

A Legacy to Remember: Al Radford

by Alan Weakley, Curator of the University of North Carolina Herbarium

Dr. Al Radford was associated with the UNC Herbarium from his arrival at the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill in 1939 until a few years before his death—some 65 years. He led the Herbarium as curator or director for a total of 37 years, from 1946 to 1983. During that time, Dr. Radford had a major impact on southeastern U.S. floristics, on students of botany, and on conservation in the Southeast.

His herbarium collection numbers run in excess of 46,000, and many of those specimens were collected in sets, the extra sheets being sent to herbaria around the world, where they have served science and education. While paying a visit to the UNC Herbarium a few years ago, Dr. Radford gestured to the cabinets lining the walls: “This is my life!” Certainly he was instrumental in making the UNC Herbarium one of the largest and most important university collections in North America.

The 1968 *Manual of the Vascular Flora of the Carolinas* (affectionately known as “The Manual,” “The Green Book,” or simply “Radford”) is one of Dr. Radford’s most influential contributions. Co-authored with Harry E. Ahles and C. Ritchie Bell and published in 1964, the book quickly became the main “flora” used throughout the South. Nearly 40 years later, it remains a standard reference.

As an undergraduate at Chapel Hill in the 1970s, I took a “Local Flora” course taught by Dr. Jim Massey, and was first exposed to The Green Book. I had always loved wild plants and animals, and also had a fascination with lists—detailed, ordered, and complete information. My botany world consisted of what my family knew in their heads from walking the woods of Virginia, augmented by “wildflower guides.” The Green Book was a revelation: everything was in it! Every plant had a name, a place in a hierarchy of family and genus, a description, a map! And there were orderly keys to use rather than haphazard flipping through pages of pictures of “plants with yellow flowers.”

Dr. Radford’s class field trips were legendary. They began with a pre-dawn rendezvous behind Coker Hall, students with backpacks emerging on foot through the morning mist and converging on white vans. Inevitably there were stragglers, and Dr. Radford would wait impatiently in the driver’s seat, tapping the

steering wheel. Once all were aboard, the teaching began and continued non-stop for days. At field stops, Dr. Radford was in the woods in no more than five seconds. There was a mad rush for everyone else to leap out and give chase to the barrel-chested man dressed in tan khakis from head to toe. When the students caught up, notebooks in hand, Dr. Radford was already naming plants in his soft Augusta-accented voice.

What students learned from Al Radford was multifaceted. They learned a way of looking at plants and learning the rich southeastern flora; how to “cerebrate” about the relationships between rock type, soils, individual species, and plant communities. One of Dr. Radford’s influential ideas was his recognition that in parts of the highly acidic Southeast, mafic rocks were a kind of “faux limestone” that weathered to richer soils support-

ive of unique plant communities and concentrations of rare plants.

Those students of Dr. Radford’s are scattered today, and many hold critical positions with conservation organizations, state and federal land-managing agencies, and universities.

In his later years, Dr. Radford became an influential conservationist. He was not prone to the cautions and asterisks that most scientists insert when asked for opinions about the importance of a potential natural area. This direct approach, along with his extensive field experience

across the region, made him an often-consulted advisor to conservation organizations and led to the protection of many preserves and parks. A few North Carolina examples are the Green Swamp, Nags Head Woods, Bluff Mountain, Big Yellow Mountain, and Buck Creek Serpentine Barren.

The Herbarium and the Garden strive to carry on and build upon Dr. Radford’s legacy—of knowledge of the flora of the Southeast, of documentation of plant distributions and habitats, and of conservation of the rich botanical heritage of the region.

Other reminiscences and information about Dr. Radford may be found on the UNC Herbarium website:

<http://www.herbarium.unc.edu/Collectors/radford.htm>



Dr. Radford and students at Sandy Bay, Pamlico Sound, in 1976.
Photo by Laurie Stewart Radford.