

A History of the Herbarium

In 1872 “*An Act to provide for the Geological and Natural History Survey of the State and entrust the same to the University of Minnesota*” created the University’s Museum of Natural History and initiated an inventory of the state’s natural resources. Initially including plants (collected along the North Shore by Thomas S. Roberts, first museum director and ornithologist), a more comprehensive botanical portion didn’t begin until 1890, when Conway MacMillan (first instructor of botany at the University in 1887) was appointed as State Botanist for the Survey.

In 1889 the Board of Regents approved the purchase of Dr. John Sandberg’s personal collection of 6,000 specimens mostly from Minnesota and the Rocky Mountains for the newly created Department of Botany. About that time, the botanical collections of the Geological and Natural History Survey (which included another 6,000 specimens) and other projects were also merged into the new department’s herbarium. The herbarium formerly in the Department of Plant Pathology was merged into the Museum’s collections in 1978 and 2000, adding significant rust and mushroom collections. From the initial 12,000 specimen collection the herbarium has grown to over 930,000 specimens of plants and fungi today.

The herbarium (which returned to the J.F. Bell Museum of Natural History in 1996) continues to preserve the initial Geological and Natural History collections as well as collections made by numerous university botanists over the decades (E. Abbe, W. Cooper, S. Galatowitsch, O. Lakela, D. McLaughlin, G. Ownbey, C. Rosendahl, C. Wetmore, to name a few) as well as botanists of Biological Survey at the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: J. Boe, M. Lee, W. Smith, and others).

Research at the University has often extended beyond the state’s borders and this is also reflected in the herbarium’s collections. Examples include: Edward W.D. Holway (South American rusts), John Moore (Raiatea, Society Islands), Margaret Oldenberg (Canadian high arctic), Lloyd Spetzman (Arctic North Slope), Josephine Tilden (marine algae and South Pacific plants), and more recently those of Jeannine Cavender-Bares (Central America), Don Lawrence (Glacier Bay), Gerald Ownbey (Mexico), George Weiblen (Papua New Guinea), and their graduate students.

Rather than a static collection of dried flattened plant pieces, the Museum’s herbarium is a dynamic authoritative source of botanical information. All specimens collected from Minnesota and national parks are being entered into an online database and selected groups of plants and fungi are now being digitally photographed for inclusion in national database portals. Specimens are being utilized in DNA analyses, phylogenetic research, and climate change studies, as well as ethnobotany, anthropology, medicine, and forensic sciences.