

Ephraim Laurence Palmer

July 8, 1888 — December 18, 1970

Although retired from Cornell University since 1952, E. Laurence Palmer continued writing and lecturing almost until his death on December 18, 1970. This prolific man was a major contributor to a worldwide nature education movement stressing the study of living things and their environment. Teacher, scholar, and humanitarian, he was known throughout this country and abroad for his tireless efforts to promote field study and preservation of natural areas.

Palmer was born in McGraw, New York, on July 8, 1888, to Laura Darrow and Ephraim Clark Palmer. A sister was born in 1890 and the family lived above a corner store until 1893 when they moved to Cortland, New York. Palmer's dad had been elected county clerk, and perhaps this was one influence that gave Eph Palmer his penchant for leadership expressed through eighteen organizations in which he participated actively.

Eph Palmer was educated at Cortland State Normal School, graduating in 1908. An able student, Palmer won a four-year scholarship competition and chose to enroll at Cornell University in 1908. Although repelled by his first college biology course, his close association with Professor Rowlee sustained him. His career as a teacher began in 1910 when he was appointed as a teaching assistant to Professor Rowlee. Palmer earned the A.B. degree in 1911 and the M.A. degree in 1913.

In his first full-time teaching appointment at Iowa State Teachers College, Palmer began building his reputation as a scholar in field biology and as a teacher. He returned to Cornell for further study and completed the Ph.D. in systematic botany in 1917. After a brief tour in the navy, he was appointed assistant professor of rural education at Cornell in 1919. His interest in teaching led him to study education at Teachers College, Columbia University, in 1921. This was also the year he married Katherine Van Winkle. A son, Laurence, was born in 1923 and a second son, Robin, in 1930.

Professor Palmer's prolific writing career began in 1919 with his contributions to the *Cornell Rural School Leaflet*, a publication he edited for thirty-four years. He also began as director of nature education for Nature Magazine. His contributions to the latter journals and to many other Journals number over seven hundred. He wrote or contributed to numerous books and pamphlets, and his *Fieldbook of Natural History* remains a classic reference for students of nature. He received numerous honors and awards and was elected president of six professional

organizations. An active supporter of the Boy Scouts, Palmer received the Silver Beaver Award in 1947 and the Silver Buffalo Award in 1964.

Largely bored with his experience in elementary and secondary school, Palmer worked throughout his career to improve education. He promulgated concern for relevance and preservation of our environment decades before the current popular appeal for these issues. He chastised the recluse but respected quiet scholarship. In all his associations with students, he urged development of their powers of observation and analysis, now popularized under cries for “process education.” He was a severe critic of the meaningless memorization of scientific facts so common in schools and colleges during his career as well as now.

Students and colleagues knew Eph Palmer as an energetic, vivacious, smiling personality. Most did not know that he was driven in part by the heartache of his eldest son’s illness which continued for fourteen years. Even when death came to Laurence in 1940, Palmer carried his memory with him constantly. In spite of this burden, Eph Palmer made time for his friends and his students. His close collaboration with Katherine, a scientist in her own right, was a source of constant strength and personal resolve.

We are fortunate to have a careful account of Eph Palmer’s work in the Ph.D. thesis work of Joseph Bellisario. Completed at Pennsylvania State University in 1969, this study summarizes the contributions Palmer made to nature education and education in general. Those of us who have known Eph Palmer shall continue to profit from the meaning he gave to life.

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