

Albert Raddin Sweetser, Founder of the University of Oregon Herbarium

By RHODA M. LOVE



Albert and Carrie Sweetser. 50th anniversary, 1938.

Albert Raddin Sweetser (1861-1940), was born on July 15, 1861 in Mendon, Massachusetts, the son of a Methodist minister. Young Albert was educated in the Massachusetts public schools and later attended the Wilbraham Academy. From there he went to Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where he received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1884 and a Master of Arts in 1887. Later he studied chemistry for a year at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Following this, he obtained teaching positions in a Methodist seminary in Bucksport, Maine and a second Methodist school in Tilton, New Hampshire. On February 29, 1888, in Centerville, Massachusetts, the bride's hometown, he was married to Carrie Knowles Phinney whom he had met on Cape Cod. The groom was 27 years old and the bride 25. In the summer of 1892, Albert and Carrie were at Rangeley Lakes, Maine, teaching at a boys' camp where Carrie kept a charming illustrated journal which survives in the University of Oregon Knight Library Special Collections. (For me, one of the highlights of Carrie's Maine journal is a photo of her, in full skirt and mutton sleeves, holding up a freshly-caught fish!) In 1893 Sweetser entered the Harvard Graduate School of Botany and remained there for four years. While there, he worked as a teaching assistant in botany and also taught at Radcliffe College.

The Sweetsers Move West

Albert and Carrie Sweetser came West in 1897 when he accepted a teaching position at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, for \$1,000 per year, and apparently they never looked back (at least not in life)! In a 1898 letter from Forest Grove to one of his former Harvard University mentors, Merritt Lyndon Fernald, Sweetser wrote, in part: "You recognize the voice that comes to you from the wild west? It is indeed in many ways wild enough... The climate is very mild;... I got my first wild flowers the last day of February. The flora is new to me as if I had been dropped into a foreign land... The lichens and mosses simply cover everything in extravagant profusion." The letter continues: "We are planning for our summer, if all goes well, a sort of moving collecting trip. I have bought a very good horse for twenty dollars and a second hand buckboard for fifteen and we propose to cover as large an area as possible." But Sweetser complains a bit in this letter about his teaching job at Pacific University: "The greatest out [sic] about this place is the slowness with which salary comes in. The hard times have tied up their vested funds so that the income is very meager."

The University of Oregon

Albert and Carrie were able to escape the "meager" salary at Pacific University when he was invited to join the faculty at the University of Oregon in Eugene in 1902 at an annual salary of \$1,250! He started at the University as professor of botany and seven years later became the head of the Department of Botany. Albert and Carrie bought a comfortable bungalow (since, unfortunately, demolished) at 1723 Alder Street in Eugene and Sweetser taught at the University until



Carrie Sweetser circa 1892.

his retirement in 1931, after which he became Professor Emeritus. Soon after arriving at the University, Sweetser was appointed State Biologist. In 1909, at Sweetser's urging, the University of Oregon entered into an agreement with the University of Washington in Seattle, whereby the Oregon school would administer the Oceanographic Laboratories at Friday Harbor in the San Juan Islands of Washington State. The Sweetsters spent a number of summers at Friday Harbor while Sweetser taught summer school at the labs. A photo journal of the Sweetsters' summers at Friday Harbor, with notations in Carrie Sweetser's hand, survives in the University of Oregon archives. It includes many turn-of-the-century snapshots of the Friday Harbor Labs, of other sites in the San Juan Islands, and of personnel associated at the time with the Universities of Oregon and Washington.

From all accounts, A.R. Sweetser seems to have been a hard worker, a gifted teacher and an exemplary human being. He was apparently a much loved professor who inspired many students. LeRoy Detling wrote of Sweetser a year after the latter's death: "His deep understanding of the problems of young people, his kindly personal interest, and his keen sense of humor have endeared him to the many students who have come in contact with him during his years of instructing. It was his purpose to build an appreciation of nature in as many people as possible, and to this end he wrote a considerable number of popular botanical articles for newspapers and journals and accepted frequent invitations to lecture before various clubs." In appearance, Sweetser was a mild-appearing man with short hair parted in the middle, a tidy mustache, and dark-rimmed spectacles. Carrie was a sweet faced woman with a very determined chin.

Considering their interest in young people, and an apparently strong and loving marriage, it seems a pity that Albert and Carrie had no children. However, the two raised her nephew, George Phinney, as if he were their own son. One of the students inspired by Sweetser was Lilla Irvin, of Barlow, Oregon, who received her B.A. in Botany from the University of Oregon where she studied with Sweetser. Lilla Irvin later married John Leach. This couple is commemorated in the name of one of Oregon's most famous endemic shrubs, *Kalmiopsis leachiana*, which she and John discovered in southwest Oregon in 1930. Of Lilla Leach, Sweetser is said to have remarked: "She was my most distinguished student."

The Herbarium

Albert Sweetser also played an important role in the establishment and growth of the University of Oregon Herbarium. Sweetser founded and served as Curator of the Herbarium of the University of Oregon from 1903 until 1924 when he hired Louis F. Henderson to fill this position. An intriguing mystery exists with respect to the hiring of the curator: Certain Sweetser letters in the Archives suggest that in 1920, he tried unsuccessfully to lure Morton E. Peck away from Willamette University. Remnants of correspondence suggest that at one point, the deal had indeed been consummated. Yet, Peck did not move to Eugene, and four years later Henderson was hired. I have attempted to track down the details of the failed transaction at Oregon, and Susan Kephart of Willamette University has tried to find pertinent correspondence there,

but so far, we have only a few tantalizing clues. It is interesting to speculate how the history of botany at both the University of Oregon and Willamette University might have differed had Peck made the move. Two of Sweetser's important early acquisitions for the young Oregon Herbarium were 10,000 herbarium sheets each from Oregon collectors Thomas Jefferson Howell (1842-1912) and William Conklin Cusick (1842-1922). Also acquired in the early years were the collections of L.F. Henderson, J.B. Leiber, M.W. Gorman, and E.P. Sheldon. See David Wagner's "History of the UO Herbarium" in the 1994 *Kalmiopsis*. Although Wagner does not mention the collection of Kirk Whited, a 1908 letter from Sweetser to Whited, then at Laidlaw, Oregon, suggests that a significant number of specimens was acquired from this collector as well.

Collecting Trips

During his years as curator as well as before, Sweetser organized several long spring and summer plant exploring and collecting trips. His letters mention a trip to Crater Lake, and journal notes describing one such trip he and Carrie took by automobile to the Kerby Quadrangle in southwest Oregon in April and May, 1923, survive in his papers in the Oregon Special Collections. Of the trip, Sweetser wrote, in part: "The University granted leave of absence in the month of May, and the writer and his wife, with camp outfit, collecting materials, photographic apparatus and sketching materials, left Eugene on the morning of April 27th,... Wolf Creek Tavern was reached in the afternoon [of the 28th]. It had been reported that there was a line of contact at this place between *Erythronium giganteum* and *E. hendersonii*. Although a careful search was made, no specimens of either could be found, the flowering season being past. Later, however, pressed specimens collected by the botany class of the Wolf Creek High School, and very accurately labeled, were sent to me at the University. Both species were found at this point..."

Later, at camp on April 29: [We] "set up our stove, made our bed on the floor and got supper and went to bed. Woe and more woe. In hollow tones the Lady imparted the information that her mattress was sinking and the air must be leaking. Blew it up again but without avail. So she tried to repose on one of the cushions but had a hard and uncomfortable night." (The diaries of Albert and Carrie Sweetser make wonderful reading. Not only do they capture the details of the Oregon flora and the botanist's life in the early twentieth century, but they are also illustrated with snapshots of the countryside, automobiles, tents, camping gear and people, and the narration is alive with the sparkling sense of humor of this delightful pair.)

On this trip the Sweetsters were collecting and camping with fellow botanist, Lincoln Savage, principal of the Kerby High School, and Mrs. Savage. They also made contact with a woman collector of the region, Anne Marie Finch, whose story is presently being researched by Ken Phillips of Cave Junction. One of the purposes of the trip seems to have been to attempt to relocate some of Thomas Jefferson Howell's original collecting sites. Sweetser's journal includes a photograph of Savage standing on a serpentine hillside near Waldo, in Josephine County, where Savage first observed Howell collecting in 1889. On May 5, with the Savages "...Found the apparent meeting place of *Erythronium hendersonii* and

E. gigantea [sic] along a line bearing about N. 80 E. To the east and south *E. hendersonii*, to the west and north *E. gigantea*. A great variety of apparent hybrids of the two were found as is shown by the specimens collected."

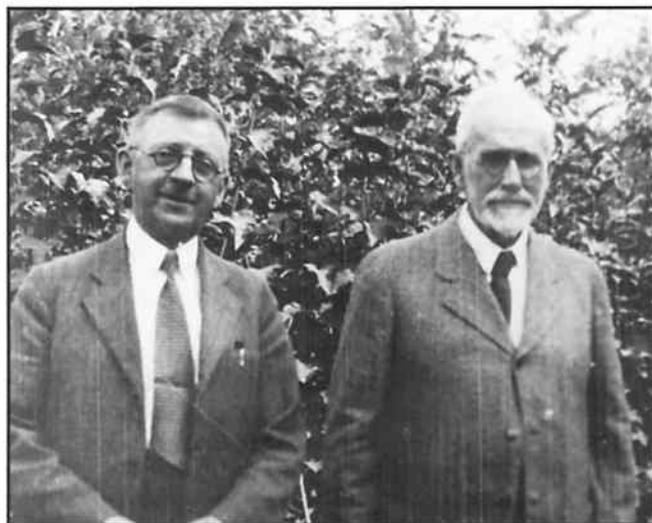
Near the end of their trip, at Page Mountain on May 21: "A little higher the zone of balsamroots was reached and the whole mountainside was a golden glory." It has been reported that in later years Sweetser usually drove a Buick automobile and that if he spotted an interesting plant in a field, he was likely to drive his car off the road and right into the field to have a closer look! The sketching materials mentioned earlier were for the Lady, Carrie Phinney Sweetser, who was a talented wildflower artist. In 1941, over three-hundred and thirty of her beautiful life-sized watercolor paintings of Oregon wildflowers were donated to the University of Oregon Special Collections where they can be seen today.

Botanical History of the Northwest

Back home in Eugene, Sweetser busied himself with his teaching, and with gathering detailed notes for a history of the botanical exploration of the Pacific Northwest, on which he worked for over twenty years. Charles Vancouver Piper (1867-1926) and Rolla Kent Beattie (1875-1960) of Washington State University in Pullman also collected copious notes on this subject. Sweetser accumulated documents on this subject which presently fill two feet of space in the Special Collections at the University of Oregon Knight Library. It is a great pity that none of these individuals lived to finish this work. Nevertheless, their notes have been of enormous help to the writers and editors of "Plants Hunters of the Pacific Northwest." With regard to the University of Oregon Herbarium, founded by Sweetser in 1903, it had grown to a collection of well over 100,000 sheets when, in 1993, it was permanently moved to Oregon State University in Corvallis.

Honors and Death

Sweetser received an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Oregon in 1931, the year of his retirement. Louis Henderson named both an Oregon species and a variety for Sweetser: *Montia sweetseri* and *Synthyris rotundifolia* var. *sweetseri*; neither name is valid today. One reference lists Sweetser as a plant name author, but I have been unable to locate a species named by him. A dormitory on the University of Oregon campus is, however, named for Sweetser! Sweetser became a member of Sigma Xi, AAAS, the Medical Society of America, the Society of American Bacteriologists, the Botanical Society of America, the American Association of University Professors, the National Geographic Society and was an associate member of the American Museum of Natural History. He was the author with Mary E. Kent of a small popular "Key and Flora" of Oregon, and author of a number of shorter articles. Another of Sweetser's major interests was the conservation of native flora. He was the author of a large number of popular essays on Oregon plants, and initiated a number of campaigns to save Oregon's roadside plants and wildflowers. In Eugene he was a member of the First Methodist Church and a church trustee. On the Sweetser's 50th wedding anniversary in 1938, Albert and Carrie were honored with a reception by members



Albert Sweetser (l.) and Louis F. Henderson. Date unknown.

of their congregation. A.R. Sweetser died at his home on September 12, 1940 at the age of 79. Carrie Sweetser outlived her husband by almost precisely 12 years, dying September 9, 1952 at the age of 89. Both are buried in the Phinney family plot in Massachusetts. They were survived by George Phinney whose descendants still live in the Eugene area.

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