



Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation
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About the Institute

The Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation, a research division of Carnegie Mellon University, specializes in the history of botany and all aspects of plant science and serves the international scientific community through research and documentation. To this end, the Institute acquires and maintains authoritative collections of books, plant images, manuscripts, portraits and data files, and provides publications and other modes of information service. The Institute meets the reference needs of botanists, biologists, historians, conservationists, librarians, bibliographers and the public at large, especially those concerned with any aspect of the North American flora.

Hunt Institute was dedicated in 1961 as the Rachel McMasters Miller Hunt Botanical Library, an international center for bibliographical research and service in the interests of botany and horticulture, as well as a center for the study of all aspects of the history of the plant sciences. By 1971 the Library's activities had so diversified that the name was changed to Hunt Institute for Botanical Documentation. Growth in collections and research projects led to the establishment of four programmatic departments: Archives, Art, Bibliography and the Library.

Ball, Carleton R.

Session of the round table discussion of ⁴Systematic botany.
Smithsonian Institution, March 5, 1925. 2 p. ms. Unpublished.

↑
sent to Maxon then

Systematic botany is a helpful and much needed branch of botanical science. It is needed not only in describing, comparing and classifying the enormous and varied range of wild plants, but also in providing similar information regarding the forms of domesticated plants. This information on both groups is needed not only by the taxonomists themselves but by the numerous groups of workers in related lines, including agronomists, horticulturists, pathologists, physiologists, ecologists and cytologists, as well as entomologists and other groups of zoologists.

In the systematic investigation of the forms of domesticated plants, it is absolutely necessary to recognize that the degree of variation in characters sufficient to establish species, subspecies and varieties of wild plants is by no means sufficient to establish the equivalent botanical categories of cultivated plants. Failure on the part of systematic botanists to recognize this fact has burdened agronomy and horticulture grievously with no corresponding advantage.

In the past quarter century or more, systematic botany has gone wild on the subject of nomenclature, and especially on the so-called law of priority in nomenclature. This so-called law of priority is not a law, but a fetish and an utterly foolish delusion. Plants were not made for names, but names for plants. There is nothing sacred in the supposed prior right of the first namer of a plant. No one worries about the rights of the first coiner of a word or of an idea. Words become obsolete and disappear. Ideas expressed in whatsoever way likewise are superseded by better and more serviceable ones. Why should not this be true of plant names, which also are merely ideas or words, as you prefer.

Systematic botany has failed to sell itself at its actual value to the scientific world. Because she has not sold herself at her true value, she is regarded with tolerance or amusement or scorn, according to the taste of the individual. Her workers are underpaid, their opportunities circumscribed and many possible fields of service to mankind untilled. The undue emphasis placed on nomenclature and on priority has been largely responsible for this. Systematic plant study has come to be regarded as a dull study of dead and dried specimens and dead and dried names.

Systematic botany must be humanized. Botany should be a cultural subject for students. It also should be the source of pleasure and inspiration to the non-scientific public. Recreational activities out-of-doors are increasing with enormous rapidity. Bird study is a favorite and inspiring recreation of multitudes. No such groups are studying plants, although plants are much more numerous and diverse as well as much more accessible. The obligation on systematic botany to make itself a subject of respect and of appreciative human contacts is obvious. Let us awaken, repent, return and strive mightily to undo the foolish past and build the new botany for the glowing future.

Discussion by Carleton R. Ball,
U. S. Department of Agriculture.

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM
WASHINGTON, D. C.

January 6, 1925.

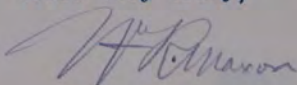
Dr. C. R. Ball,
Bureau of Plant Industry,
U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Dear Doctor Ball:

You will recall that toward the last of the meeting devoted to the round table discussion of systematic botany and its present needs, a motion was passed looking to the publication of a series of abstracts of the remarks offered by the various speakers. I am trying to get these together, and shall be much obliged if you will let me have within the next few days an abstract of the points covered in your address. It seemed to me, and I afterward heard the same opinion expressed by many, that the discussion was very successful, and might lead to beneficial results. At any rate it would be worth while, I think, to put out the gist of the discussions, and when the abstracts are all in I am going to ask you to go over them with me.

By the way, the committee which I appointed (with the advice and assistance of Doctor Pool) to consider the whole subject during the coming year consists of Prof. K. M. Wiegand, Chairman, Dr. M. A. Howe, and yourself. I am sending Professor Wiegand a batch of letters I had from a good many systematic botanists after the announcement of the round table program went out, as a possible aid to the committee and their work, and I think you will hear from him in the matter before long.

Yours very truly,



William R. Maxon
Associate Curator,
Division of Plants.



Jan. 7, 1925.

Mr. William R. Maxon,
Associate Curator,
Division of Plants,
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Maxon:

Your letter of Jan. 6 is just received, and I note, with interest, your statement regarding the committee to survey the situation in taxonomic botany in our educational institutions. Dr. Wiegand had suggested before he left Washington that I was to be made a member of this committee. I told him that I was not sure whether that action represented a forgiving spirit on the part of the botanist or an intent to penalize me severely. In either case, I shall be glad to give my best endeavor to the work.

I had hoped to dictate a summary of my own attitude toward this question as reflected in what I said at the meetings, but have not yet had time to do so because I have been serving on the Bureau Board of Review almost continuously since the meetings ended. If possible, I will do this and enclose the abstract with this letter. If not, I will send it to you as soon as I return from the trip on which I leave tomorrow.

Very sincerely yours,

C. R. Ball,
Senior Agronomist in Charge.

CRB/ecs

Smithsonian Institution

March 5, 1925.

Memorandum for Dr. Hall:

Just a line to say that nearly all of the abstracts of "speeches" delivered at the Systematic Session of the Round-table discussion have come in, and that I hope to get the matter in final shape for publication very soon. Will you, then, be good enough to let me have a transcript of your own remarks as soon as you can conveniently? I know these are busy times for you, but I hope you can manage to let me have the gist of what you said, say three or four hundred words.

Sincerely,

A. R. Maxon

March 21, 1925.

Mr. W. R. Maxon,
U. S. National Herbarium,
Smithsonian Institute.

Dear Mr. Maxon:

I am transmitting, in separate package, a few willows which I have determined for collectors and am glad to transmit ~~for~~ inclusion in the Nation Herbarium if desired.

I enclose also two copies of a summary of my remarks before the Systematic Section of the Botanical Society of America on the subject of Latin nomenclature and taxonomic botany, which I trust you may find of use.

Very sincerely yours,

C. R. Ball,
Senior Agronomist in Charge.

CRB/ecs

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
UNITED STATES NATIONAL MUSEUM
WASHINGTON, D. C.

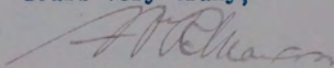
March 23, 1925.

Dr. C. R. Ball,
Bureau of Plant Industry,
U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Dear Mr. Ball:

Thank you for your letter of March 20, forwarded with 10 specimens of willows from the western United States, and two copies of a summary of your remarks before the Systematic Section on the subject of taxonomic botany and its needs. The material is accessioned as a gift from you to the National Museum.

Yours very truly,



William R. Maxon
Associate Curator,
Division of Plants.

