

The Mariposa Tulip

ERWIN G. GUDDE

THE FLOWERS OF THE PLANTS of the genus *Calochortus* are considered by many the most beautiful wild flowers of the North American West. The first known member of this group was found in the present state of Idaho by the Lewis and Clark expedition on its return journey. In 1814 the English botanist Pursh named the newly discovered plant *Calochortus*, from the Greek *Καλός*, beautiful, and *Χόπος*, grass, in reference to the beautiful blossom and the grass-like leaves. In the next few decades many other species were discovered, a large proportion of them by the English botanical explorer David Douglas, for whom one species of *Calochortus* has been named, and whose name is familiar to us through one of our best known conifers, the Douglas Fir. It was Douglas who discovered and named the first species of that section of *Calochortus* now known as *Mariposa*: *C. luteus*, *C. macrocarpus*, *C. splendens*, and *C. venustus*—the specific names indicating that the botanist was impressed by the extraordinary beauty of these species.¹ The name "Mariposa," originally a folk name for certain of the species near the Pacific Coast, was first adopted by botanists in 1868, when Alphonso Wood applied it to one of the main subdivisions of the genus. At present twenty-one species are placed in this group, all characterized by a relatively long and narrow fruit that is usually three-angled and not winged at the angles, and by membranaceous bulb-coats.

The Spanish word *mariposa* means 'butterfly' as well as 'moth,' but all botanical reference books explain that the flower was so named because of its resemblance to a butterfly. It is uncertain when the name originated. The assumption that the name was applied in Spanish times is as unverifiable as is the belief that the Spaniards had named the *Eschscholtzia, copa de oro*. Romantic ideas were foreign to the early occupants of California, and wild

flowers were noticed by them only if they had edible fruit.³ At any rate, no reference to the name *mariposa* for the flower in Mexican or early American times has been found so far. That the name existed before 1868 is testified by Alphonso Wood in his article "A Sketch of the Natural Order Liliaceae," "This splendid flower (*C. venustus*) . . . has long been known to the native Californians by the name of Mariposa . . ."

It is very tempting to cite the great John C. Fremont as a witness that the flower was called *Mariposa* before California became United States territory and that it was so called because of its resemblance to a butterfly settling on a flower. In 1847 Fremont had acquired the title to one of the two Mexican land grants called *Las Mariposas*. In his *Memoirs* (p. 447) he gives his observation of the flowers as found near his rancho:

The springs and streams hereabout were waters of the Chauchiles and Mariposas Rivers and the Indians of this village belonged to the Chauchiles tribe.—On some of the higher ridges were fields of a poppy which, fluttering and tremulous on its long thin stalk, suggests the idea of a butterfly settling on a flower, and gives to this flower its name of *Mariposas*—butterflies—and the flower extends its name to the stream.

Unfortunately we must rule out this apparently so genuine and realistic account. First, the statement is not contemporary because Fremont did not write his *Memoirs* until 1887, when the name Mariposa was already in general use; second, Fremont was mistaken in his idea that Mariposa Creek was named after the flower.

Another theory of the origin of the name has found its way into L. H. Bailey's *The Standard Cyclopedia of Horticulture*. We read on page 634:

To this group of calochortuses is properly applied the Spanish name *mariposa* (butterfly), for their brilliantly colored flowers, with eye-like spots on each petal and sepal, and other delicate markings with dots, lines, and hairs which are strongly suggestive of the wings of a brilliantly colored butterfly.

A similar idea which the explorer and the scholar express was given poetic wings by Ina Coolbrith sometime before 1895, that means shortly after the publication of Fremont's *Memoirs*:

THE MARIPOSA LILY

Insect or blossom? Fragile, fairy thing,
Poised upon slender tip, and quivering

To flight! a flower of the fields of air;
 A jeweled moth; a butterfly, with rare
 And tender tints upon his downy wing
 A moment resting in our happy sight;
 A flower held captive by a thread so slight
 Its petal-wings of brodered gossamer
 Are, light as the wind, with every wind astir,—
 Wafting sweet odor, faint and exquisite.
 O dainty nursling of the field and sky,
 What fairer thing looks up to heaven's blue
 And drinks the noontide sun, the dawning's dew?
 Thou winged bloom! thou blossom-butterfly!

All this sounds so convincing that it seems somewhat presumptuous to challenge the current version of the origin of the name of our beautiful flower. Yet, we must keep in mind that no evidence has been produced to prove that a Spaniard or a romantic American bestowed the name upon the flower, and any observant lover of flowers will have to admit that it requires some imagination to see in the cup-shaped blossom the wings of a butterfly. The spots on the petals of some mariposas, to be sure, are not unlike the "false eyes" on the wings of some butterflies. However, Fremont's imaginative picture of a butterfly settling on a flower appears much more plausible than comparing the petals of the flower to the wings of the insect.

When did the name *Mariposa* or *Mariposas* first occur in Western America? Padre Pedro Muñoz, who accompanied Lieutenant Gabriel Moraga on an expedition into the interior of California, records under date of September 27, 1806:

Llamne este Sitio de las Mariposas, por que su mucha multitud especialmente de noche y mañana . . . uno de los Cabos de la Espe. se le introdujo una en un oido Causandole demasiado molestia y no poco trabajo en la extraccion. (Diario del P. Pedro Muñoz. Transcript in Bancroft Library, University of California).—This place was called of the *Mariposas* because of their great multitude, especially at night and morning . . . one of the corporals of the expedition got one in one ear, causing him considerable annoyance and no little discomfort in its extraction.

From this account it is quite obvious that the insect that got into the corporal's ear was not a brilliantly colored butterfly but a nasty little moth, and in American speech, the creek would properly have to be called 'Moth Creek' and not 'Butterfly Creek.' Fortunately the melodious Spanish name prevailed and gave rise

to an interesting name cluster. When in September 19, 1843, and on February 22, 1844, Mexican land grants were created in the region, the name *Las Mariposas* was naturally chosen. With that the name became perpetuated, for after the United States conquest the established and recorded names of land-grants provided the names for counties and cities as well as for mountains and streams. When California acquired statehood and the state was divided into counties (February 18, 1850) the name had already become so important that it was applied (in the singular form Mariposa) to a county, which included at first the larger part of southern California. Later the name was restricted to present Mariposa County, and the county's name was in turn applied to numerous other geographic features.

According to the latest monograph on the genus by Marion Ownbey,⁵ 1940, four species of the *Mariposa* section of the genus *Calochortus* are on record in the territory of the present county: *C. Leichtlinii*, *C. luteus*, *C. superbus*, and *C. venustus*; others may occur as rarities. At least four other species are commonly found within the limits of the original Mariposa County, i.e. the territory between Merced River and Los Angeles County.

In the absence of any evidence for the current theory of the name, the assumption is permissible that the name for the flower originated sometime after the American conquest, simply because the plant was found frequently within the limits of the geographical region originally designated as Mariposa. In my opinion the sequence of naming was not entomological-botanical-geographical but entomological-geographical-botanical. In other words, if this theory is correct, the botanical as well as the folk name of this section of the genus *Calochortus* is not even indirectly connected with a butterfly, for the *mariposas* that gave rise to the geographical name were not gaudy butterflies but lowly night insects.

NOTES

1. *Transactions of the Horticultural Society of London*, VII 275ff.
2. For the botanical angle of this article the author is indebted to Thomas Morley.
3. Morley called the author's attention to the fact that in Mexico three different plants, none of them a *Calochortus*, are called Mariposa, according to M. Martinez, *Catalogo alfabetico de nombres vulgares y cientificos de plantas que existen en Mexico* (1923).
4. *Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*, 1868, pp. 165ff.
5. "A monograph of the genus *Calochortus*", *Ann. Missouri Bot. Garden* XXVII.