

CHAPTER TWO: FROM BIRDS AND BUGS TO BOTANY

That someone was a graduate student who had come to the University the previous summer to begin work toward a master's degree in zoology. By no stretch of the imagination could she be called an "outstanding" botanist. In fact, I was not a botanist of any sort when I entered the University that June of 1935. During my growing-up years on our farm in Wilkes County, North Carolina, I loved to prowl the woods and fields in the early morning hours, fascinated by the activities of birds, bugs, and spiders. Flowers were pretty to look at and nice to arrange in vases, but that was the extent of my botanical interest. My mother who was born with two green thumbs, loved and grew plants from the time she was a little girl. In later years she studied botany on her own, and was always thrilled to find a new flower in her native Michigan woods and learn its name by chasing it down through the keys in Gray's Manual (which she had taught herself to use). Her efforts to interest me in this delightful pursuit usually fell with a dull thud: I loved birds and someday I was going to be an ornithologist. But things don't always work out according to plan, as I learned soon after arriving in Chapel Hill.

My meeting with the head of the Zoology Department was brief but memorable. Dr. Henry Van Peters Wilson was petite, dignified, and scholarly, with snow-white hair and piercing blue eyes. I quickly learned, to my great dismay, that he considered ornithology, entomology, and such to be "frothy" courses, "frills", upon which no serious student of zoology would waste time. "No, no," French was no good; I must take German. What I needed was morphology, comparative anatomy, etc., the basics. To him I seemed intent on avoiding the basics. Perhaps I was adverse to hard work. He closed his eyes and debated this thought a few moments, asking and answering his own questions. Suddenly his blue eyes flew open, he fixed me with a penetrating look, yawned, and said he was very busy. Somewhat shaken, I hastily retreated down the hall to the Botany Department where I was most kindly greeted by Dr. John N. Couch. He registered me for a couple of botany courses, since there was nothing in zoology being offered that summer. Before long, I had decided to switch my major to botany.

This was a new direction for me, for which I was poorly prepared, I should say, not prepared at all. My science teachers in both High School and College had been basically zoologists. Ironically, I was saved by a little black pocket-sized notebook in which for several summers past, I had sketched and colored some thirty common plants growing around our farm and orchard. So when Dr. Couch asked for examples of work I had done in botany, the only thing that came to mind was the little notebook. The fact that I had done it on my own and not as a requirement for some course seemed to impress him, for he went around the building showing it to everyone he could find. I have to give my mother the credit, for she suggested that I bring in plants and sketch them (she knew I liked to draw), and try the keys. So in spite of myself, I did learn a few plants with their Latin names, and how to use a key in Gray's Manual.

The little notebook led the good professors to believe I knew much more botany than I did. I had to learn a lot and as fast as possible - I couldn't let them down. I took both botany courses offered that summer and audited a couple of undergraduate classes by way of review. At the end of summer, Dr. Coker offered me an undergraduate assistantship, the only financial help available. I was delighted. Although it paid only \$250 for the nine months, with careful planning I felt I could manage. He said it was likely my work would be in the herbarium. At that time women were not often allowed to assist in predominantly male labs.

In the fall I had a second encounter with Dr. Wilson, this time a very pleasant one. For my minor in zoology he suggested hydrobiology, entomology, and embryology, the three courses I had mentioned in June. He was very nice about it. In fairness to him, I must say here that later I took one of his "basic" courses and enjoyed it immensely. He was an excellent teacher, one of the old masters. I counted the experience a privilege - and he learned that I was not afraid of hard work.

September of 1935 was a busy month. I was taking new botany courses, had started on my thesis, and was beginning to work in the herbarium. I elegantly described the latter in a letter home: "I took some plants that had been dried and pressed, and put some glue on them and stuck them on herbarium sheets." There were four F.E.R.A. (Federal Aid) students also working in the herbarium, and all of us were supervised by Miss Ruby Rice, a graduate student (she later married Dr. Elbert Little, an eminent dendrologist in the Department of Agriculture). She had come the previous fall to assist Dr. Harbison, who had noted in a letter to Dr. Totten, "I hope Miss Rice and I can do some nice work. I am glad she is new to our place and ways of doing. She will be able to start with no bad habits."

Ruby certainly had no bad habits. She was a very quiet, gentle, pleasant person, and an excellent supervisor - but she didn't stay long. On October 4th, she left to accept a clerical and research position at Cornell. The following day Dr. Coker told me that until Dr. Harbison arrived I was in charge of the herbarium and would supervise the workers. I managed to keep them busy, but was very glad to see Dr. Harbison when he came on the 22nd. I liked him at once and noted a few days later in a letter home: "I enjoy working with Dr. Harbison...he's a nice old gentleman." He was a very modest man "with short pointed gray beard, gray hair and twinkling eyes". By mid-November he was letting me put away plants in the cases "so I am learning some genera of the Composite family...it's much more interesting than gluing plants onto paper."

By December Dr. Harbison seemed to need to rest for longer and longer periods. Consequently, he began turning over to me more and more of the routine work of the herbarium, so that by early January I had been well initiated into the operation of it. His death on the 12th was a very personal loss to me, for though our working time together had been but a few weeks, I had come to admire him for his great knowledge of plants,

and to respect him for his integrity, kindness, and gentle humor...if only I could have known him earlier, how much more he would have taught me.

That spring of 1936 I worked very hard on my courses, my thesis, and in the herbarium. There I spent many more hours than required because I loved the work, and because everything had to be kept moving along or else the student workers would lose their stipends. Then, too, more and more botanists from other areas were asking to look at Ashe's types and other collections, or to borrow specimens for their various studies. The truth was that so much of the Ashe material was still in mostly unmarked bundles all over the place that no one had any clear idea where a particular genus or family might be. The herbarium was definitely not ready for visiting botanists. As I noted in March: "The herbarium is not catalogued or even straightened out; it is in a frightful mess...so many plants have been stuck around in any old place ...instead of being properly filed...Dr. Coker suggested we stop our other work and straighten out the files first."

It was a temptation to do just that, but the student workers simply did not have the experience or botanical knowledge required to do the job. Since mounting was about all they could do, the work of preparing material for them had to go on. So I proposed a compromise: from then on I would be responsible for filing all mounted specimens and at the same time would begin to straighten out the files, if everyone (especially professors!) would refrain from reshelving plants, and put them on a "To Be Returned" table. Then I would refile the plants into their proper pigeonholes, and take the blame should anything be lost. Dr. Coker liked the idea and was most agreeable, as he nearly always was when I brought up for his approval any new suggestions for improvement.

In April I learned from Alma Holland, Dr. Coker's secretary, that Dr. Coker was planning to offer me the job of full time curator of the herbarium as soon as I received my master's degree. I redoubled my efforts to learn as much as possible about plants and to do a good job in the herbarium. Several graduate students had been assigned to the herbarium, in addition to the F.E.R.A.'s, so I really had to work hard to keep ahead of them all.