



Obed David Evans (1889-1975)

Photograph by courtesy of The Sydney Morning Herald

OBITUARY: OBED DAVID EVANS

Obed David Evans, who died on 26th July 1975, was born 86 years earlier in Sydney, New South Wales. In fact his birthplace was symbolic of his future career for it was on the old Shepherd's Darling Nursery in Bourke Street, long since submerged below the bricks and mortar of Redfern, that Obed first saw the light of day. Shepherd's was probably the oldest plant nursery in New South Wales, having been established on a land grant made by Governor Darling over 60 years previously. It was here that Obed gained the love and knowledge of plants which no doubt helped him obtain an appointment as Laboratory Attendant in the newly formed Botany School at Sydney University in 1916.

Although it seems that he was not actually appointed Curator of the John Ray Herbarium at the University until 1924, he had started long before that to build up this collection. It is thus largely his supervision that has made it the largest herbarium collection in any Australian University. His characteristic strong rounded hand appears on several thousand beautifully preserved and annotated specimens mounted on the azure blue ledger paper that Kew had ordained as the only satisfactory sheet for plant collections throughout the British Empire.

This, however, was not his only contribution to the University. He was also Chief Laboratory Attendant and as such he had the responsibility for the day-to-day organization of the courses given in the Botany School. This involved maintaining the equipment, directing the laboratory staff and collecting material for the classes. At first this last duty was relatively easy and a trip on the tram out to La Perouse with a black metal vasculum—standard equipment for a botanist at the time—usually secured a satisfactory haul. There were times, however, when journeys further afield were necessary. Sackfuls of *Macrozamia* cones were obtained twice a year from the sandhills around Woy Woy to illustrate the Glaswegian botany taught at that time at Sydney: all the senior staff had been pupils of Bower with a consequent and definite bias towards life-history studies. This bias resulted in his being sent to Queensland to collect material of *Bowenia* for research in the school.

Once, after collecting *Prostanthera sieberi* near Waterfall, the smell from that labiate completely cleared the railway carriage in which he travelled back to Sydney—and the guard let him know why in no uncertain terms.

As the courses extended their scope and collecting away from public transport became necessary, Obed acquired a push-bike, eventually affixing a small petrol motor which gave some assistance up the hills with which the Sydney area abounds. The effect, after a successful collecting trip, must have been rather like a somewhat inefficiently motorized version of Birnam Wood. Eventually, very close to his retirement, he could make use of a car which the Department purchased, second-hand, from one of its Professors.

Retirement from such work was bound to alter his life. He took up part-time work with the Botany School at the University of New South Wales, assisting to develop a teaching and reference herbarium. He made frequent short collecting trips as well as organizing material from other sources.

At first he also toyed with the idea of running a small nursery but the University of Sydney gave him a grant in 1952, so that he could use his considerable knowledge of the native flora to assist in writing a student's key to the flowering plants of the Sydney region. This had been begun by a number of staff members under Professor N.A. Burges' Chairmanship about 1948. In the event it was N.C.W. Beadle and Obed Evans who did the bulk of the work on it until a disastrous fire at the University of New England destroyed a large part of the manuscript. R.C. Carolin helped finish a number of keys subsequently and rewrote some of those destroyed in the fire.

Obed Evans was a modest man, in keeping with his religious outlook, but in one matter one could detect a small amount of pride. In 1957 when he was awarded a B.Sc. degree by the University which he had served so well for so long, for his work on the Handbook of the vascular plants of the Sydney district and Blue Mountains, he always insisted that one understood the degree was not honorary but awarded after examination by thesis.

This, however, was not the end of Obed's career for now he had started on another course. In April 1959 he took up an appointment as a part-time Botanist at the National Herbarium of New South Wales, with the specific duty of contributing to the Flora of New South Wales. He continued in this position until 30th June 1971 and prepared manuscripts for several families for the Flora as well as several research papers arising out of his work. Some of these have been published (see bibliography) while others are being worked up in the light of more recent knowledge and will be published in due course under the names of Evans and relevant co-authors.

Formal taxonomic revision was a new departure for Obed and he approached it humbly but with his usual meticulous care and determination to do a good job. His work at the Herbarium was all on monocotyledonous families, particularly those, such as Restionaceae and Cyperaceae, with very small floral parts. His eyesight remained keen and he was able to carry out the necessary microscopic examinations to the last. He also became interested in cultural experiments on the duckweeds (Lemnaceae) and published a paper on variation in this extremely difficult group. In the Restionaceae he used stem anatomy to very good effect in distinguishing species and genera.

Obed worked closely with one of us (LJ) during these years and the association was a happy one throughout. Though modest and disinclined to become involved in theoretical or evolutionary questions, he never objected to such matters being discussed in joint papers. He was amenable to suggestions but would stick firmly to his opinion when he had carefully arrived at it. Despite his advanced years, he carried out a considerable amount of field work during his time at the Herbarium and was always conscious that the specimens with which he was dealing were merely representatives of the living populations in nature.

A devoted family man, Obed Evans was a member of a small evangelical church and his religious beliefs were strongly held. In both academic and herbarium spheres he often found himself in company in which a secular outlook was manifest. However, because of his obviously sincere and generous attitudes and the unobtrusive but firm way in which he lived by his principles, his beliefs were universally respected and he seemed to be happy in any civilized company. Likewise he was respected as a man and held in great affection by all who knew him. He became well known as a professional botanist at a much later stage in life than might be reasonably expected. Not only will Obed be remembered by generations of students of the Botany Department of the University of Sydney, but his contributions to knowledge will survive through his publications.

R.C. Carolin.
L.A.S. Johnson.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The following publications are listed in chronological order.

NOTE: The form of citation "Fl. N.S.W.", rather than "Contrib. N.S.W. Nat. Herb., Fl. Ser." is used throughout.

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Mr Evans also prepared the following two lists of which some duplicate typescript copies were circulated, although they cannot be regarded as publications:

Evans, O.D., 1959—A census of trees and plants in Ku-ring-Gai Chase. Arranged in families according to the system of Engler and Prantl but in groups commencing with Dicotyledons. 18pp.

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