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Editor: George H. M. Lawrence

Director, The Hunt Botanical Library

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Some recollections of Percy Train (1876-1942)

Chester A. Arnold

AMONG the obituary notices in the March 13th issue of *Science* for 1942 was the name of Percy Train. He was a man who during his lifetime had acquired a considerable reputation as collector of living plants and fossils of both plants and animals. To those who knew him personally, he was more than just a collector, but was very much of an individual in his own right. To me, as one who had had the good fortune of spending considerable time with him in the spacious desert regions of the Great Basin, he was an entirely unforgettable character. Vivid remembrances of him always return whenever I happen to be among those sagebrush covered hills where Train spent most of his active life.

As an individual Percy Train was a hale and hearty well-met person of large physical build who was always stocked with an ample supply of good stories. He had a lively curiosity about almost everything he saw, and though he possessed and was always willing to express opinions on almost any subject, he was remarkably open minded. Besides, he was highly literate, and it was never necessary to "talk down" to him.

Percy's life involved an emotional and physical adjustment to the desert that reminds me of the life of a fish in a pond. The desert, with its components of sagebrush, jackrabbits, and coyotes was the medium in which he existed. Anywhere else he was likely to feel annoyed, bored, and uncomfortable. "Whenever I would hear water running from the tap I just wanted to scream," was his complaint after spending two weeks with his aged mother in a small city. Usually he did maintain an official residence in some small Nevada town, but that was largely a place to which to retreat during cold weather and to keep a regular post office address. But while there he was always impatient for spring to come, and as soon as the desert roads could be travelled, the tent, camp stove, collapsible bed, water barrel, dish pan, and grub box were loaded into the half-ton panel-body truck, and Percy, along with his wife, Agnes, and the dog, would take off for the wilderness which would be their home for the next six or eight months. If the tent could be staked down beside some clear stream well supplied with

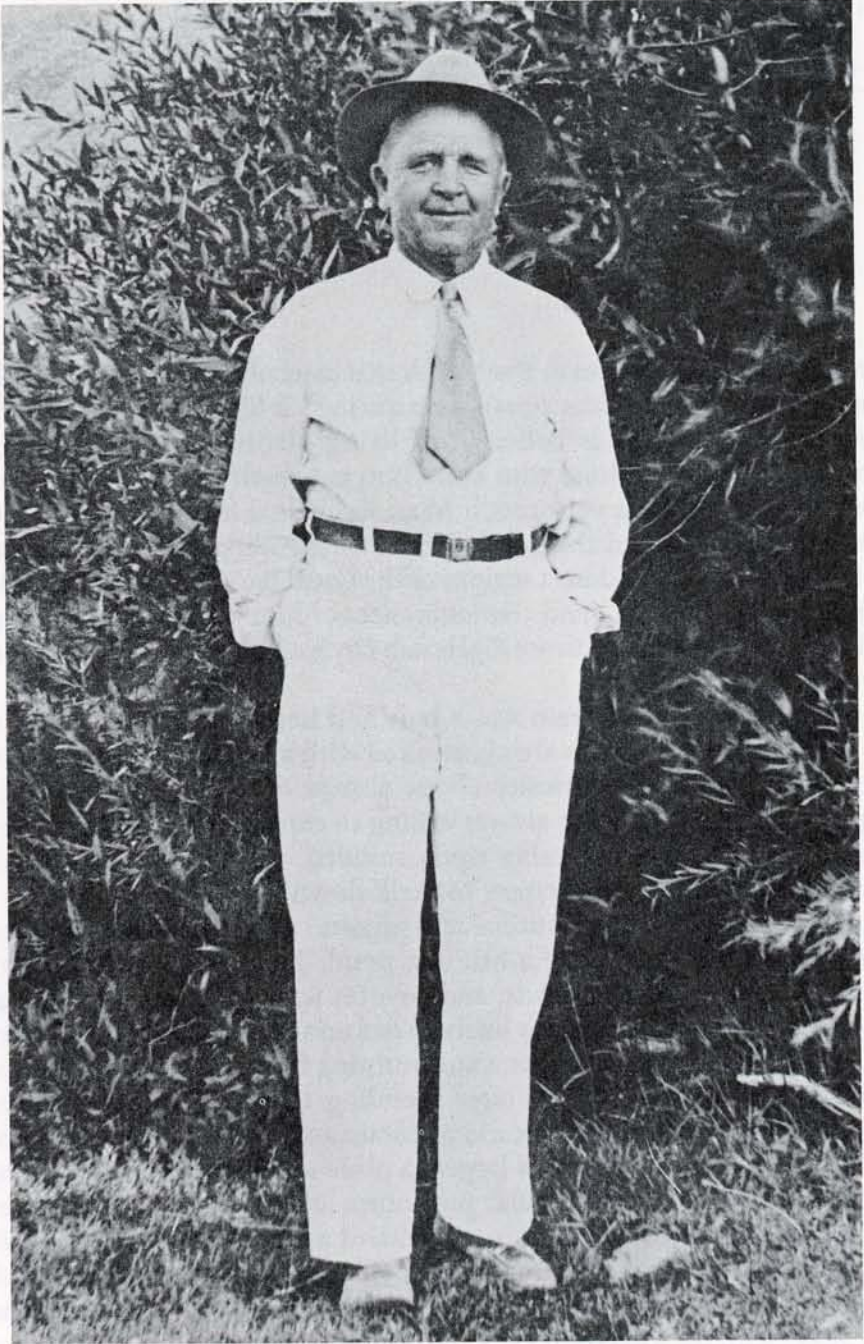


Fig. 29. Percy Train (1876-1942), in 1932.

Photo by and courtesy of C. A. Arnold

hungry trout, well and good, but that was a nonessential luxury. Once I found the Trains firmly established seven miles from the nearest water and four miles from where the sagebrush grew sufficiently large to be harvested for fuel. But they managed to live comfortably in this out-of-the-way place.

Long before, Percy had learned to apply horse sense and ingenuity which he found would go a long way toward overcoming the inconveniences of a dry camp on the hot desert. For instance, he explained his simple technique for keeping venison edible through the mid-day heat with no ice nearer than 50 miles. "You hang it outdoors during the night, high enough so the coyotes can't get it. Then in the morning wrap it well, and put it between the blankets in the middle of the bed." That was all there was to it, and the Trains enjoyed fresh venison as long as the supply held out. He also had plenty of advice to give on other matters pertaining to survival on the desert. "Look out for loose sand on these roads," he cautioned me. "It's OK going downhill, but don't try it uphill or on the level. And mind you, if you do get stuck, don't bury the wheels. Pull up some sagebrush and stuff it under them. That is the only thing God made it for." Furthermore, he advised me to fill the gas tank at every opportunity even though it be already nearly full. So doing lessens the chances of having to walk, and distances on the desert are sometimes considerable. I was also warned to be suspicious of unusually tall clumps of sagebrush in the road, which sometimes hid large rocks. Percy did have a healthy respect for rattlesnakes, but he was quite insistent that a rattler will be a perfect gentleman if you behave like one, too. Which simply means leave them alone!

The agreeable desert climate was something Percy did not like to see disturbed, and he always knew who or what to blame when it went bad. "Just California weather slopping over," was his terse comment following one of these rare occasions when a rain storm hurdled the high Sierras and dropped its load of water on Nevada instead of California.

Percy's only indulgence that I became aware of was chewing gum, which he obtained from a mail order house by the box. He would sometimes treat himself to a fat cigar on the rare occasions when he went to town. Somewhat surprisingly, when one considers the uninhibited character of desert life, he was not addicted to excessive profanity. But he could turn it on with devastating effect when circumstances were appropriate. This was demonstrated to me one Sunday morning during one of our fishing trips along Trout Creek. I had not seen or heard him for about an hour, when suddenly the clear morning air was filled with the most unrepeatable language I had ever heard. I was completely mystified because it seemed to come from everywhere, though it was distinctly Percy's own, clear resonant voice

rebounding like rubber balls from the rhyolite canyon walls. Greatly puzzled and knowing the possibility of an unexpected encounter with a rattlesnake, I commenced to investigate. I found Percy not far away, and soon learned what the trouble was. A small trout had helped himself to the bait, while close by a fine big lazy fellow just watched indifferently. That was too much for Percy's normally very tolerant soul.

Percy Train was born in Helena, Montana, in 1876. After completing courses at the Montana School of Mines he worked as mine consultant and prospector in Montana and adjacent states until 1905. Then he went to Nevada and established an assayer's laboratory in Manhattan, which he operated until 1915. By then, mining activities had slackened and he was left with spare time on his hands, and it was then that he began to explore the geology of the Great Basin. He had become a professional fossil collector by 1926, and in 1927 Dr. R. S. Bassler described some Ordovician age sponges that Train had found in Nevada. During these years he explored most of the Great Basin and adjacent areas, criss-crossing them in all directions. In 1928 he married Agnes Hume Scott, a Chicago librarian, and the two became a team that lasted until Percy's death in 1942.

While on one of his exploratory trips into the sagebrush country of southeastern Oregon, Train found a diatomaceous earth bed of Miocene age that contained large numbers of plant fossils. This was near Trout Creek in the southern part of Harney County. He made a small collection which was sent to the University of California, and which Harry D. MacGinitie described. Percy then offered to work there during the summer of 1932, and for a sum to secure a specified number of fossils. This led to a contract between him and the University of Michigan.

The Trains spent the whole summer of 1932 and part of that of 1933 at their quarry at Trout Creek, and the result was a collection of 11,000 fossil plant specimens. Then in 1935 they spent a few weeks collecting along Sucker Creek in the eastern part of the state near the Idaho line. Here a series of shales and sandstones deposited in Miocene lakes yielded plant impressions similar to those from the Trout Creek locality. Several hundred specimens were secured at Sucker Creek. The Trout Creek and Sucker Creek floras were recently studied *in toto* by Alan Graham, who identified 75 species in the former and 69 in the latter.

As late as 1932, the year of my first trip to Oregon, Percy had never seen a plant press. When I arrived at his camp during the early part of the summer of that year, a small press was part of the paraphernalia I unloaded from my car. He spotted it, and of course wanted to know immediately what it was. I told him, and demonstrated how it was used. "Why can't I do that too?"

he finally asked. During the summer he helped me collect and press desert plants, as well as dig fossils, and during the years that followed he interspersed plant pressing with fossil digging. He assembled his plants into sets which were offered for sale. At first the venture seems to have been somewhat less than a moderate success, but some of his specimens found their way to Washington where they received the attention of Dr. W. A. Archer who was then involved in a project on the flora of Nevada. Percy soon received an official appointment as Agent of the Bureau of Plant Industry, and his special assignment was to collect and gather information on the medicinal plants used by the Nevada Indians. This was not an easy task, but Percy knew how to find the plants, and what was still more important, he was quite successful with the help of his wife in extracting information from the untalkative and noncommunicative Indians. After they had spent several seasons in the field the work of the Trains was assembled, and it was published in mimeographed form in two parts totaling 332 pages, in 1941 and 1957. These reports give the scientific names of the plants, their common names and how they are pronounced in the Indian language, and how they are used.

I last saw Percy Train in November of 1941. He was then in his 60's and the couple had given up the nomadic way of life. They had purchased and moved into the old Judge Virgin mansion in the little town of Genoa, which had been the original capitol of Nevada Territory. I found Percy to be the same effervescent individual that I had always known, but his robust health was gone. He told me then that the end was not far away, and he died three months later.

It was a somewhat unfortunate quirk of fate that the most active part of Percy Train's career as collector of natural history material came during the depression of the 1930's when institutions that could have made good use of his special abilities were so desperately short of funds. Were he alive and active today, the situation would probably be very different. In those days he had to work hard to keep the wolf from the door, literally as well as figuratively. As a collector, he appreciated the scientific value of his material, and he was always concerned that it fall into competent hands and be properly utilized. Furthermore, he took pride in his work, and did everything possible to turn out fine specimens. His fossils were always carefully removed from the rock strata, and neatly trimmed and cleaned. Living plants were laid out and pressed with the most meticulous care. He realized, too, which some collectors do not, the importance of source data concerning specimens, and his collections were often embellished with detailed sketch maps and diagrams of stratigraphic sequences. Then, too, he could

go into and collect in places most of us would consider inaccessible. He has left a permanent imprint on the botany and paleontology of the Great Basin, and men of his type are indeed in short supply.

Some publications based upon Percy Train's collections

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