

Collector Chronicles, Part I

By Carol Ann McCormick, Assistant Curator, UNC Herbarium

The UNC Herbarium's collections consist of over 700,000 specimens—vascular plants, fungi, algae, fossils, and mosses. Behind each specimen is the person who collected it.

Some collectors are prolific. Our herbarium is the primary repository for the collections of Dr. Al Radford, Harry Ahles, and Dr. C. Ritchie Bell, authors of the landmark *Vascular Flora of the Carolinas* published in 1968. We estimate that Harry Ahles alone deposited over 100,000 specimens! Current collector Bruce Sorrie, of the N.C. Natural Heritage Program, has deposited more than 1,400 specimens as he documents rare and endangered flora.

Other collectors are less prolific. In fact, the word “obscure” comes to mind for a few. These collectors are obscure for a variety of reasons, and it has become an avocation for the Herbarium staff to learn more about these people.

Brother Wolfgang Wolf (1872–1950) is a prime example of an obscure collector. We have only a handful of his specimens. Born in Bavaria, Wolf became a Benedictine monk, and spent most of his life at St. Bernard's Abbey in Cullman, Alabama. His official role at the abbey was tailor; but he became interested in the native plants of the area and assembled books with which to identify them.

Though most of Brother Wolfgang's botanizing was done within walking distance of the abbey, his botanical influence was wider. He described six plant species native to Alabama, among them *Talinum mengesii* (Menges's fameflower) and *Erythronium rostratum* (yellow trout lily).

Another obscure collector proved to be just a hundred yards away from the Herbarium. I came across a nice series of fern specimens “collected by Haven Wiley” in 1956. But I hardly thought that UNC Biology Professor Haven Wiley was old enough to have been collecting rare ferns in the mid-1950s. Was he a child prodigy pteridologist who later became an eminent ornithologist? Yes! I learned that Dr. Wiley's uncle was the pteridologist Dr. Warren “Herb” Wagner of University of Michigan, who inspired his 13-year-old nephew to seek out, identify, and preserve ferns. For anyone lucky enough to go birding with Haven, you know

that he's very adept at identifying native plants (though it's a pity birds don't perch on native ferns, given Haven's proclivity!).

Most well-known botanists have ties with colleges or botanical gar-



Apios priceana, as drawn by Sadie Price (from “A New Species of *Apios* from Kentucky” by B. L. Robinson, *Botanical Gazette* 25[June 1898]: 450-53).

dens that give them “weight” in the scientific community. Some collectors, however, have neither Ph.D. nor academic appointment. Sadie Price (1849–1903) was an all-around naturalist whose interests included plants, birds, and mollusks. Despite life-long frail health and lack of a professorship, Price published articles on natural history in the popular press and scientific journals. She was a gifted artist and illustrated her own publications. The UNC Herbarium is fortunate to have specimens of *Oxalis pricea* and *Apios priceana*, which were not only collected by Ms. Price, but also named in her honor. B. L. Robinson of the Gray Herbarium at Harvard University wrote the following in his 1898 description of *Apios priceana*:



The plant here characterized was discovered some years ago in open woods and thickets near Bowling Green, Kentucky, by Miss Sadie F. Price. After noticing it for several seasons its occurrence and peculiar characters, Miss Price, who recognized its genus and believed it to be a new species, sent it to Professor Charles F. Wheeler of Michigan Agricultural College for further examination. . . . She has observed that the flowers are visited by the butterfly *Eudamus tityrus* and by both honey bees and bumble bees, the latter appearing to find the nectaries very difficult to access. . . . It is a pleasure to commemorate in the specific name of this noteworthy plant the work of such a careful observer of the Kentucky flora.

Unlike Sadie Price, Claire Newell is a professional botanist with a Ph.D. (1997) from UNC. As part of her thesis, “Local and regional variation in the vegetation of the Southern Appalachian Mountains,” Claire collected and deposited scores of specimens in the Herbarium. Claire is far from obscure to current Herbarium staff (who remember her “iron-woman in the field” reputation), but I theorize that in fifty years, few people will think to look for her specimens at UNC—or for that matter, in the United States. After finishing her doctorate, Claire returned to her native New Zealand to work for Landcare Research, that country's foremost environmental research organization. It is in one of New Zealand's sixteen herbaria that future botanists will look for her specimens, and few will realize that she documented rare plants of the Southern Appalachians in her youth.

These are only four out of almost five thousand individuals who have contributed specimens to the UNC Herbarium. As Herbarium staff continue to catalog the plant specimens, we look forward to documenting the men and women who collect those plants. (Look for more short biographies on the “Collectors” section of the UNC Herbarium's website: www.herbarium.unc.edu.)