

LeRoy Ellsworth Detling (1898-1967)

Eileen Flory
North Manchester, Indiana

LeRoy Detling was born on October 23, 1898 in Groton, South Dakota, the youngest of eight children. His grandparents came to the United States from Germany, settling in the Midwest, and his parents, like so many of their generation, emigrated west, where they were farmers and orchardists in Washington and California. Detling graduated from Gridley (California) Union High School in 1916. He attended Philomath (Oregon)

College and then went to the University of Oregon, where he received his BA in Romance languages in 1921.

In 1921-22 he taught high school Latin and French in Wallowa, Oregon. A love of languages that would stay with him all his life prompted him to go for an advanced degree, and Detling received his MA in French from Stanford University in 1923. He then returned to Oregon to teach Romance languages at Willamette University in Salem (1924-26) and at the University of Oregon (1927-1930). Study abroad at the Sorbonne in 1926 helped keep the French language alive for him.

Leap to Science

During those early teaching years at the University of Oregon, Detling met Louis F. Henderson, then curator of the plant collection in the herbarium. Henderson had a degree in Romance languages from Cornell and this mutual interest may have originally brought the two men together. Henderson served as Detling's mentor, training him in the techniques of collecting, identifying, and caring for herbarium specimens. Eventually Detling took the leap to science and returned to Stanford for more graduate study, completing his MA in botany in 1933 and his PhD in biology in 1936. His doctoral dissertation was "A taxonomic and distributional study of the Pacific coast species of *Cardamine* and *Dentaria*."

The year Detling returned to Eugene with his new PhD, the University of Oregon created the Museum of Natural History, with the herbarium as one of its four units (Wagner 1994). Louis Henderson formally became curator of the herbarium, but his health was poor and at the age of 83, he needed help. Detling was hired as his part time assistant, and when his old mentor finally retired in 1939, Detling succeeded him as full-time curator.

For nearly 30 years, Detling directed and developed the herbarium



LeRoy Detling in the University of Oregon herbarium, where he served for nearly 30 years. Photo by Old Oregon staff, 1957.



LeRoy Detling early in his career. Photographer unknown.

for public service, research, and instruction, also teaching for many years in the departments of botany, zoology, and biology. After 1957 he focused almost entirely on herbarium work, limiting his teaching to small classes of advanced students in plant taxonomy and species distribution, plus advising numerous graduate students in their theses and dissertations.

From Taxonomy to Biogeography

Like many of his contemporaries, Detling gathered thousands of herbarium specimens, primarily from the far west of North America. A search of the Oregon Flora Project database shows that 6,713 of his specimens from Oregon alone are currently housed at the Oregon State University herbarium (the collections of the University of Oregon herbarium now reside at Oregon State University in Corvallis.). Other collections went to herbaria outside the state, including his collection of *Botrychium pumicola* from a summit just east of

Paulina Peak near Newberry Crater in 1928 (WTU2387). This collection was the second record of this taxon, which was first discovered 32 years earlier (1896) and 60 miles south on the rim of Crater Lake by F.V. Coville (Rogers 1951).

Detling wrote monographs on three genera: *Cardamine* (*Dentaria*), *Descurainia*, and *Lupinus*. Thus, his most notable collections were in these genera in support of his research. He published a new species in northern Idaho, Constance's bittercress (*Cardamine constancei*), naming it in honor of Lincoln Constance, who collected it along the Middle Fork of the Clearwater River in 1935 (Detling 1935). This rare bittercress, endemic to Idaho, is listed as a sensitive species. In addition, he compiled a collection of the Willamette fossil flora, especially from a quarry east of Goshen. These collections have been a great asset to paleontologists (Chaney 1948).

Over the years, Detling became as much an ecologist as a taxonomist, focusing on biogeography, specifically plant migrations and the origins of current western flora. He shared an interest with W.H. Baker in relict islands of xeric flora west of the Cascade Mountains (Detling 1953) (See the article on William Baker by Rhoda Love (*Kalmiopsis* 16:31-36).). He noted *Cardamine pattersonii* as the only strictly endemic species on Saddle Mountain, "growing abundantly on the open, grassy, south slopes" (Detling 1954). This species was named by L.F. Henderson (1930) for his student John Rollo Patterson who discovered it in 1928 (Sayce 2010). It is currently considered threatened over its narrow distribution range in Tillamook and Clatsop counties.

His interest in plant migrations led him to visit Mexico five times and Costa Rica once. His most significant



Saddle Mountain bittercress (*Cardamine pattersonii*). Photo by Paul Slichter.

collecting trip in Mexico was a sabbatical leave for a year and a quarter in 1961-62. The Mexican collection comes largely from the western Sierra Madre in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Aguascalientes, and Colima. It was in hopes of completing his plant migration research that he stayed on the job past his official retirement date in 1963.

As it turned out, Detling never retired. He was still serving as curator of the herbarium when he died in September 1967. His wife, Mildred (also a scientist), finished and published his last biogeography research (Detling and Detling 1968) and cared for the herbarium until a successor could be found.

The Detling Family

After an unsuccessful first marriage, in 1944 Detling married Mildred Riechers, on whose master's degree committee he had served. Soon afterwards they built, plumbed, and wired a house among the walnut orchards just north of Eugene. At the time, Mildred was a zoologist studying foraminifera (a group of mostly marine protists); she later became a scientific illustrator for the University of Oregon's Museum of Natural History. A woman of many talents, she was also a mother, writer, editor, teacher, and an accomplished metalworker.



Cardamine constancei Detling from the Clearwater River in Idaho. Photo by Rich Old.



Detling's collection of pumice moonwort (*Botrychium pumicola*) in 1928. Courtesy of University of Washington herbarium.

Weekends, holiday breaks, and summers often found the Detlings camped out and botanizing (of course). Once their children arrived (Eileen in 1948 and Clifford in 1951), field work became a family affair. The children were introduced early into the routine of changing the plant press felts by laying the damp ones in tidy rows in the warm sun to dry and then inserting them between the sheets of newspaper with specimens folded carefully inside. On the occasions when he couldn't take the family out collecting, Detling at least came back with stories: of following a bear up the trail or of running across an ex-student in the field. On the herbarium front, the youngsters helped with setting dishes of fumigant on the shelves of the plant cabinets and keeping the counters clean. He always claimed that "*Pseudotsuga taxifolia*" were his first-born child's first words, followed closely by "xeric island" and "chaparral."

At home in Eugene, the back yard was a *Metasequoia* nursery for a time. The seedlings, of a genus previously thought to exist only in the fossil record (living *Metasequoia* were discovered in China in 1944), were lined up planted in



Mildred and LeRoy and Detling in September 1966. Photographer unknown.

tin cans awaiting adoption; placement always came with a warning that the trees would shed leaves and twigs in the wintertime and were not to be abandoned as dead. The Detlings planted a *Metasequoia* in the yard, and it had grown huge by the time of his death. The tree was subsequently moved onto the University of Oregon campus.

Botany in the Local Community

Detling's commitment to botany extended beyond the herbarium and the home. He served as an officer of the 4-H organization in Lane County and was on the staff at Camp Lane, a 4-H camp in Oregon's Coast Range. Once the family 4-H projects started, he led forestry and entomology clubs for many years. Many times, the purchasers of new homes brought in specimens of shrubs and asked to have them



The Detling family in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1962. Photo by Jim Kezer, University of Oregon.

identified (Cressman 1957). And from time to time he was also called into court to identify plants, once to find that the contents of a suspicious cigarette were Scotch broom flowers!

The Mexico Adventures

The trips to Mexico were high points in Detling's career. Not only did they extend his study of plant migration far to the south of Oregon, they also allowed him to use his language skills and they gave him (and the rest of the family) a love of all things Mexican. These trips lasted anywhere from two or three weeks to a stay of over a year, when the Detling family packed itself into a 21-foot trailer and established "base camp" in a trailer park in Guadalajara.



The Detlings at their trailer in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1962. Photo by Jim Kezer.

Any frustrations of work in Mexico (mechanical breakdowns, bureaucratic red tape, illness) were far outweighed by exciting new activities. Country people welcomed the strange botanist and his family into their homes and fields, explaining at length over fresh-squeezed limeade what each plant was used for. Scientific work was a perfect entrée into the local culture. Visiting and dining with the watchman at the university; chatting in German with Mennonites in the wilds of Chihuahua; stopping at a one-horse sugar mill, a bare-bones tequila factory, or an open-air brickworks—all contributed to a depth of experience that transformed collecting trips into full-fledged adventures. The Detlings briefly considered moving more or less permanently to Mexico, but gave up the dream as impractical. The equally impractical notion of bringing back a baby burro was also left unfulfilled.

Sharing an Affection for the Plant World

One of Detling's strengths as a collector was the meticulous ecological data he included with his specimens. He taught his students and his 4-H-ers the whys and hows of noting down such details as other plants in a specimen's vicinity, the altitude (from his old brass altimeter), soil characteristics, which direction a slope faced (aspect), weather conditions—any observation that might help future researchers understand the plant in question.

His affection for the plant world came through clearly, wherever he happened to be. He had a habit of cupping a specimen in his hand, smiling, and saying, "Pretty little thing, isn't it?" Bushwhacking, hiking along a trail, or

Publications

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LeRoy Detling examining cow parsnip (*Heracleum lanatum*) in the field. Photo from the Old Oregon article.

driving the roads of the West and of Mexico, his eyes would tend toward the flora, and he was always ready to expound on it all to anyone willing to take a few minutes to listen.

On September 19, 1967, LeRoy Detling died of a heart attack as he left his house to walk to an evening of work at "the herb." The minutes of the next University of Oregon faculty meeting recorded, "We will miss this quiet, patient man. Even those who were only casually acquainted with him will be saddened at the loss... The many thousands of plants he collected will serve botanists and students for many years to come. His memorial will be the simple statement on the label of each of these specimens, 'Collected by LeRoy E. Detling.'"

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Prairie lupine (*Lupinus lepidus*), the subject of LeRoy Detling's monograph on caespitose lupines in western North America. Photo by Robert Korfhage.

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Eileen Flory is the daughter of LeRoy and Mildred Detling. The acorn did not fall far from the tree: She has studied Spanish, music, ethnomusicology, and anthropology and has traveled to out-of-the-way places in Mexico in pursuit of those interests. Eileen's early days behind the scenes at the University of Oregon's Museum of Natural History led to a career in exhibit development at the Science Museum of Minnesota and the Oregon Coast Aquarium. She currently lives in a retirement community in Indiana.
