

Biography of Margery Carlson

Margery Carlson, former professor of botany at Northwestern University and a research associate of Field Museum for many years, died on July 5, 1985 at the age of 92. Dr. Carlson earned her bachelor's degree at Northwestern in 1916, the M.S. in 1920 and the Ph.D. in 1925 in botany at the University of Wisconsin. She taught high school biology as well as botany at Wellesley College while completing her doctorate and served as a Research Fellow at the Boyce Thompson Institute of Plant Research, Yonkers, New York, 1925–27. In 1928 she joined the faculty at Northwestern and taught there 30 years. She retired in 1958 as Associate Professor.

An energetic and adventurous woman, Dr. Carlson's primary interaction with Field Museum was through her plant collecting program in Mexico and Central America in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Using a station wagon or truck-camper as both vehicle and motel, Margery, together with her companion Kate Staley, was able to reach remote areas in southern Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Costa Rica. Each expedition took several months and came close to or exceeded 10,000 miles of travel.

What was especially remarkable about Margery's field trips was that both she and her companion were gray-haired ladies embarking on trips that would challenge someone half their age. The trips were not without adventures and minor mishaps. One expedition ended with the truck smashed at the bottom of a canyon but with the two women only slightly injured. Another adventure Margery loved to recount was the time she and Kate were eating lunch along the side of the road in northern Mexico, when they found themselves face-to-face with two men brandishing machetes and demanding money. Sizing up the situation quickly (these were two poor farmers and not dangerous bandits), Margery proceeded to admonish them in Spanish: "Don't you realize you could have scared us to death? And if that had happened you could never go to heaven!", whereupon she invited them to have some lunch — which they did.

Dr. Carlson's collections are a significant part of Field Museum's premier holdings from Central America. Margery's research on the genus *Russelia*, in the snapdragon family, was published in the scientific journal *Fieldiana: Botany*, in 1957.

After retiring from teaching, Dr. Carlson played another important role as an advocate of conservation. She was the first secretary of the Illinois chapter of the Nature Conservancy and was especially active in the preservation of Volo Bog, a nature preserve at the southern part of Illinois Beach State Park, and of a section of land along the Vermillion River, now part of Matthiessen State Park. The latter area, not far from her hometown of LaSalle, IL, boasts hundreds of yellow lady's slipper orchids and has been designated the Margery Carlson Preserve.

Margery brought more than her knowledge of botany to the battle for conservation. With an imposing physical presence, a clear voice, precisely focused energy, and the authority of seventy years, she became an effective champion for the preservation of natural areas in Illinois.

Margery once remarked that she held the record for number of years served as an assistant professor at Northwestern University, her male colleagues having moved up the ladder at a more accelerated pace. But that remark was expressed more in humor than in bitterness, reflecting the very positive way in which she approached her work and her life.

[The preceding first appeared in the Bulletin for Fall 1985, credited to William C. Burger, Chairman, Department of Botany; reprinted from his article in the Field Museum of Natural History Bulletin, Vol. 56(9), Oct. 1985.]

From our SDF/GWIS files we learn that besides her career in botany and nature conservation, Dr. Carlson has contributed much to Sigma Delta Epsilon over the years—a Life Member for many years and National Secretary 1935–38, she was instrumental in founding Lambda Chapter at Northwestern University in 1929, actively supported Lambda, and continued her support since the merger of Lambda and Eta to form the Metropolitan Chi Chapter in 1969. On June 16, 1978 she was installed as a National Honorary Member by Chi Chapter.

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