

# History of the Docent Program Revealed

When Nancy Backstrand read that The Nature Conservancy was negotiating to buy part of the Santa Rosa Plateau, she knew she was the one to get their docent program up and running. She wrote a letter stating her background and got a call “in 15 minutes.”

Raised in the tradition of volunteerism, Nancy learned to run volunteer organizations through the Junior League. She started in the 1960s as one of the three original docents with the Riverside Museum. By the end of her tenure there of 20 years she was a respected member of the museum’s board of trustees.

She and her husband, Lee, moved away from downtown Riverside in 1983 in search of clean air. This was where the Reserve’s first manager, Tom Griggs, found her. “Tom was a botanist,” Nancy remembers. “He had a PhD and was an

expert on vernal pools.”

Nancy found her volunteer docents for the Plateau by placing ads in the newspapers. Most of those first dozen or so had a background in either botany or biology. Among that vanguard, docents Gordon House and Carol Scott are still active with us.

With only a short period until opening day, Nancy knew there wasn’t time to thoroughly train all in every aspect of the Reserve. And the crowd that first day was going to be huge. It was March of 1984.

“At the time this was the largest piece of land The Conservancy had bought in California — outside of Santa Cruz Island,” explained Nancy. The turnout that day was over 1,000.

So she used a system of “stationary docents” placed along the trail, all within sight of each other. The crowd was strung out along the trail and moved from guide to guide.

Nancy also helped mark out some of the first trails on the Reserve, simply by placing tags along the way as she hiked. Not all of these trails were given names, but among those that were are Oak Tree Trail and the currently-closed Sycamore Trail.

The original Vernal Pool Trail made a complete loop around the largest pool, allowing a close look at waterfowl. “We weren’t as worried about the ecology of the place back then,” she explains. “It was already

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