

The shell couple



Mary Turver holds a triton from the South Seas while Harry holds a melongena, 1945.

Thanks to the Turvers, we have the City Museum today

By MARGARET KOCH
Sentinel correspondent

SINCE EARLY days, Santa Cruz has had its share of naturalists, botanists, bird watchers and nature lovers of various kinds. Some were professionals with degrees. Others were self-taught, lucky to hold a high-school diploma. This is about a self-taught expert who was eventually recognized by the Smithsonian Institution.

Harry Turver's name is all but forgotten in Santa Cruz. He came here as a youth with his parents, from England. They lived in Olympia (near Zayante) briefly, then in San Francisco. In 1916, Harry returned to Santa Cruz with his wife, Mary. He worked for an oil company and was regarded as a highly competent employee. But his heart was held captive by Monterey Bay.

Harry Turver developed a thorough knowledge of certain fields of geology ... the earth's strata ... the earth's surface ... and

particularly the sea creatures of Monterey Bay. He studied continually and became an internationally known authority and expert on sea shells and fossils. In his "spare" time, he organized Santa Cruz City Museum, Turver was behind the move. He and Mary also organized the Santa Cruz Nature Club about that time.

As museum director, he once said, "We have had much fine comment on the museum from those people who are qualified to speak. Santa Cruzans would be amazed at the authorities who have visited it from all parts of the country." As

Turver's earliest year in Santa Cruz County, at Olympia, whetted his appetite for learning about the earth and its inhabitants. He explained that area once, saying that he estimated "the Miocene deposits of Olympia to be at least 20 million years old."

At age 18, he became affiliated with the California Academy of Sciences. Also at that age, he got his first job as a lineman for a power company. But every spare moment, he spent studying the earth and its creatures.

When the he and Mary came to live in Santa Cruz in 1916, they collected shells and fossils around Monterey Bay until 1945 when his job took him to Los Angeles. The couple also traveled, and added to

their collection, in other countries and he corresponded with scientists worldwide during those 29 years.

The Smithsonian published an article on rare Monterey Bay and Mexican shells, crediting the Turvers for the information. Mary also became an authority. Harry specialized in identifying the shells and fossils.

The Turvers sent collections of local shells to museums in Australia and South America as well as to numerous schools in the U.S.

In February, 1930, when the former Crafts House in Seabright was converted into the first Santa Cruz City Museum, Turver was behind the move. He and Mary also organized the Santa Cruz Nature Club about that time.

As museum director, he once said, "We have had much fine comment on the museum from those people who are qualified to speak. Santa Cruzans would be amazed at the authorities who have visited it from all parts of the country." As

director, he emphasized the natural science of the local area in the museum displays.

Mary did most of the collecting. "It's best after storms," she said in a 1941 interview. "But we collect everywhere we go. If we are inland, we look for fossils and fresh water shells ..."

Their collection of more than 1,000 species of shells from different parts of the world included 250 from Monterey Bay. Turver once said that Monterey Bay was "unique in its variety — a real treasure trove."

It was Mary who also prepared local shell collections for elementary schools — "about 100 common varieties the children will recognize readily when they see them on beaches in the vicinity."

At that time, 1941, nine kinds of abalone were found in Monterey

Bay, including the largest abalone shells in the world, according to Turver. Moon snails were common on Rio del Mar beach. Pismo clams and cockle clams were plentiful then, but the geoduck clam, once in large supply here, had by then become extinct, according to his records.

"If you find a yellow shell in any family, you have a real prize," Mary once explained. "And once in a thousand shells, there will be one with the valve on the left instead of the right."

They were proud of the fact that they had never sold a shell; all the school collections and foreign exchanges were free.

Shortly before the Turvers left for southern California, Harry was instrumental in establishing a small aquarium at the end of the Municipal Wharf.

And Mary was heard to remark that collecting was getting more difficult with fewer shells to be found.

When the Turvers left Santa Cruz in 1945 they took their personal collection with them — the harvest of 29 years — some 2,000 specimens.

They left behind a fine collection of more than 300 identified shells at Santa Cruz city museum; some of those shells are probably extinct today.

Harry, who was thrilled when the number of WEEKLY visitors to the museum hit 50 or 75, would be surprised today. Attendance now averages — daily — between 75 and 150. He would be pleased no doubt, with the whale that kids love to clamber over, out in the front yard ... the tide pool where kids can dabble their hands and pick up starfish and other marine creatures ... and with the updated displays that are the work of Director Charles Prentiss, John Lane and staff members.



In 1945 photograph of Santa Cruz Nature Club Mary Turver sits seventh from left, smiling at Santa Cruz naturalist John Strohbeen.

A glance at history

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