barbara. The Famous Trees of California bound book is also included, as well as newspaper clippings and a collection of index cards alphabetically arranged by common tree name.

Indexing Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library’s online public access catalog.
Subjects
Plants--California.
Landscape architecture--California.

Genres and Forms of Material
Research.
Student works.
Photographs.

I. Personal Papers 1920-1970
Series Scope and Content Summary
Consists of University of California, Berkeley term papers for Landscape Gardening, Botany, which include drawings and detailed descriptions of various plant species located on campus. Contains the study of the Douglas Fir in Lagunitas and Little Carson Canyons, photographs of plants and trees, as well as a field notebook with pressings of plant specimens of named trees in California. Includes publications by his wife Eleanor Van Rensselaer.

A. Student Work
Box 1, Folder 1
Landscape Gardening 101 Prof. Flint (Planting South of N. Hall) n.d.
Box 1, Folder 2
Landscape Gardening 101 (Plot SW of Hilgard Hall) n.d.
Box 1, Folder 3
Botany 3 1921
Box 1, Folder 4
Study of Douglas Fir in Lagunitas and Little Carson Canyons 1920
Box 1, Folder 5
Student’s Field Notebook n.d.
Box 1, Folder 6
Eleanor Van Rensselaer 1957-1966

B. Publications
Box 1, Folder 7
Bird Publications 1927-1970
Box 1, Folder 8
Nature Guide Publications 1921-1934
Box 1, Folder 9
Garden/Plant Publications 1932-1942

II. Professional Papers 1921-1942
Series Scope and Content Summary
Contains nature guides, as well as garden, plant and bird publications. It also includes a notebook bound by Van Rensselaer titled “Trees By Counties,” in which he has listed named trees by alphabetical counties in California.

Box 2, Folder 1
Misc. Tree Photographs with captions 1921-1960
Box 2, Folder 1
Misc. Tree Photographs with captions 1921-1960
Box 2, Folder 2
Reference - Trees of Howell Mountain n.d.
Box 2, Folder 3
Reference - Sierra Club Bulletin 1933
Box 2, Folder 4
Trees By Counties Book 1932-1936

III. Famous Tree of California Project 1933-1945
Series Scope and Content Summary
Consists of photographs of famous named trees of California. Some with captions, some with no captions. Also includes photographed postcards of trees. Contains correspondence primarily from Lokoya and Santa Barbara regarding the Famous Trees of California project. Also, includes research notes and Famous Trees of California book.

A. Photographs
III. Famous Tree of California Project 1933-1945

A. Photographs

Box 2, Folder 1  California Tree Photographs no-captions n.d.
Box 2, Folder 2  Postcards/Photographs n.d.
Box 2, Folder 3  Photographs n.d.
Box 2, Folder 4  "Morgue" Photographs n.d.
Box 2, Folder 5  "Famous Trees of California" Project n.d.

B. Correspondence and Research

Box 3, Folder 6-7  Correspondence Lokoya 1933-1934
Box 3, Folder 8  Correspondence Santa Barbara 1935-1945
Box 3, Folder 9  Notes and Research Santa Barbara 1935-1945
Box 3, Folder 10  Clippings n.d.
Box 3, Folder 11  Notes and Research n.d.
Box 4  Famous Trees of California book n.d.
Box 5  Index Cards- Alphabetical by Species n.d.