Ruth and Charles Larabee were each born in the Midwest at the turn of the last century. Both were children of privilege who were descended from prominent families of wealth and means. From this background, they set out on a journey of their own and cultivated a unique place in American history. Along the way, the Larabees created a model of visionary benefactors from which there is much we can learn. Their particular life choices helped form the mission that is ours today: To inspire people of all ages to connect with plants and nature.

**Daughter of a Kansas City Banker**

Ruth Robertson Baird was born in February 1904 in Ann Arbor Michigan, the oldest of three children. Her father, Charles A. Baird (1870-1944) married Georgia O. Robertson (1876-1923) while they were students at the University of Michigan and he was a football quarterback. Baird was later elected manager of the football team and subsequently became the University of Michigan’s first athletic director. In 1909 Baird moved his family to Kansas City, Missouri, his wife’s family’s home town. Over time, he became a successful bank owner and investor with holdings that included several thousand acres of farmland in Texas. A benefactor of U of M, Baird donated a giant carillon of bells to his alma mater which is played several times a day from the campus bell tower.

Not surprisingly, Charles wasn’t the only success story in the Baird family. His brother James Baird became a prominent civil engineer in New York City who directed the construction of many famous buildings, including the Lincoln Memorial, the Arlington Memorial Amphitheater and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, DC, the Flatiron Building in New York City, and the Law School at the University of Michigan. In his memory, the James Baird State Park was created in Pleasant Valley, New York.

Like her parents and family before her, Ruth was also well educated, somewhat of a rarity in the 1920s when a relatively small percentage of people actually completed high school.
She graduated in 1921 from the private Barstow School in Kansas City, Missouri where she was a budding writer, and participated in the yearbook, theatre club and basketball team.

Ruth attended Vassar College in Poughkeepsie, New York, where she majored in Latin and graduated in 1926. At that time, her family home address was 814 West 52nd Street, in Kansas City, Missouri.

Photos of Ruth from her high school and college yearbooks portray a raven-haired, petite young woman with strong features and a direct gaze.

**Larabee Family: Industrial and Civic Leaders**

Charles Wright Larabee also descended from pillars of the community. His grandfather, Joseph D. Larabee (1833-1913) relocated from New York to Stafford, in central Kansas, where he and his two sons Frederick (1868-1920) and Frank (1864-1921) became bankers.

The Larabee men were pioneers of Stafford and are revered to this day for their civic and industrial contributions. They established Farmers’ National Bank of Stafford, which assumed control of a flour mill that had fallen on hard times. Under the Larabee brothers’ care, the mill prospered, eventually becoming the base of their fortunes: The Mills of Larabee produced “Larabee’s Best Flour”, which was competitive with General Mills. Eventually they also owned flour elevators in Kansas, Nebraska and Oklahoma. In addition they established a library and developed a fledgling telephone and electric system for Stafford.

Frederick Larabee married May Wadsworth (1870-1946) of New York, and together they had two children, Charles Wright, born in 1901, and Angeline (1907-1947).

Charles was sent to boarding school at Western Military Academy High School, in Alton, Illinois. As an 18 year old student he applied for a passport to South America to explore trading prospects for Larabee Flour. His passport photo provides our first glimpse of young Charles, who described himself as 5’9” tall, with a high forehead, brown eyes, light complexion, and red hair.

Charles is also named in the 1920/21 yearbook from Babson College, a business school in Wellesley, Massachusetts, although it is not clear if he actually graduated.

In 1920 Charles Larabee’s father Frederick passed away, leaving his widow and two children a sizeable estate. (At this point, when Charles was 19, the Larabees lived at 1004 West 52nd Street in Kansas City, Missouri, within a block of Ruth Baird who was 16.)

Frederick Larabee was described as a “millionaire mill owner” who employed two thousand men at the time of his death.
His fortune included his portion of Larabee Flour, which had a daily turnover in excess of $225,000 and two hundred flour elevators; 110,000 acres of Kansas wheat land; and the Mid-Continent Iron Company with mines and smelters used by the government in World War I.

He also owned a dozen casing head gasoline plants in Kansas and Oklahoma and some oil refineries, and a cement plant he built in Mexico which was the largest of its kind, later sold to a British syndicate for one million dollars.

Charles and his sister Angeline were each to receive one quarter of their father's wealth, with stipulations: Charles would become eligible for one half of his inheritance when he turned 30, and the remainder when he turned 35.

Ruth and Charles Together

Ruth and Charles grew up within a block of each another on West 52nd Street in Kansas City, Missouri; however, we have no record of where or how they met. They married on June 3, 1926, just days after her graduation from Vassar, in Springville, New York, where Charles’s mother May was born.

Two years later, Ruth and Charles were photographed arriving at Michigan Avenue in Chicago, Illinois in their eighteen foot boat, in which they sailed 1800 miles round trip from Kansas City to Chicago and back by navigating the Missouri, Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. By this time they appeared to share a passion for adventure in the outdoors. In 1930 Ruth was a substitute teacher in the public schools, while Charles described his occupation as a miller.

Also in 1930 Charles became co-owner of “The Garden Shop” a nursery in Kansas City containing four acres of trees, evergreens, shrubs and perennials. (He maintained his part of the ownership until 1947.)

On his thirtieth birthday in 1931, Charles Larabee became eligible to receive the first half of the inheritance from his father.

In addition to owning the nursery, Charles gave lectures on gardening topics, and the flowering peach trees and azaleas in their front yard were photographed for a local garden club publication.

The remainder of Charles Larabee’s inheritance would have arrived some time in 1936 when he turned 35. During the late 1930s and mid 1940s Charles pursued photography of the Southwest, traveling to Utah, Colorado, Texas, and Mexico capturing black and white images of scenery, cowboys, ranchers, rodeos, and indigenous peoples.

In 1940, Charles Larabee joined eight other adventurers on a 1,463 mile voyage of a lifetime down the Green and Colorado Rivers, prior to the
damming of the Colorado and the creation of Lake Powell. The story and photographs of this expedition were preserved in newspapers and publications from late that summer.

The nine voyagers, who included young Barry Goldwater before he became Senator of Arizona, sailed in maneuverable wooden boats constructed by expert boatman Norman Nevills; they corresponded with people on land by carrier pigeon. Charles was onboard as photojournalist. (By 1944 he had developed recognition for his photography and by 1950 also gave lectures and guided boating expeditions himself.)

There are few other records of Ruth and Charles’s early life and lifestyle until June, 1942, when Ruth Larabee signed the first of two deeds to acquire what was later to become San Diego Botanic Garden.

A Rustic Little Ranch in Encinitas

In the first grant deed Ruth Larabee purchased a ten-acre parcel with a small cottage in December, 1942 from a man named Herman Seidler. The second grant deed was for a 16.5 acre piece of land and ranch house purchased in June, 1943 from Anton van Amersfoort. (Prior to van Amersfoort, it was owned by Donald Ingersoll.)

Curiously, only Ruth Larabee was named on the grant deeds, and each deed was bought by her for the sum of $10. The actual price was undoubtedly higher than this, but for some reason was not shown on the deeds. (Actual tax assessments valued the two parcels together at approximately $17,850.) The deeds were written in this fashion for reasons that can only be speculated upon.

Ruth and Charles left their home in the Midwest and in 1943 moved into the modest ranch dwelling we now know as the Larabee House. (In earlier times the property was surrounded primarily by chaparral and coastal sage scrub, with few if any of the trees seen here now.)

Their reasons for moving to Encinitas are unknown, although they may have been drawn by the many agricultural opportunities in this part of southern California, which was rich in the floral and citrus industries, to name a few.

Life at the ranch, which Ruth eventually named “El Rancho San Ysidro de las Flores,” was hard work. Ruth sometimes had the help of day laborers but was known to be up and out at early hours of the morning by herself digging and tending the gardens.

Charles occasionally employed members of the Explorers Scout Troop of which he was scout master to help maintain the property when he and Ruth traveled.
Since neither Ruth nor Charles was gainfully employed during residence at the ranch, there was plenty of time to travel and to cultivate their gardens.

Among the plants they likely acquired were *Agave americana* and *Agave americana var. marginata*, various Aloes, including *Aloe arborescens*, Cork Oaks, Dragon Trees, Hollywood Juniper, Mysore Fig, Podocarpus, Red Flowering Gum, Southern Magnolia, and Torrey Pines trees.

Ruth and Charles did not have children of their own, but generously sponsored young students involved in scouting — Ruth leading Girl Scouts and Campfire Girls and Charles the Explorer Scouts — treating them to camping adventures and river trips to share their love for the outdoors. For a while, the scouts met in a small building located on the Larabee’s property.

Unfortunately, in the spring of 1949 Charles filed for a divorce from Ruth, which was finalized in April 1950. Sometime prior to this, he had moved from the ranch to live on Balboa Island in Newport Beach, California, an affluent neighborhood of homes on a marina. Charles lived at the ranch in Encinitas for approximately six years.

### Ruth’s Vision for Quail Park

Soon after the divorce, Ruth donated four acres of her property for construction of what became the Scout Hut which opened in 1951. She stayed at her Rancho for another six years, continuing to cultivate the gardens and nurture its wildlife resources. Ruth appreciated nature in its fullest sense; she was particularly fond of the quail and sought advice from fish and game officials for ways to enhance their survival.

She also maintained numerous friendships and ties made through Vassar College. Occasionally those friends kept her company by staying at the ranch; other times, she treated them to camping trips to Mexico.

In August 1956, Ruth contacted the San Diego County Board of Supervisors about her desire to will her property to the County to be used as a park.

Ultimately she was convinced to donate it while she was still living, and in January 1957 she gave the entire 26.5 acres, (then valued at $98,000) to the County of San Diego to be preserved as a park for public enjoyment.
In 1970 Ruth Larabee’s dream was realized. Quail Park Botanical Gardens was opened to the public to provide a horticultural center specializing in cacti and succulents; a sanctuary and feeding station for quail; an educational program; a center for scientific study of the horticulture of specific plants; and a meeting place and herbarium.

The Scout Hut was rededicated in 1971 as the Ecke Family Building when Paul Ecke, Sr., a founding member of the Quail Gardens Foundation, purchased the property and donated it to the County to become part of Quail Gardens.

After Ruth Larabee left Encinitas in 1957, she moved to Puebla, Mexico, where she embarked on training to become a nurse, fulfilling another dream, to nurse to the poor. During her five years in Puebla, she befriended many people and extended her charity.

For example, in her trust, she bequeathed $10,000 each to students Juan and Jorge Gaspar, of Puebla, Mexico to complete their education. In addition, she left money in her will for someone named Florina Morina who was in the nursing school in Puebla. Sometime between 1957 and 1966 Ruth lived in Lubbock, Texas, (which was also the home of her sister Elizabeth.) In her trust she wished for a nursing school to be built at Texas Tech University, in Lubbock, Texas, if there were proceeds remaining from her estate.

By December 1966, when she filed her will and trust, she had returned to the Midwest to live in a modest home in Shawnee Mission, a neighborhood in Kansas City, Kansas.

In December 1969, Ruth Larabee vacationed in England, staying at the medieval Rose and Crown Hotel in Saffron Walden, Essex, England, just north of Cambridge. Sadly, in the early morning of December 26, 1969 — when Ruth was 65 — a fire broke out in the hotel, burning it to the ground. The story spread from newspaper to newspaper that Ruth Baird Larabee was among the eleven people who perished in the fire, most likely from smoke inhalation. Her remains were cremated and she was buried near her mother and father in the Baird Family Plot at Forest Hill Cemetery in Kansas City, Missouri.

**Ruth’s Will and Trust: Clues to a Life of Generosity**

Much can be learned about Ruth Baird Larabee’s travels, her friends, her generous nature and philanthropic interests from the will and trust she left behind. For example, of the 70 beneficiaries named in her trust, 55 were non-family members, people who had been her friends and loved ones, from all over the country and around the world.

From her father Charles Baird, Ruth inherited thousands of acres of farmland in Texas, much of which she entrusted to Texas Tech University. Today, over forty years after her death, the file at Texas Tech containing Ruth’s trust and probate records is still active as the various tracts of land she donated to them are leased out for oil and mineral production.

She also donated a carillon in memory of her parents Charles and Georgia to that campus. And she bequeathed $10,000 to the San Diego Campfire Girls organization.

**Life for Charles after 1950 with Lila and Her Family**

In 1950, four months after his divorce, Charles married Lila Pihlblad Hopkins, herself a divorcée who had also grown up in Kansas City, Missouri, and who also lived on Balboa Island. Lila’s parents were from Sweden, her father a successful surgeon in Kansas. She graduated from Bethany College in West Virginia, a concert level pianist and later a student at the Julliard College of Music in New York City.

Through this marriage Charles gained step-children William (Bill) Hopkins, Jr. and Lila Jean Howard, who today reside in Orange and Riverside Counties in southern California.

Bill was fifteen at the time of the marriage, and recalls his father as a man of his word who was charismatic, artistic, related easily to teenagers, and maintained a fondness for the desert.

Charles continued to take an interest in Ruth’s ranch and garden, occasionally locating unique plants from his travels in Mexico to add to her collection.
Cultivating Their Place in History: The Story of Ruth and Charles Larabee

The Larabee Legacy

Ruth and Charles Larabee were free spirits who were passionate about the outdoors. For years they were not just easily comfortable outdoors but were actively engaged in it and dedicated to sharing their discoveries with others, particularly younger generations.

Through his photography, Charles Larabee demonstrated a reverence for the natural world, documenting and preserving the innocence of a time which would be lost but for those like him who saw something worth saving.

Ruth’s dedication to wildlife conservation and her determination to preserve her beloved Quail Park for generations to come was an act of true generosity and vision. Knowing what we now know about the Larabees, how can we not be inspired by their bold example?

Sources

All sources for the Larabee history are documented in two volumes of official genealogy records located in the SDBG Office. They include references found through www.Ancestry.com; various historical newspapers, magazines and books; the Nora Larabee Memorial Library; www.EBay.com; various government offices of vital records; Texas Tech University Mineral Rights Division; the Barstow School; Vassar College; Google Maps; various personal interviews; family members; docents, volunteers and members of the SDBG History Team. Research and narrative by Sally Sandler, Docent. Created using Microsoft Publisher 2007.