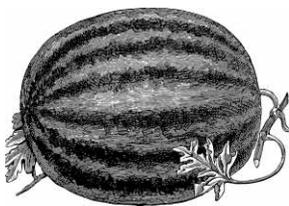




# Land conservation leader grounded in farming

BY KIM LAMB GREGORY



*“If only (my great-great grandfather) knew I’d be around 100 years later ... My family might have stayed in agriculture.”*

**Meredith Hendricks**  
Executive director, Land Trust for Santa Barbara County

Shortly after becoming executive director of the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County in November, Meredith Hendricks visited the graves of her ancestors, who helped shape the county she now stewards.

Flanked by her two cousins, the fifth-generation Californian climbed a grassy slope at Santa Barbara Cemetery where her great-great grandfather George Martin Williams lays buried.

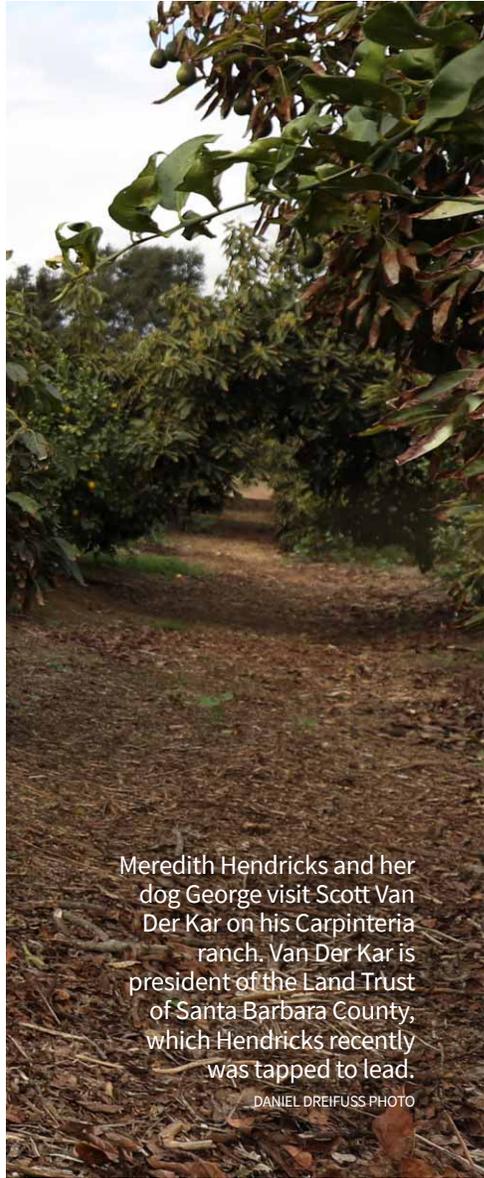
“I would have really liked to have spent time with him,” Hendricks, 44, said. “If only he knew I’d be around 100 years later and I could help him, things might have been different. My family might have stayed in agriculture.”

Hendricks’ Central Coast story begins with Williams, who came to Santa Barbara County from the East Coast nearly 150 years ago and purchased acreage along Modoc Road.

Three generations of Williamses farmed there until a tragic accident forced the land to be sold. Today it is the site of the Five Points Shopping Center on State Street.

And now, Williams’ great-great granddaughter has come home.

“To be able to stand there and see how connected I am to Santa Barbara,” Hendricks said, “really redoubled my commitment to being a part of keeping Santa Barbara so spectacular.”



Meredith Hendricks and her dog George visit Scott Van Der Kar on his Carpinteria ranch. Van Der Kar is president of the Land Trust of Santa Barbara County, which Hendricks recently was tapped to lead.

DANIEL DREIFUSS PHOTO

Land Trust Board of Trustees President Scott Van Der Kar was impressed with Hendricks' 20 years of conservation, land-management and environmental nonprofit leadership experience, but also with her personality.

"She had that way of being very personable and very professional at the same time," Van Der Kar said. "You meet her, you sit down, and you're comfortable. That means so much in the Land Trust — that everybody you deal with feels comfortable."

Hendricks' conservation experience included serving as the Save Mount Diablo Land Trust director, but her experience with agriculture and animals was limited to picking berries in the spring, pumpkins in the fall and working at the San Francisco Zoo where she helped raise a baby wallaby with a harelip. *Continued*

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Meredith Hendricks' great-great grandfather George Martin Williams was a progressive force in Santa Barbara County's farming history.

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**Land conservation leader**

*Continued from page 23*

“He couldn’t nurse because of his harelip, so his mom rejected him,” Hendricks said. “I raised him by carrying him around in a little fake pouch with his bottle.”

**‘Big daddy of the industry’**

Her great-great grandfather’s influence on the region’s agriculture was such that local historians like Hattie Beresford chronicle his achievements.

“He was one of the very select farmers creating the farming industry,” Beresford said. “He knew what would grow, what the market was, what they could promote. He was the big daddy of the whole industry and the newspapers came to him to ask, ‘What’s the (farming) forecast for the year?’”

Born in Baltimore in 1849, Williams left Maryland for California at age 17. Beresford believes he likely traveled by ship around the horn of South America.

The wheel of fate turned after Williams arrived at the Port of San Francisco in 1866 and helped a stranger with his luggage.

“He turned out to be a cook on a ship headed for San Diego and he needed somebody to peel potatoes,” Hendricks said.

Six months later, Williams drove cattle to Santa Barbara where he landed a job on a farm and in 1874, he married the farmer’s daughter, Eliza Jane Towne, who had crossed the Great Plains in a covered wagon with her family.

The couple settled on the 150 acres they purchased and raised eight children. At the time of his death in 1935, Williams had acquired 3,000 acres.

Through the years, he planted walnuts, lima beans, grapes, stone fruits, lemons, watermelons and cotton.

“He entered a 39-pound watermelon in the first Santa Barbara County Fair in 1881,” Hendricks said.

**Progress, then calamity**

Williams saw promise in refrigerated railcars to transport produce back East, and made what would be a fateful decision to let the Southern Pacific Railroad lay track on his land.

His son — Hendricks’ great-grandfather Charles — eventually took over the family ranch where he and his wife, Mary Drusilla, raised children and grandchildren — including Hendricks’ mother, Dianne.

“My mom... rode her horse to the beach and had a pig named Abigail who thought she was human and would try to get in the back door regularly,” Hendricks said.

Then, in 1943, Charles was struck and killed by an unscheduled train transporting troops during World War II.

His death left his wife with a farm she didn’t want to run, so the land was sold. Hendricks’ mother married David Thomas, and the couple raised Hendricks and her two siblings in the Bay Area.

Having come full circle, Hendricks and her husband, Jesse, feel at home in Santa Barbara raising their sixth-generation Californian, Wilder, 6, and a dog named — yes — George.

With a legacy of agriculture and a deep understanding of the value of open spaces, Hendricks plans to treat both with equal weight.

“My goal is to create sustainable, livable places where there is a high quality of life for everyone,” Hendricks said. “It also means having high quality things to eat produced where you live.”

**Kim Lamb Gregory**, a communication specialist at Cal State Channel Islands, is a veteran print and broadcast journalist.

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