

SCRIPPS FAMILY



In 2003, Scripps Institution of Oceanography will celebrate its first century of oceanographic exploration, research, and discovery. This feature is the second in a continuing series of articles that will present special features about the history of Scripps Institution and the science, people, ideas, and technology that have played major roles in its century of leadership.



San Diego philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps and her half brother E. W. Scripps (opposite page) were founding benefactors of Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Opposite bottom, Left, Virginia Scripps (seated left) and Ellen Browning Scripps. Right, Virginia gardening in La Jolla.



BY JOE HLEBICA

First Generation of Commitment

The Scripps name seems to be everywhere in the San Diego community: Scripps Clinic, Scripps Memorial Hospital, Scripps Research Institute, and Scripps Institution of Oceanography are examples:

All are named for members of one remarkable family that a hundred years ago in San Diego included Edward Willis “E. W.” Scripps, Ellen Browning Scripps, and Eliza Virginia Scripps.

The philanthropy of the Scrippses was encyclopedic. From architecture to zoology, they fostered colleges, parks, institu-

tions, and other organizations through their generous gifts.

How did one of the world’s largest oceanographic research institutions—Scripps Institution of Oceanography—come to carry the Scripps name? The story begins in the early years of the 20th century.

The Institution’s First Family

Shortly after meeting William E. Ritter, a University of California professor of zoology, in the summer of 1903, E. W. Scripps and a group of family and friends paid a visit to Ritter’s





temporary marine field laboratory on Coronado Bay, south of San Diego city.

Ritter would later write of E. W., “My most vivid impression was of this unique person cruising around the laboratory to see for himself what was going on. This was probably his first sight of anything like a scientific laboratory. From table to table he went, inspecting whatever was visible.”

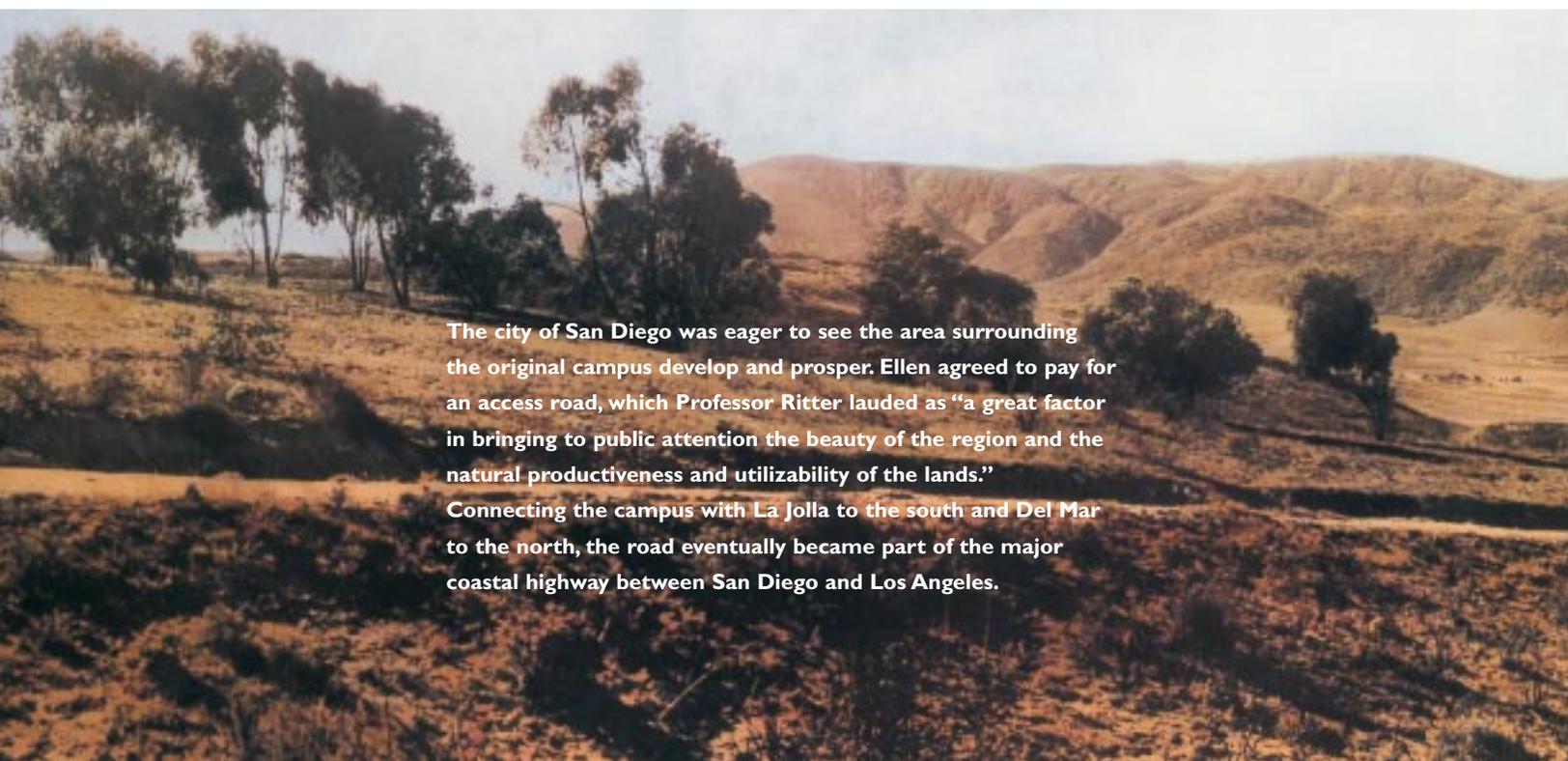
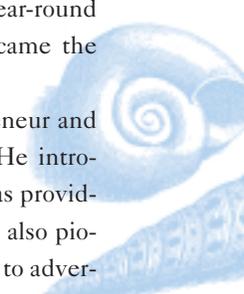
Of the scientific venture he found himself entering, E. W. remarked, “We aren’t too old to learn a good deal about biology, and I tell you it is mighty interesting.”

E. W. had retired to San Diego in the early 1890s with a fortune made from the chain of newspapers he and his siblings published in the midwest. As a wealthy citizen, he was accustomed to being approached for donations to many causes and organizations. After one such instance, he reported the details in a letter to his newfound friend, Professor Ritter:

“I was called on the other day by a gentleman who wanted me to give to an organization so well known and well thought of that almost anybody and everybody would give to it. But [I told him] there is a little scientific concern at La Jolla...for investigating the living things of the ocean and the ocean itself. Hardly anybody knows or cares much about this. Yet sometime it may make additions to knowledge that will be of great value to the world. So I think I’d better give to it.”

The “little scientific concern at La Jolla” that E. W. had decided to fund was Ritter’s marine field laboratory. Financial support was provided by the Marine Biological Association of San Diego—backed by E. W., Ellen, and Virginia Scripps plus other prominent San Diego citizens including Fred Scripps, another Scripps family member residing locally. In fact, he was the largest single donor to provide construction funding for the “Little Green Lab,” a first home to Ritter’s marine field laboratory. The laboratory grew and moved to a new location several years later. The new facility became a permanent year-round marine biological station. It is this marine station that became the Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

E. W., born on an Illinois farm in 1854, was an entrepreneur and a maverick who became a giant in the publishing world. He introduced innovative practices to the newspaper business such as providing suburban circulation. With his half brother James, E. W. also pioneered the idea of charging the bulk of production expenses to advertisers rather than subscribers.



The city of San Diego was eager to see the area surrounding the original campus develop and prosper. Ellen agreed to pay for an access road, which Professor Ritter lauded as “a great factor in bringing to public attention the beauty of the region and the natural productiveness and utilizability of the lands.” Connecting the campus with La Jolla to the south and Del Mar to the north, the road eventually became part of the major coastal highway between San Diego and Los Angeles.



Ellen Browning Scripps paid for construction of the Scripps research vessel *Alexander Agassiz*, named for the renowned Harvard oceanographer. Agassiz, who had been Ritter's teacher at Harvard, visited San Diego in 1905 and subsequently donated valuable books and scientific apparatus to the fledgling biological station, immeasurably boosting the morale of all involved. The 85-foot schooner was the first ship launched by the institution and one of the first vessels built specifically for marine research.

The Scripps league of newspapers (parent company of the Scripps-Howard association of news agencies) adopted a democratic outlook and down-to-earth editorial style. These new publishing concepts attracted the increasingly literate American working class and made the family millions.

Ellen Browning Scripps was born in London in 1836, and emigrated to the United States in 1844. She attended Knox College, not far from the family's Illinois farm. Later, she worked with older brother James and younger half brother E. W. in the newspaper industry, where she earned a reputation as both brilliant businesswoman and talented journalist. In 1891 she joined E. W. in San Diego and built a home in La Jolla.

One of the country's most notable philanthropists, "Miss Scripps," as she was affectionately known, was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1926 (the year of E. W.'s death). The editors introduced her to readers as "a woman who taught school when Lincoln was a country lawyer, who helped found a newspaper in 1873, and who [now] founds a college [Scripps College for Women] at age 89. Miss Ellen has always regarded her wealth as a trust for the benefit of humanity. She has made giving an art."

Time's "most beloved woman in southern California" shared the wealth she earned and inherited with many organizations. In addition to founding Scripps College for Women,





in Claremont, California, she paid for the establishment of Scripps Memorial Hospital in San Diego, the San Diego Community Welfare Building, a park in La Jolla, and what was then the world's largest aviary, at the San Diego Zoo. Much of the credit for funding in the early days of Scripps Institution of Oceanography also belongs to her.

A third Scripps family member who supported Ritter's early efforts was E. W.'s sister Eliza Virginia Scripps. Virginia, as she was known, was an amateur naturalist with an active interest in marine biology.

She and Ellen lived together in La Jolla for more than 20 years, but they were

quite different. Whereas Ellen was shy and unassuming, Virginia was something of an iconoclast and acquired a reputation for being outspoken.

According to San Diego journalist Judith Morgan, Virginia was a forceful, self-appointed warden of the community who was scrupulous in her concern for the cleanliness of La Jolla sidewalks. She would often berate litter-bugs and curse landscapers who did not comply with her ideas of what the community should look like. Given to routinely swearing at men for the slightest misconduct, she defended her home on one occasion from an intruder by hurling a heavy fossil at him. Reported one La Jolla resident, "She seems to have constituted a law unto herself."

But Virginia was not all bluster. She was a dedicated collector of marine artifacts and often took young family members and their friends to the seashore to identify local marine animals and plants. It was Virginia who donated funds to the new marine station's aquarium-museum to purchase glass tanks and display cases. She and Ellen identified and hand-mounted a collection of local kelp and other algae. This historically valuable collection is housed at the San Diego Natural History Museum; samples also are maintained in the archives at Scripps.

Equally at home on horseback, mountain climbing, or striding by the sea, the adventurous Virginia died in 1921 during an around-the-world trip.

Once these three accomplished people befriended Ritter, who would become the institution's first director, the four comprised a unique team of businessman, philanthropist, naturalist, and university professor. It was a fortuitous match as they joined together to help establish and support the marine biological station that would become Scripps Institution of Oceanography.

Opposite, "Tent City" was a summer camping resort on Coronado Island during the first years of the 20th century. The lavish Hotel del Coronado stands in the background, with the hotel's boathouse to the right (note flag-topped cupola). This was the temporary home of San Diego's first marine biological station, and the foundation for Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Below, Scripps's La Jolla campus circa 1910.





Fostering a Campus

According to Ritter, the credit for establishing a permanent location for Scripps belonged to E. W. There had been some difficulty finding a suitable location for the marine laboratory between the years 1903, when Ritter first brought his summer field studies to San Diego, and 1907, when the Scripps campus was established. During those four years, the seasonal laboratory moved around the San Diego area from Coronado to Point Loma to a small facility built on Point La Jolla. But for various reasons, all proved unsuitable for the long term.

E. W.'s solution was typically shrewd: finesse from the city of San Diego a 177-acre tract of former pueblo land located between La Jolla Cove, north of the city, and towering cliffs a few miles further north. It was a fortunate choice as this coastal area encompassed a wide variety of habitats, from kelp beds and sandy beaches to rocky reefs and cobble. These natural laboratories provided ample opportunities for field studies and scientific collecting. There was also plenty of upland area for future campus expansion. And all this for \$1,000, a below-market price

Among Ellen Browning Scripps's most important gifts to the campus was \$36,000 for construction of the first Scripps Pier. An invaluable research facility, and one of the area's most notable landmarks, it was built in 1915 of reinforced concrete pilings (shown being constructed above) and a plank deck. The first pier served the scientific community (and for many years the general public) until its replacement in 1988 with an all-concrete structure, the Ellen Browning Scripps Memorial Pier.



in business that... I am more provoked by any sort of a business mistake, bookkeeping or otherwise, than I could possibly be exhilarated by the feeling that I had helped to discover ten thousand new kinds of bugs.”

Still, according to Scripps biographer Oliver Knight, Ritter was the only person with whom E. W. ever developed a genuine and close personal friendship, and, in fact, E. W. never abandoned this friendship nor his interest in seeing the institution succeed.

guaranteed to the Marine Biological Association by a very supportive city council. Ellen, working with her brother, was the one who actually signed the check and paid for the purchase.

In exchange for the bargain, Ellen also agreed to provide an additional \$10,000 to pay for a public roadway through the acreage, the first step in developing the remote area. Thus, the research outpost was made accessible to cities throughout southern California.

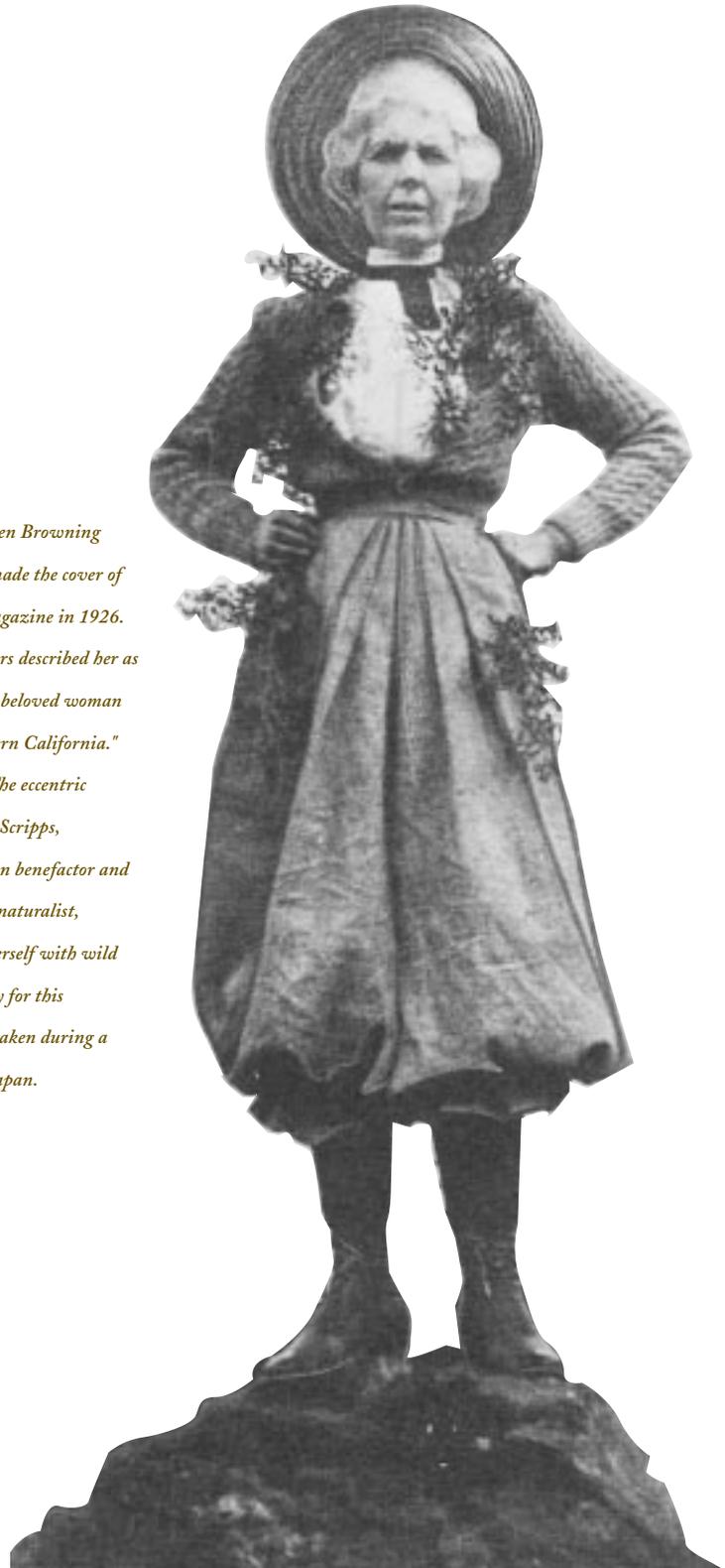
The Emerging Business of Science

Ever the entrepreneur, E. W. insisted that the marine station operate like a business and attempt to turn a profit. This proved impractical for a research facility. Frustrated by the lack of business sense among the academics, and refusing to take upon himself the burden of clerical details, E. W. withdrew from the board of trustees on two occasions. (At one point, when the yacht he'd loaned the institution was run aground during a research cruise, he very nearly ended his support altogether.)

The sometimes cantankerous E. W. wrote to Ritter at “Bugville,” his nickname for the institution: “I have been so schooled and trained

Left, Ellen Browning Scripps made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1926. The editors described her as “the most beloved woman in Southern California.”

Right, The eccentric Virginia Scripps, institution benefactor and amateur naturalist, draped herself with wild shrubbery for this portrait taken during a visit to Japan.



Their rapport enabled the two friends to criticize each other with impunity and humor. Ritter responded to E. W.'s criticism of his business abilities by chastising him for not supporting the institution with generosity equal to Ellen's. E. W.'s comeback was that he helped Ellen make the money that she gave to the fledgling institution.

In 1909, E. W. stated his vision for Scripps: "The ideal institution that I had in view was not a school of instruction, but a school of research and compilation. I would have a school for the study of life—and perhaps life extends far and away beyond the borders of the field which the term biology is supposed to cover." He went on to boldly declare, "We are going to make this the biggest thing of its kind in the world."

Miss Scripps Prevails

In spite of E. W.'s occasionally testy relationship with the academics, Ellen's dedication remained steadfast. She continued to finance expansion of the campus and to elicit funds from her half brother and other family members on behalf of the struggling young institution.

The first structure built on the permanent campus was erected in 1910. Dedicated as the George H. Scripps Memorial Marine Biological Laboratory, it would become a major landmark in the history of oceanogra-



phy. Ellen requested that their deceased elder brother, newspaperman George H. Scripps, become the institution's first namesake because of his interest in science. The "Old Scripps Building," as it is now commonly known, housed laboratories, aquaria, a classroom, a library, and even the director's residence. Funding came as a gift of \$50,000 from Ellen in 1905—a portion of her inheritance from the estate of brother George.

Eventually, the University of California, Berkeley, which took over the laboratory in 1912, asked to adopt the general family name for the institution in honor of the support provided by many Scripps family members. Scripps Institution of Oceanography continues to enjoy the generosity of the Scripps family to this day.

Over the years, Ellen's donations covered as much as one-third of the institution's annual budget. In 1930, a new laboratory was built with \$40,000 that she contributed, along with matching grants of \$40,000 each from the state of California and the Rockefeller Foundation. Ellen established an endowment of \$400,000 to Scripps in her will that for nearly 70 years has continued to provide support for the institution that bears her family's name. 🌐

The original proposal that the institution operate a public aquarium has been attributed to both E. W. Scripps and his sister Eliza Virginia, the family naturalist. The establishment and maintenance of such a facility was mandated in the Marine Biological Association's charter. From 1905, the "Little Green Lab," (above) as the marine biological station on Point La Jolla was known, housed a few aquaria and wet tables (supporting local sea life) that were funded with a \$300 gift from Virginia. From these humble beginnings the original concept of an aquarium at Scripps grew. Four separate campus facilities have housed aquarium and museum displays. The latest, opened in 1992, is the Birch Aquarium, a multimillion dollar complex providing hundreds of thousands of visitors yearly with a window to the institution and the ocean beyond.