

JAMES WEST BIOGRAPHY

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James West (1886–1939)—a man of mystery for the early years of his life who came to America from Germany in about 1914 and was one of three men who founded the Cactus and Succulent Society of America in late 1928.



The man we have known as James West most of the time in America was born in Germany on 31 August 1886 under the noble title of “Egon Viktor Moritz Karl Maria von Ratibor und Corney, Prinz zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst”. Very little is known of his early life before he came to the United States of America in about 1914 and there are blank spots in later life.

When he traveled to California in 1915 he introduced himself as Duke Ratibor, Prince Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst. However, due to a blockade of his home country during the years of World War I (1914–1918) he was unable to receive funds from home. Driven by necessity he found work in a lumber company, dropping his title and changing his name to James West. After accumulating a little extra money he made his way to Arizona finding employment as a gardener which gave him the opportunity to study botany and horticulture. By 1927 or 1928 he returned to California settling in San Rafael where he made a modest living in the field of horticulture. He laid out many gardens, specializing in rock gardens that included cactus and succulent plants.

A St. Helena, a California rancher by the name of Jerome Landfield met Duke Ratibor in 1915 at a luncheon at the Bohemian Club in San Francisco, California. It wasn't until the autumn of 1935 that Landfield briefly met a man by the name of James West after a dinner party at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Walter Heil, director of the MH de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. James West had designed and implemented Heil's rock garden. Landfield did not connect the two names being the same person at that time.

Shortly after that 1935 brief meeting Jerome Landfield received a call at the Bohemian Club from James West. The caller asked Landfield if he remembered meeting him back in 1915. After telling him his name was Duke Ratibor at that time Landfield remembered and James West explained his reason for calling. Professor Thomas Harper Goodspeed (1887–1966), of the University of California, Berkeley, was planning his first expedition to the Andes of South America in 1935 seeking new plants and asked West to accompany him on the expedition. Eager to go James West wanted to make sure of his return to the United States. Therefore, he wanted an affidavit from someone who had known him before and could testify to the legality of his presence in the United States. Landfield made the affidavit at the immigration office in Oakland, California and James West was on his way with Goodspeed to the Andes. West was fluent in at least five languages which was helpful a number of times during the trip.

Of special interest to the succulent plant enthusiast, James West along with Arthur Duvernoix Houghton (1871–1938) and Gustav Adolph Frick (1878–1974) founded the Cactus and Succulent Society of America (CSSA) at a meeting in late 1928. CSSA was officially organized on 6 January 1929 with about 110 present, voting James West as Vice President in charge of the Northern California District. The other 2 districts were Southern California and Texas-Oklahoma. West was instrumental in providing knowledgeable plant and book review monthly articles for the CSSA Journal from its beginning in July 1929 into 1933. He was also on the editorial staff in those early years. Current species *Echeveria westii* and *Lobivia (Echinopsis maximiliana subsp) westii* were named in his honor. West was a founding member of the California Horticultural Society and was instrumental in creating the University of California, Berkeley botanical garden.

Duke Ratibor (alias James West) was an eccentric who would rather stay in a tent rather than in a lodging room. During the 1935–36 expedition with the Goodspeed party to the Andes of South America he would wonder off on his own many times for days at a time. When the expedition returned in to the United States in 1936, James West stayed—exploring on his own—collecting plants in South American countries of Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, Argentina and Ecuador and in Mexico and Central America, returning to the United States in 1937. In total he collected some 4,000 plants during his time in South America, Mexico & Central America—many of them cactus and succulent plants. He was set to go on another expedition with Goodspeed in 1938, but never showed up.

Returning to Germany one brief summer to visit relatives in 1938, he vanished again until the family learned of his death by drowning in Germany sometime in late 1939.

References:

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