

Walter Conrad Muenscher

May 30, 1891 — March 20, 1963

Dr. Walter C. Muenscher was born in Fischbach, Germany. He came to America when young, attended schools in Washington, and secured his A.B. from the State College of Washington in 1914. He received the M.S. in taxonomy and ecology from the University of Nebraska in 1915. During the summers of 1915 and 1916 he was an instructor at Puget Sound Marine Station. There he published his first paper on the ecology and growth of certain brown algae. For the year 1915-1916 he taught in a high school in South Dakota.

In the fall of 1916 he came to Cornell as an instructor in botany and served continuously until his retirement in 1954, except for service with the United States Army during 1918-1919. He received the Ph.D. in plant physiology in 1921, was made Assistant Professor in 1923 and Professor in 1937.

Dr. Muenscher served in various capacities with the Bureau of Plant Industry, U.S.D.A., during the summers of 1917, 1923, and 1924. For a number of years he was a consultant to the Tennessee Valley Authority. From 1926 through 1938 he was botanist during the summers for the New York State Biological Survey.

Dr. Muenscher's varied activities and broad background in botany led to a number of important books, all of which have been widely used throughout the country. The experience with the Biological Survey led to his *Aquatic Plants of the United States*. During his long tenure at Cornell he answered over 25,000 extension letters, many of which requested information about weeds. His book *Weeds*, now in its second edition, is one result of this work. Other results are a series of Experiment Station Bulletins on weeds, a series of experiments on the germination of weed seeds, large collections of weed seeds that made possible the identification of unknown seeds, and pioneer experiments on weed killers. In all of this work he was ably assisted by willing graduate students who found ample material for doctoral dissertations and who then went out to become leaders in the field.

Still another outgrowth of his extension work was a realization of the need for an informative book on poisonous plants. He wrote *Poisonous Plants of the United States*, now in its second edition. That book served as a text in his course on poisonous plants and has been of great value to medical and veterinary medical men.

For many years Dr. Muenscher offered a course on the taxonomy of woody plants that was especially popular. He wrote *Keys to Woody Plants* to aid in the course and had the keys printed privately. The keys were so widely used

and in so much demand that he turned the publishing over to Comstock Press, a unit of Cornell University Press. The little book is now in its sixth edition.

In a similar vein Dr. Muenscher and Dr. L. C. Petry collaborated in the writing of *Keys to Spring Plants*, likewise in its sixth edition and published by Comstock.

Dr. Muenscher and some of his graduate students became interested in herbs. An Extension Bulletin, a doctoral dissertation, numerous popular articles, and an herb garden resulted. The culmination of this interest was *Garden Spice and Wild Pot-Herbs*. This beautiful book, with text by Muenscher and Myron Rice, was issued in an edition limited to one hundred copies. Miss Elfriede Abbe, Scientific Illustrator for the Department of Botany, produced all of the woodcuts, set the type, and printed the volume by hand on her own press. Subsequently the Comstock Press has issued a trade facsimile of this book.

One factor that contributed to Professor Muenscher's interest and first-hand knowledge of plants was his traveling and collecting in every state in the Union. Of particular interest to him, however, was Whatcom County, Washington, the most northwestern county in the United States, which has a wide range of environments. In 1941 he published privately *The Flora of Whatcom County*, including discussions of the county's habitats, its poisonous plants, its native ornamentals, the significant botanical explorations made within its confines, and its native, wild vascular plants.

He became interested in the flora of Bergen Swamp, about twenty miles west of Rochester, New York, during his work with the New York Biological Survey. Later he helped found, and was for many years an officer of, the Bergen Swamp Preservation Society, Inc. Several of his graduate students made floristic studies in the area.

The total number of his publications was 125, and he had forty graduate students, chiefly doctoral candidates. He and his family retained as vigorous an interest in the students after they left Cornell as during their stay here, and one seldom sees a group of students so loyal to their mentor. He retained both the respect and the friendship of these students in a way that few of us can hope to emulate.

In retrospect Dr. Muenscher appears as a broadly trained taxonomist who adapted his abilities in such a way as to fill a void with every contribution. He began with the taxonomy of higher plants, became well versed in lower plants (algae, mosses, slime molds), added ecology by years of patient observation, and took his doctorate in plant physiology. He practiced all of these disciplines during his long career.

Dr. Muenscher's productive career was capped fittingly by the award of a Certificate of Merit in 1959, the highest award of the Botanical Society of America. In 1958 his students presented a circular bronze plaque in his honor, which was erected in the Poisonous Plants Garden at Cornell.

He was a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a member of the Wildlife Preservation Society of America, New England and California Botanical Clubs, American Society of Plant Taxonomists, American Society of Plant Physiologists, Limnological Society, Torrey Botanical Club, Botanical Society of America, Phi Kappa Phi, and Sigma Xi.

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