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The foremost grass specialist of her time ended her formal education after grammar school. She began collecting and illustrating plants in her twenties, and was hired by Chicago's Field Museum in 1901 and later as a botanical illustrator for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Scientific illustration was a way for women to enter science at the turn of the century. Chase studied on her own at the U.S. National Herbarium, and in 1906 published her first scientific paper and secured her first professional position, with Albert S. Hitchcock at the USDA. Hitchcock was Chase's mentor and advocate. After The North American Species of Panicum, by Chase and Hitchcock was published in 1910, Chase published Tropical North American Species of Panicum in 1915, and Grasses of the West Indies in 1917. Chase was actively involved in the women's suffrage movement and aligned herself with the radical Woman's Party. She was jailed several times for participating in suffrage demonstrations, and continued her radical activity despite threats of dismissal from the USDA. Throughout her career, she demonstrated a special concern for the careers of young women botanists, and maintained a correspondence and specimen exchange network, providing training for young women entering the field as well. Her home, dubbed Casa Contenta, was always open to visiting women botanists. The First Book of Grasses, the Structure of Grasses Explained for Beginners was published in 1922. Two years later she began an eight month trip through eastern Brazil facilitated by Dr. Paulo Campos Porto and Maria Bandeira, who accompanied her to Mt. Itatiaia. She returned to Brazil in 1929-1930, and is credited with being the only woman to have scaled the highest mountain in South America. Chase retired from the USDA in 1939, at the age of seventy, but continued to work five or six days a week on her collections in the Smithsonian's tower. In 1940 she surveyed Venezuela's grasses and advised the government on establishing a botanical program. She recommended Zoraida Luces, a botanist at the Ministerio de Agricultura y Cria, to head that program, and invited her to train for the position at the U.S. National Museum. In 1960, Zoraida Luces de Febres produced a Spanish translation of Chase's First Book of Grasses.

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