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## Harry E. Ahles 1924—1981

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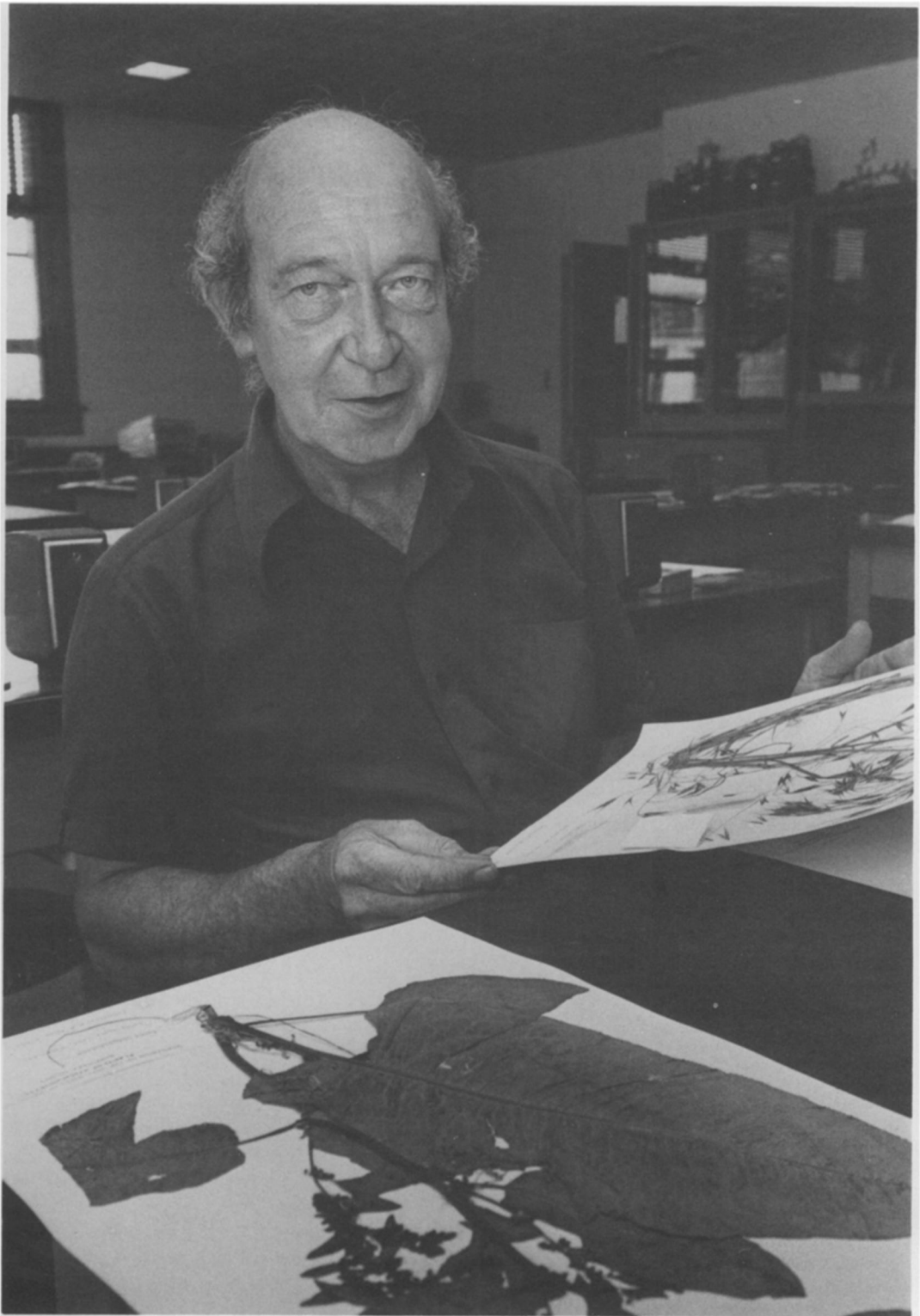
It must have been over thirty years ago that I first heard of Harry Ahles. The Department of Botany at the University of Illinois was seeking an assistant curator for its Herbarium, headed then by Professor G. Neville Jones. The New York Botanical Garden reported that they could not recommend anyone with the specific qualifications we listed but they did have a young man working as a gardener who, although he had just recently completed high school, was a veritable genius at identifying plants. His name was Harry Ahles. After considerable correspondence and telephone calls to the Garden and after the usual hassle with the bureaucrats in the University personnel office, who were horrified by this suggested departure from established standards, we offered the position to Harry and he accepted.

There then emerged the pattern which he was to repeat at North Carolina and later at Massachusetts. He threw himself into herbarium activities, working day and night, seven days a week, except that during the growing season he duplicated these long hours in the field, collecting plants to be added to the Illinois Herbarium, or else to be used in exchange with other institutions. Soon, a bevy of undergraduates and graduate students gathered around him, attracted by his intimate knowledge of plants and his insatiable enthusiasm for field work. If anyone at the University and later anyone in the state had a difficult specimen, they came to Harry. If Marcus Rhoades came across a reference to a peculiar type of meiosis in a rare sedge, he came to Harry, who would say, "Yes, I remember seeing that growing down near Carbondale. I'll pick it up the next time I'm down that way." His years at Illinois with Jones—from whom Ahles said he learned

more Botany than from any other individual—culminated in 1955 in the volume *Vascular Plants of Illinois* by G. N. Jones and G. D. Fuller, with the collaboration of Harry Ahles.

Harry's first publication (in 1951) was a short paper in the Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club entitled "Interesting weeds in New York City." It was during some of his collecting in the wilderness which is the Bronx that he was accosted by several policemen in a squad car, who demanded what he was doing with his odd vasculum over his shoulder. He explained he was a botanist and he was collecting plants. "You know all these weeds?", asked one of the men. Upon being assured that he did, he was asked to join them in the car which drove some distance until they came to an open lot on which there was a flourishing crop. "What is it?" "Marihuana," was the reply. Whereupon one of the officers exploded, "Damn those kids, they told us they were tomatoes."

When Ritchie Bell decided to leave Illinois to return to his native North Carolina, he persuaded Harry to join him in a major project to study the flora of the Carolinas. For ten years Ahles served as Curator of the Herbarium at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, during which time he, following in the footsteps of William Bartram and Andre Michaux, roamed all over the coastal plain, the Piedmont, and the mountains of North and South Carolina, gathering specimens to furnish the foundations for a new flora of these two fascinating southern states, eventually culminating in the *Manual of the Vascular Flora of the Carolinas*, by A. E. Radford, Harry E. Ahles, and C. Ritchie Bell (University of North Carolina Press. 1964). Professors Radford and Bell tell me that



Harry contributed forty percent of the text and descriptions of the species in this widely-hailed flora of over 1100 pages. In addition, he added over 200,000 specimens to the North Carolina Herbarium.

The events leading to his departure from Chapel Hill and his coming to Amherst reveal one facet of Harry's nature. About fifteen years ago—by which time I had moved to the University of Massachusetts—he called me. He wondered if there might be an opening here for someone of his interests. I asked him why he wanted to leave North Carolina—an excellent university with a first-class Botany department and where he was participating in a study of a very interesting flora. His reply was: "They have air-conditioned the Botany building." "What's wrong with that?" I inquired. "I will not work in an air-conditioned laboratory." I told him that I could not guarantee that someday we too might not air-condition our Herbarium. He said that when that happened, he would quit. Well, to be brief, there was an opening for a curator in the Herbarium, and Seymour Shapiro and his colleagues selected Harry and indeed subsequently succeeded in accomplishing something that neither the Illinois nor North Carolina botanists had, namely persuading Harry that he should learn to drive an automobile. Hitherto he had been dependent on friends when he wanted to travel any distance; now he soared like an eagle.

Harry commenced his curatorial duties with vigor and dedication, particularly those aspects which took him out into the countryside. I am told that in the years he has been here, he personally has added 25,000 specimens to the collection. In addition, he and his co-workers gathered well over 100,000 plants which have been sent to institutions all over the world for exchange purposes. As a matter of fact, the University has received an estimated 52,000 plants in exchange. This dramatic expansion and enrichment of our collections will

certainly remain as a monument to the dedicated labors of this extraordinary field botanist.

When Harry was appointed, it was understood that his responsibilities would be those of a curator—no formal teaching was envisioned. However, as elsewhere, there soon gathered around him a cluster of students who were devoted to field Botany. He was persuaded to give a course in the local flora, later a course on aquatic vascular plants. Immediately, he was a huge success, attracting droves of students—new sections had to be opened up, and finally students had to be turned away.

Along with his curatorial duties and his heavy teaching program, Harry managed to devote some time to what was intended to be his magnum opus, the flora of New England and adjacent New York. Sadly, this work, so much of which depended on his vast field experience and his special genius in observing plants, remains unfinished.

I have spoken of his Botany which made up so much of his life, now let me say a word or two about the man. I occasionally and jokingly referred to him as Paracelsus, or on other occasions hailed him as Linnaeus. And in truth he did share some of the attributes of these two legendary figures. I have always been struck by the resemblance between Harry and the Paracelsus depicted in August Hirschvogel's sixteenth century woodcut. And Harry certainly shared with Linnaeus a passion for collecting, naming, and classifying.

Everyone who knew Harry Ahles will remember him as a unique individual who did his own thinking regardless of the current fads and foibles. Indeed, he could be stubborn as a mule. But there was no kinder nor more thoughtful person. We shall long remember Harry for his many contributions to the Botany Department, to his University, and to the wider botanical community.