Helen Gilkey (1886-1972)

Helen Margaret Gilkey was a nationally recognized mycologist, a talented botanical illustrator, and a watercolor artist. She was the first woman to obtain a Ph.D. in botany from the University of California, earning her advanced degree from Berkeley in 1915. She then established a career as one of North America's most distinguished botanists and was considered to be the American authority on truffles.

Helen was born to Fannie E. and J.A. Gilkey on March 6, 1886, in Montesano, Washington, one of six children. In 1903, she moved with her family to Corvallis, Oregon, where her father, a horticulturist, was employed as superintendent of the grounds and greenhouses at Oregon Agricultural College (now Oregon State University).

With both bachelor's and master's degrees from Oregon Agricultural College, Gilkey received her master's degree in 1911, with a thesis entitled "Oregon Mushrooms." A year later, she entered a doctoral program at the University of California at Berkeley. The influence and encouragement of the Botany Department head, William Albert Setchell, led Gilkey to further her interest in the taxonomy of the truffle fungi. Her doctoral dissertation, "A Revision of the Tuberales (truffle fungi) of California," was published in 1916. She later joined the faculty as scientific illustrator and anonymously illustrated Willis Linn Jepson's seminal *Manual of Flowering Plants of California*.

Oregon Agricultural College offered Gilkey a position as herbarium curator in 1918. The herbarium dates to about 1882 and is one of the oldest and most significant in the West. Gilkey was a professor of botany at the university, where she touched the lives of thousands of students. She was also a poet and a supporter of the NAACP, the international peace movement, and environmental causes. She lived with her sister Beulah, a school teacher, in the bungalow-style home their parents had built. After she retired in 1951, she remained active as professor emerita, continuing her research and writing until her death at age eighty-six.

During her academic career, Gilkey wrote or co-authored several books and more than forty scientific articles, including biographical sketches of botanists and an unpublished history of the herbarium at Oregon State. Her botanical portraits often illustrated her writing. Her last book, *Handbook of Northwestern Plants* (1967), was written in collaboration with LaRea Dennis. In 2004, Willamette University biology professor Sharon Rose honored Gilkey's work by curating an exhibit of prints entitled "Helen Gilkey: The Art of Botanical Illustration" at Willamette's Hallie Ford Museum of Art.

Helen Gilkey received numerous honors and awards, including Outstanding Scientist awards from the Oregon Academy of Sciences in 1952 and the Northwest Scientific Association in 1969.

Written by Lois Leonard

Further Reading:

Johnston, La Rea Dennis, and Rhoda Love. "Helen Gilkey (1886-1972)." *Oregon Flora Newsletter* 2:2 (April 1996). See also at http://www.oregonflora.org/ofn/OFNv2n2.pdf.

Trappe, James M. "Helen Margaret Gilkey 1886-1972." *Mycologia* 67 (March-April 1975): 207-13.

Copyright © 2008-2013 Portland State University