

Ellen Browning Scripps Biography

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Scripps Institution of Oceanography Archives

Ellen Browning Scripps was born in London October 18, 1836, the daughter of an improvident bookbinder from an otherwise distinguished family of printers and intellectuals. Her father was twice widowed in England and emigrated with his six surviving children to Rushville, Illinois in 1844 where he established a farm. He married again and had five additional children. Miss Scripps' eldest brother was James Edmund Scripps (1835-1906) and the youngest child of the family was her favorite, Edward Wyllis Scripps (1856-1926).



Ellen Browning Scripps, circa 1868

Miss Scripps taught school to save the money to attend Knox College. While there, she witnessed one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates which inspired a lifelong interest in politics and free speech. As women could not receive college degrees from Knox, Miss Scripps received a certificate after completing a two year course in 1859. She returned to Rushville to care for her aging father and continued her teaching career. Her lifelong habit of giving began with volunteer work and charitable activities during the Civil War for the Freedman's Association. She managed to save enough money from her meager salary to invest in the Detroit News, an innovative penny paper for workingmen started by her brother James. After her father's death, she joined James in Detroit and began working on the paper as proofreader, copy editor, and writer. She wrote a front page column for women, "Matters and Things." She persuaded a reluctant James to take their young brother E.W. Scripps into the business.

Miss Scripps invested in E.W. Scripps' Cleveland Penny Press when he left Detroit to establish his own newspaper chain, and she eventually owned substantial stock in his company. She traveled throughout Europe and North Africa with her brother in 1881, and published her travel experiences in her column, "Miss Ellen's Miscellany." She later traveled in Europe with her brother James, and visited Mexico and Cuba.

She moved to San Diego, California with her brother E.W. Scripps and his family in 1891. She was then a woman of 60 with an independent fortune, and for the first time in her life, she established her own home in La Jolla, California in 1897 together with her sister Virginia Scripps (1852-1921). The sisters shared an interest in natural history, and Virginia collected specimens of sea life and pressed sea weeds which were displayed in their home. Ellen began a new life as a philanthropist.

In 1900, Ellen's bachelor brother, George Henry Scripps (1839-1900), died leaving her stock in the Cleveland Press. Ellen decided to use this legacy, amounting to some \$600,000, to honor her brother, a yachtsman with scientific interests. E.W. Scripps told Ellen that a Berkeley biologist, William Ritter, wished to establish a marine station in San Diego. Dr. Ritter called on Miss Scripps at her home on July 12, 1903. She attended several of his lectures and contributed \$1500 per year for three years to establish the station. In 1906, she provided an endowment of \$50,000. In 1907, she contributed the \$1000 necessary to purchase the La Jolla Shores site for the marine station. While the aquarium was her brother's idea, Miss Scripps was very interested in it as a means of public education. In 1909, she announced her intention to make a bequest in excess of \$250,000 to the station. It was Miss Scripps' contributions that built the roads and the pier, the first laboratory building and the first library of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Together with her brother E.W. Scripps and his son Robert Paine Scripps, Miss Scripps provided an annual subscription to the institution which constituted the entire operating budget for the marine station from 1903-1912. Beginning in 1912, when the station became part of the University of California, the University matched the Scripps family annual subscription.



Ellen Browning Scripps, 1904

Miss Scripps's principles were straightforward. She believed in education and free speech, she was an advocate of women's suffrage and women's clubs, biology interested her, she abhorred discrimination and privilege, she favored temperance and world peace. She disliked the word "philanthropist," and referred to her gifts as investments.

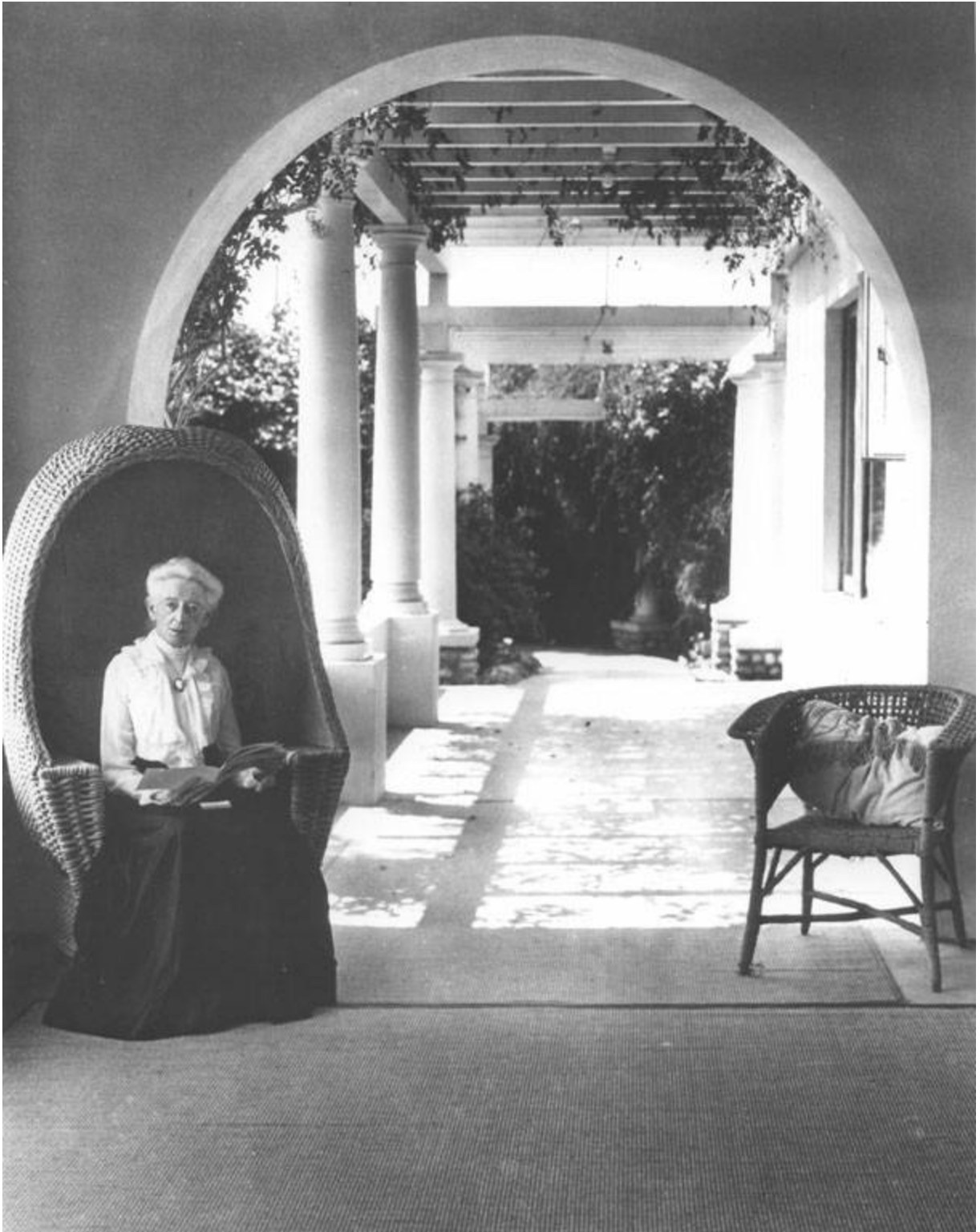
After founding the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, she founded Scripps College, Scripps Hospital and Scripps Clinic. She built the La Jolla Women's Club, the La Jolla Library, and the Children's Pool. She provided scholarships to The Bishops School. She purchased Torrey Pines and other lands and donated them to the public as parks. She made substantial contributions to the San Diego Zoo, and she donated sums to many religious institutions without regard to denomination. She commissioned works by local artists and architects, including Irving Gill, and provided gifts for the publication of scientific books, especially books documenting the natural history of San Diego.

Her other gifts included sums donated to:

Children's Hospital, Vellore, India
Cleveland College
Egypt Exploration Society
Knox College
La Jolla Playground
League for Industrial Democracy
National Council for the Prevention of War
National Recreation Association
Pomona College
San Diego Museum of Natural History
YMCA of San Diego
Women's Union Christian College in the Orient
Yenching University

In accordance with her wishes, no public record was kept of her gifts, so the entirety of her philanthropy will probably never be known. Although she intended to give away her entire fortune during her lifetime, the residue of her estate was used by her nephew Robert Paine Scripps to establish the Ellen Browning Scripps Foundation which continues her philanthropy today. Ellen Browning Scripps was a realist with a wide experience in life. She once said,

"If one could live one's life over again with the advantages of the experiences one has gone through it might be interesting as an experiment -- not as a pleasure."



Ellen Browning Scripps at home in La Jolla, 1927

Miss Scripps died in La Jolla, California on August 3, 1932. In accordance with her instructions, her body was cremated and her ashes scattered at sea from the deck of the R/V Scripps, research vessel of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.