

# Austin's Beardtongue

by Larry Blakely



*Austin's Beardtongue, Penstemon floridus var. austinii (Eastw.) N. Holmgren (Scrophulariaceae)*

*Few Eastern Sierra plant groups can match the Penstemons in their many species of striking beauty. Some of their specific (and varietal) epithets evoke their charms (e.g., floridus, spectabilis, speciosus, azureus); some, providing grist for this miller, honor botanists (austinii, davidsonii, eatonii, newberryi, purpusii); others are a tad mysterious (confusus, heterodoxus, miser). The subject of this essay not only combines the first two of these properties but there is also a bit of mystery surrounding the person named in the honorific. We know his name and dates - Stafford Wallace Austin, (b. 1860, d. 1931) - and that he was the husband of one of the most famous former residents of the Owens Valley. However, while considerable information is readily available about Mary Austin, it's hard to get concrete details about Wallace (as Mary called him).*

*He was born in, and grew up in, Hawaii, where his father had been a government secretary and, later, owner of a sugar plantation. When Wallace was 20 the family moved to the Bay Area of California, where he completed his education, culminating with a degree from UC*



*Stafford Wallace Austin*

Berkeley. Mary, a native of Illinois, was tutoring children on a ranch near Bakersfield when, in 1890, she met Wallace, resident then of a neighboring ranch. They entered into a hasty marriage, and, after a brief time in San Francisco, they traveled (most of the last leg on the narrow gauge railroad) to Lone Pine, arriving in 1892. When in San Francisco, Wallace and his brother had devised a scheme to develop irrigation systems in the southern Owens Valley. Unfortunately, the plans did not meet with success, and Wallace and Mary, now expecting a child, fell on hard times. For a while Wallace could not find reliable employment, and was reduced to working various odd jobs and an unsuccessful stint at homesteading in the Alabama Hills. But, probably because of his educational credentials and an obvious desire on his part to stay in the Eastern Sierra, he began to come into more substantial positions. He taught for a while at the school in George's Creek, then was appointed Inyo Co. Superintendent of Schools in 1898. In 1900 the Austins designed and built their house on Market Street in Independence. In 1902 or 1903 he took up the position of Register in the Desert Land Office in Independence. In 1905 the Austins did battle against the City of Los Angeles when the city's water plans became evident to them, Wallace being in a position to see what was going on. In 1906, Wallace was again out of a job when the Desert Land Office closed.



The Austin home in Independence, CA.

Mary, who roamed far and wide, later chastised Wallace for clinging to Inyo County, rather than joining her after she had begun to make a living at writing. She had few words of praise for him. While she did say that he had a zest for acting in the Shakespearean plays she produced in Independence, she was negative about most other aspects of Wallace's life and character. An author of a recent article characterizes their marriage as a "nightmare"; "While she was turbulent, egocentric, and abrasive, he was mild, often insensitive to his wife's needs, and inept." Mary claimed that it was

she who got Wallace into botany, "always a consuming interest for her" she wrote. However, she was not complimentary as to the result. In her autobiography (written partly in the third person) she remarked that "he was never able to carry [botany] to more than a collector's accent, the mere naming and classifying of kinds and orders, avoiding her concern with adaptations and local variations." Mary further tells us that Wallace was an avid outdoorsman, continually dragging her off on hiking and camping adventures in the Eastern Sierra which taxed her physical abilities. Mary left him permanently in 1906, and divorced him in 1914 (neither remarried). Yet Wallace remained friendly towards Mary through the rest of his life, writing and sending her gifts, and leaving her an insurance policy on his death.

It was on a July 4 outing in 1899, along Oak Creek, that Wallace collected specimens of the plant now known as Austin's Beardtongue. One or more of the specimens found their way into the hands of Alice Eastwood (the Eastw. in the full name) who was curator, over the remarkably long period of 1894 to 1949, at the Herbarium of the California Academy of Sciences (CAS). Miss Eastwood named Wallace's plant *Penstemon austini* in 1905. The next year she apparently saved the specimen, along with nearly 1500 other type specimens, from the crumbling CAS building soon after the big earthquake struck. The plant was later



deemed (in 1937) to be a subspecies, then later still (1979) a variety of *P. floridus* (a plant first found by the German plant collector Carl Albert Purpus near Lida, NV in 1898, and named in 1899 by Eastwood's CAS predecessor, Katharine Brandegee; Purpus' *P. floridus* became *P. floridus* var. *floridus*).

Mary, "a woman of genius", may well have had the deeper botanical insight, but perhaps Wallace was the more botanically driven. It appears that he may have collected a very large number of plants. His latest specimen in the University and Jepson Herbaria (U-JH) (among 65 S. W. Austin specimens listed upon querying the CalFlora databases) bears his collection number 8200. A specimen of his July 4, 1899 collection of *P. floridus* var. *austinii* is found there and bears his number 187. Further research would be needed to confirm that he collected over 8000 specimens; possibly, some were at the CAS, and were lost when the CAS building was destroyed in the 1906 earthquake. His specimens in the U-JH (listed on CalFlora) cover the period February, 1899 through July, 1906. Most were collected in the years 1899, 1900, and 1906. Except for two from over the Sierra crest, they are all from Inyo Co.



View towards the Inyo Mountains across Owens Valley from the 6000' level of Oak Creek Canyon.

Curiously, of the 12 specimens (the one collected by Wallace plus 11 others) of *P. floridus* var. *austinii* listed for the U-JH collection, and the 9 locations given on Mary DeDecker's specimen card for this plant, only the one collected by Wallace is from the Sierras. All others were found in the Inyos and desert mountains to the east. Local botanists I have consulted are not aware of any definite Sierra location for variety *austinii*- another little mystery. (Mary DeDecker collected *P. floridus* var. *floridus* in Oak Creek canyon.)

*P. floridus* var. *austinii* is the only plant named for Wallace. Several other California plants contain "austin" in an honorific, but they are named in honor of Rebecca Austin (1832-1919) who collected extensively in Northern California; she became well known among botanists for her studies on the Cobra Plant, *Darlingtonia californica* Torrey. In names of plants honoring her, the honorific is in the female form: *austiniae*. As far as CalFlora records go, none of "her" 8 plants occur in Inyo Co., and "his" does not occur outside of Inyo Co.

In 1909 (he had been in law practice in Oakland after leaving the Eastern Sierra in 1906) Wallace was appointed Receiver for a troubled minerals company engaged in borax recovery on Searles Lake. His work there, which lasted through 1917, was carried out under trying circumstances but was hugely successful. Road building, exploratory and production drilling, construction of a large processing plant, and the building of the town of Trona were initiated during his stay there. He subsequently became Los Angeles manager for the company which owned the Trona operations. Those operations, under different

owners, continue to this day. The value of the mineral reserves in Searles Lake, first carefully explored after Wallace arrived on the scene, is currently estimated at 250 billion dollars. Today in Trona one will find Austin Street, and lingering fond memories of Austin Hall, the social, cultural, and commercial center of town life for 50 years.

I haven't run across any evidence that Wallace engaged in plant collection after leaving the Owens Valley. He kept yearly diaries during his years in Trona which chronicled his management, but not personal, activities. The diary for 1914 did reveal an apparent vacation trip to Hawaii, and there is a photo of him and some Trona men on a fishing expedition (see the SLIDE SHOW), but mostly it seems that life for Wallace was a relentless nose-to-the-grindstone matter. A perusal of his diaries makes it appear likely that he was just too busy to do much botanizing, too busy doing things like thwarting claim jumpers, acquiring land, traveling to San Francisco, Los Angeles, and



Street intersection in Trona.

Washington, D.C. to attend to legal matters, all the while micromanaging affairs at Trona. He was, in

the words of a Trona historian giving tribute to the man who so successfully saw the minerals company and town through numerous difficulties, "a fighting man". Still, during wet years especially, he must have cast a wistful eye on spring blossoms in the desert and foothills around Searles Lake.

Text appeared in the newsletter of the Bristlecone chapter, CNPS, November, 1999/Vol. 19, No.6)