

George L. Fisher (1868-1953)

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George Lewis Fisher, son of Lewis and Almira Mann Fisher, was born January 8, 1868, near St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada. He died at Houston, Texas, September 21, 1953, survived by his wife, a daughter (one of two), and five grandchildren. Mr. Fisher's grandfather came from Germany to Buffalo, New York, when his father was a small child, and from there went to Pennsylvania. His father married a Pennsylvania girl of English descent, and moved to Canada, where he was a successful farmer. His cousins in Detroit made the phrase "Body by Fisher" a by-word in the automobile industry.



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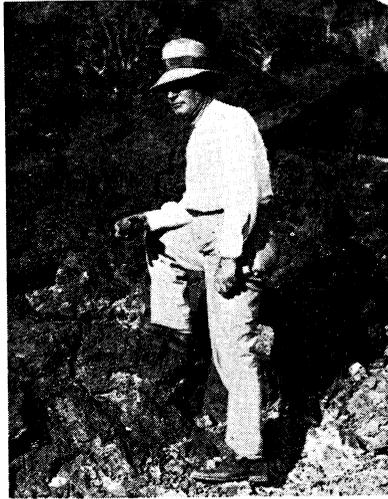
Though most widely known for his botanical work, Mr. Fisher was a music teacher by profession. But botany was never neglected for mere professional activities. He studied at conservatories of music in Toronto and in Europe (Leipzig, 1893-1895; London, 1895-1896), collecting plants all the while. On a specimen of corn poppy, *Papaver Rhoeas* L., from Windschlaeg, Baden, Germany, collected August 4, 1895, he has noted "from near my father's birth place." He was married in London on October 13, 1896, splendid in Kaiser Wilhelm mustache and collapsible top-hat, to Alice M. Palmer, from his home town of St. Thomas. Mrs. Fisher relates that when the young couple returned to Ontario,

their luggage included "a couple of trunks full" of plant specimens collected by her husband in Europe. For a rest from teaching, in 1911 he moved to the Texas Panhandle (Tucumcari, New Mexico, was the nearest post office), making a brief try at sheep ranching. In 1912 he moved to Houston, resuming his activities as teacher of instrumental music. He joined the First Methodist Church, and was active for many years in the Houston Outdoor Nature Club. He played saxophone in the Houston Shrine Band, and had expenses paid to attend Shrine conventions as far away as California. His convention duties over, he would stay as much as a month, to collect plants. Beginning in 1924, he made triennial trips to Mexico, taking along an assortment of trinkets to pay native boys who helped him collect. In 1926 he published his only scientific article, "Fern Collecting in Mexico," in the *American Fern Journal* (vol. 16, pp. 57-59). Most of his collections were identified for him by specialists, chiefly at the U.S. National Herbarium and the Chicago Natural History Museum (Field Museum).

From his garage in Houston he operated the American Botanical Exchange, selling and exchanging his own collections and those received from others, dealing with high schools, colleges, and museums in the United States, Canada, Latin America, and Europe. One large lot of specimens was hurriedly packed and sent to him by the University of Caen, France, just before the city was occupied by the Germans in World War II. Collections were sold at prices ranging from 5c for U.S. plants to 10c for Latin American ones, barely enough to pay operating and travel expenses. None of the specimens he received went into a permanent, private herbarium. Anything he had might be sold or exchanged at any time, if someone requested it. He worked entirely for the benefit of others, and for the pleasure the work gave him. He set up his own type for price lists and labels, though these had to be run off by a professional printer, since he did not own a press himself.

He continued to be active with field work to the last. Until 1951, he continued to drive his own car. But age inevitably meant some curtailment in his beloved avocation. In 1950 he wrote me that since he was now past 80, he wanted to arrange a permanent home for his remaining collections, and offered them at a reduced price. Unfortu-

nately our budget did not permit such a purchase, but he generously agreed to sell them to me personally in small monthly installments. Some 7,500 specimens were thus acquired and turned over to the Southern Methodist University Herbarium. Before his death, he left instructions that the remainder—in excess of 10,000, nearly filling the open shelves that had been built for them on three walls of his garage—were to go to the University as a gift. These have been transferred to Dallas, but have still to be sorted and mounted.



Photograph of George L. Fisher, taken in the 1930's, while exploring for plants in the White Mountains, near Ruidoso, New Mexico.

George L. Fisher represented a type of vanishing American: the amateur naturalist who makes contributions of lasting value to the science of his avocation. Wholly without technical training in the subject to which he devoted so much of his time, his unselfish interest led to the enrichment of scores of herbaria, large and small, and especially to the increase of our still too meagre knowledge of the immense and complex flora of Mexico. In a more sophisticated but surely not more civilized age, there is no one to fill the niche he occupied so usefully.