

Georgia Mason (1910-2007)

By Rhoda Love

Georgia Mason was unique among twentieth-century Oregon botanists in that she did not arrive in the Northwest nor begin her serious study of botany in the state until she was in middle age. The summers she spent botanizing alone in the rugged, isolated Wallowa Mountains were in the decade between 1961 and 1971. She published her well-respected *Guide to the Plants of the Wallowa Mountains of Northeastern Oregon* in 1975, with revisions five years later. Mason was acting curator of the University of Oregon Herbarium in Eugene in 1961-1962, and again between 1970 and 1976. Following her reluctant retirement, she researched, wrote, and self-published her second book, *Plants of Wet to Moist Habitats in and around Eugene, Oregon*.

Mason was a relative newcomer to the West with little or no training in botany when she set out in 1960 to compile a flora of the Wallowa Mountains. She had traveled to Oregon from her home state of New Jersey in 1958 to work on a Master of Science degree at Oregon State College (now Oregon State University). At the time of her move west, she had been teaching science in the New Jersey public schools for twenty-seven years. Her educational background consisted of eight years of summer study and correspondence courses at New Jersey teachers' colleges.

Mason was born in New Jersey in 1910, the daughter of Greek immigrants; she changed her birth name from Mavropoulos to Mason to make it easier for the grade school children to pronounce. It seems likely that she intended to return to teaching after completing her Masters degree, but the glorious scenery and flora of the mountainous West must have tugged at her heart, for she remained in Oregon for the rest of her life.

Mason accomplished a prodigious amount of work during her seven-year tenure as acting curator of the University of Oregon Herbarium. She mounted and labeled the Lilla Leach collection of approximately 3,000 specimens as well as the Orlin Ireland collection of nearly 4,000 specimens. She obtained much-needed new herbarium cases, reorganized the specimens, and began formally accessioning the holdings, in addition to working on her Wallowa flora. In the introduction to her Wallowa guidebook, Georgia wrote that the work was "based mostly on my own collections over a period of eleven years." She received no remuneration during her summers in the field.

Georgia Mason was by far the most assiduous of Oregon's female collectors, with 4,546 herbarium specimens to her credit; only three Oregon men have collected more. Her retirement from the University of Oregon in 1976 at the age of sixty-six was not her own choice. David Wagner, who followed her as curator, has indicated that she would have continued happily for another ten or twenty years, but the college hoped to find a replacement with a more advanced degree. In 1978, Mason contributed an endowment to Oregon State University in Corvallis to provide funds for student workers at the OSU Herbarium where the curator, Dr. Kenton Chambers, had encouraged her Wallowa explorations. She died in Eugene in October 2007 at the age of 97.

Sources

Love, Rhoda M. "Georgia Mason and the Flora of the Wallowas." *Kalmiopsis, Journal of the Native Plant Society of Oregon* 15:29 (2008). (With photo)

Love, Rhoda. "Georgia Mason (1910-2007)." *Oregon Flora Newsletter*, October 14, 2007. (Map of Mason's collecting stations. p. 18)

Mason, Georgia. *Guide to the Plants of the Wallowa Mountains of Northeastern Oregon*. Eugene: Museum of Natural History, University of Oregon, 1975, 1980.

The Oregon Encyclopedia

https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/mason_georgia_1910_2007/