

# THE COLLECTOR Ynés Mexía

1870–1938

Ynés Mexía was a late bloomer. At 55, she became the first Mexican-American female botanist. In the final 13 years of her life, she transformed the study of plants.

YNÉS WAS THE DAUGHTER OF A MEXICAN DIPLOMAT. SHE MOVED AROUND QUITE A BIT DURING HER EARLY LIFE, WHICH WAS FILLED WITH DISAPPOINTMENT.

AFTER MOVING TO SAN FRANCISCO FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE, SHE FOUND SALVATION IN THE REDWOODS, JOINING THE ENVIRONMENTALIST MOVEMENT AND RETURNING TO UNIVERSITY TO STUDY BOTANY AT THE AGE OF 51. THIS WAS HIGHLY UNUSUAL FOR A WOMAN IN THE 1920S.

This vision of the unspoiled wilderness drew me irresistibly.

BIG HISTORY PROJECT | Written by Bennett Sherry | Art by Kay Sohini

IN 1925, SHE TRAVELED TO MEXICO FOR HER FIRST EXPEDITION. THERE, SHE LEARNED THAT SHE PREFERRED TO WORK ALONE. ON THAT FIRST TRIP, SHE COLLECTED 1,500 PLANT SPECIMENS— ONE OF WHICH WOULD BE NAMED AFTER HER.

IN THE YEARS THAT FOLLOWED, SHE TRAVELED TO SITES ACROSS THE AMERICAS, FROM ALASKA TO TIERRA DEL FUEGO, BUT HER MOST EPIC JOURNEY TOOK HER 3,000 MILES AND OVER TWO YEARS ACROSS SOUTH AMERICA, TRAVELING BY STEAM SHIP, CANOE, AND RAFT ON THE AMAZON RIVER.

A well-known collector and explorer stated very positively that "it was impossible for a woman to travel alone in Latin America."

IN A TIME WHEN WOMEN WERE NOT EXPECTED TO TRAVEL ALONE OR DO FIELD WORK, YNES RELISHED THE BEAUTY AND THE PERIL OF WILDERNESS. IN HER SHORT CAREER, SHE COLLECTED 145,000 SPECIMENS.

My dryers get all filled up and still numbers of plants sit and look at me and announce that they are waiting to be collected. It is terribly trying to a greedy collector like myself.

I decided that if I wanted to become better acquainted with the South American continent the best way would be to make my way right across it.

SHE CATALOGUED 500 NEW SPECIES. ONE GENUS AND 50 SPECIES WERE LATER NAMED AFTER HER.

SHE DIED IN 1938, AT THE AGE OF 68.

I don't think there is any place in the world where a woman can't venture.

After more than two years in the wilds of South America, I find myself longing for a nice, quiet jungle again.