Botanising in the Marlborough Province.

For many years I have been most interested in the plants of the Marlborough Province.-an interest which no doubt came about through reading William Martin's books and articles in which he describes the brooms and several other novelties which are indigenous to the district.

Thus as soon as circumstances permitted, my husband and I set out for Blenheim with the intention of motoring down the Kaikoura coast, calling in and inspecting Woodside Creek en route.

On a sunny afternoon in November 1965 we arrived in Blenheim - Stage 1 of my dream realised. However, before moving on I was determined to track down William Martin who taught at the local school thiry years ago. I went to all likely places to get information, but nobody knew anything about him. In desperation I went to the Editor of the "Marlborough Express" and from him learned that Mr.Martin now resides in Dunedin.

When speaking to the Editor I could not resist expressing astonishment that a man of Mr. Martin's calibre, who not only lived in the district for some years, but had done so much to bring to the notice of the public the interesting plants of the district - yet, there is no effort made to perpetuate his great work. It was then I was told that some public-spirited people in Blenheim are making a move towards establishing some of the indigenous plants of the Province in Pollard Park.

Before moving south we had to find out from the Lands & Survey Dept. which is Woodside Creek, for there are many streams which rise on the slopes of the seaward Kaikouras. Furthermore the streams are not all signposted in the South Island.

It was a beautiful run from Blenheim - on our right were great high hills on which sheep grazed, and on our left was the Picton-Christchurch railway line, beyond which was the sea. Roughly forty miles from Blenheim we passed a picturesque little church built of mauve-coloured stone, and not far away was a farm house which we took to be where the owner of the land lived, so we decided to make enquiries.

Sure enough we were at Woodside Creek, and the farmer's wife, Mrs. Parsona, gave us permission to go up the creek and much to our delight accompanied us as she wanted to get to know the names of the plants in this remarkable area. It transpired that Mrs.Parsons knew Mr.H.F.Hursthouse well, who had also died six weeks earlier, in Blenheim.

As we left the main highway and turned inland along the south side of the creek, we soon came to the part which makes this creek quite different from any other. Surrounded by great bluffs of limestone, the creek bed itself consisted almost entirely of limestone debris and was glistening white. As we proceeded, what a sight met our eyes - Pachystegia insignis in full bloom, together with Hebe hulkeana which was adorned with pale lilac flower sprays. Linum monogynum with its pure white flowers and a large Celmisia, which looked somewhat similar to C.coriacea. All these were growing in cracks and crevices of the flint-like limestone.

Two plants we specially wanted to see were Ranunculus lobulatus and Wahlenbergia matthewsii. We eventually found many plants of the former, but according to Mrs.Parsons, a severe flood had swept away numbers of the smaller plants on the lower banks. Our search for W.matthewsii was unsuccessful. Other plants noted in the area were Phormium colensoi, Aciphylla sp., Anisotome filifolia, a small-leaved Clematis, and C.afoliata. The leafless lawyer abounded here.

For the first time we encountered Arthropodium candidum growing naturally and Hebe parviflora var.angustifolia was pletiful on the less steep slopes in association with ngaio, kawkawa and mahoe.

Seeing all this was realistion of dream number 2, but we had been told not to miss seeing the beautiful alpine meadow that existed just up the grassy slope. At this stage Mrs.Parsons left us,assuring us however that it would be well worthwhile "just going up the hill". "It isn't far," she said With no time to lose we puffed up the steep, grassy hillside. Another fence to cross and we were getting up on the shoulder of Mt.Benmore now, and just as we were beginning to despair of ever seeing the much-talked of alpine meadow, we noticed the grass was thinning out and tussock becoming more dominant. At last, the realisation of dream number 3. We appeared to be almost on a great precipice. Below us was Woodside Gorge, and opposite, the steep banks were gaily lit by the yellow flowers of Ranunculus lobulatus - a magnificent plant. In the foreground was a natural rock garden.Pachystegia insignis and Hebe hulkeana were dominant. Senecio bellidioides, and what looked like S,saxifragoides were also present. A few plants of Celmisia monroi were observed, and dozens of Celmisia spp.

Without doubt this is a most wonderful area, for where else would one find such an assemblage of outstandingly beautiful plants so easy of access and almost at sea-level. Although the present owners of the land appreciate its uniqueness, it does not mean to say that future generations will do likewise.

Fortunately the gorge sides are inaccessible, so the area could not be despoiled by avaricious plant collectors, and the overall natural conditions allow for easy reproduction of the plants. A fourth dream would be to see this area preserved for posterity.

Continuing our way southward we never ceased to marvel at the number of Pachystegia insignis, and its variety minor, that grew out of fissures of the rocks on the hillsides for miles and miles. Growing in a similar habitat were hundreds of Hebe hulkeana.

Not far away from the Conway River bluffs we came to the Charwell River. This was reasonably accessible so we decided to see what was there. The riverbed is identical with those of Canterbury, and much of the vegetation looked the same. There were various species of Epilobium, the most attractive of which is undoubtedly the dark-stemmed E.melanocaulon.

Several species of Raoulia were recognised and included R.tenuicaulis and R.hookeri varieties. Skirting the shingle we saw Muehlenbeckia axillaris the leafless lawyer and the leafless clematis. On the far side of the bank we were delighted to find what we took to be Notospartium glabrescens, growing in association with Pachystegia and Hebe hulkeana.

We would have liked to stay longer, but it was the same old story - the time factor - so we reluctantly retraced our steps to the car, and went on our way to Hanmer.

Muriel Fisher.