

FIFTEENTH ANNUAL ARBORETUM DAY

MAY 4, 1979

TRIBUTE TO WALTER P. COTTAM

BY

BERTRAND F. HARRISON

It is most fitting that the Utah Native Plant Society award its first Honorary Life Membership to Walter Pace Cottam. In matters of Utah Botany it is a habit of his to be first. He was one of the first professionally trained botanists to work in Utah; but more about that later.

Dr. Walter Cottam was born in St. George, Utah, March 3, 1894, to hardy Mormon Pioneers who survived the cruel hardships of the Dixie Mission. He received his early schooling in St. George, among that group of superior individuals who colonized that harsh land.

I once asked a friend of mine who was raised in St. George how it was that so many notable people came from Utah's Dixie. He said that the early Church Brethren sent all the outspoken, free-thinking Mormons to colonize Dixie. I don't know if there is any truth to that tale but it could help to account for Dr. Cottam's insistence on thinking for himself, his complete intellectual honesty, and his courage and willingness to speak out against the abuse of our environment.

In 1916 he was graduated from Brigham Young University with a Bachelor's degree and in 1919 he received his Master's Degree from B.Y.U., the first graduate degree awarded by B.Y.U.

He was appointed Professor of Botany at B.Y.U. in 1920 and except for time out to complete his PhD at the University of Chicago he taught there until 1931 when he moved to the University of Utah where he remained until his retirement.

I could spend all the time available to me telling you about his many scientific contributions, about the many responsible positions he has held and about the many notable honors and awards he has received, but I prefer to tell you about Walter Cottam, the man, as seen through the eyes of his student of many years ago.

I used to wonder how he came to know all the things he did. Later I came to understand, at least in part. He had an intense interest--akin to love--in the plants of his homeland, and this same interest and enthusiasm he transmitted to his students. He had a great curiosity about plants and was constantly looking, searching for answers, for relationships.

Not content in finding answers only in books he sought out the plants in their secluded niches to learn of their ways. When not in the schoolroom or laboratory he was in the field--searching, observing and collecting. From these early collections he established the Brigham Young University Herbarium and laid the foundation for the great Herbarium it is today. Later he did the same for the University of Utah Herbarium.

In 1929, fifty years ago next month, Dr. Cottam took me and another student, Bill Stanton, on a month long field trip through Southern Utah and the Arizona strip. In his Model T Ford we traversed roads more suited to pack animals and Jeeps than passenger

cars. We collected many hundreds of specimens and learned much first hand. From him I came to know the desert, its many moods, its harshness and its beauty.

Dr. Cottam brought many talents to his teaching. His language was as colorful as <sup>the hills of</sup> his native Dixie. His figures of speech brought interest and meaning to his discussions. He was a sensitive artist and a superb photographer and he used these talents to bring the outdoor world with all its intimacy, its beauty and its majesty into the classroom.

As a teacher his ultimate objective was to give to his students some of the wonder and the fascination of plants that he knew; to teach them to work and to think independently and speak up for that which they knew to be right. Other than my own father Walter Cottam has influenced my life for good more than any other man. I shall always be grateful to him for what he has done for me.

While I have spoken primarily of Dr. Cottam's role as a teacher I wish to note his influence on a much broader scale. Long before most people had ever heard the word "ecology" he was calling us to repentance for overgrazing our range lands, for over harvesting our timber and for recklessly denuding farmlands, roadsides and mining properties.

No one has been more effective in showing us the divine obligation of stewardship of our world; no one has given us greater appreciation of the beauty and fragility of our environment; no one has impressed us more with the urgency for its care.