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## Photo, Dr. Richard W. Pohl, February 1982 & Foreward to v.104 no.3

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Dr. Richard W. Pohl, February 1982.

## FOREWORD

In her biographical portrait of Dr. Richard W. Pohl, Mrs. Pohl provides an engaging personal perspective of her late husband, his development as a botanist, his career, and his family life. We gain a sense of Dr. Pohl as a dedicated scientist as well as a humanist. Although Dr. Pohl possessed an abiding curiosity regarding all things natural, he is best known and remembered for his focus on grasses. As Mrs. Pohl documents, this interest in grasses began in the late 1930's and continued throughout his life—ultimately he was regarded as an authority on grass taxonomy both nationally and internationally. His contributions to plant systematics were abundant (Appendix I); as a researcher, he published numerous papers and books, and as an educator, he taught students and the public alike about the wonders of grasses and other plants.

During his career, Dr. Pohl wrote 79 journal articles and five books, the majority on grasses. He did publish, however, on other topics as wide-ranging as the grape family, techniques for examining plant tissues, poisonous plants, weeds, the cultivation of liverworts, and seed viability in *Drimys* (Appendix II). Some of these publications reflect his lifelong interest in the cultivation of plants; this fascination also took the form of the fine teaching and research living plant collection housed in the Richard W. Pohl Conservatory in the Botany Department at Iowa State University. An examination of Dr. Pohl's body of published scientific work reveals that careful observation of nature and the meticulous pursuit of details were two of his fortes. He preferred to deal with facts, and rarely indulged in speculation. It was for this reason that Dr. Pohl, albeit a staunch proponent of evolution, consistently refused to infer any but the most general phylogenetic relationships even among the grasses, the plants he knew so well.

Dr. Pohl's contributions to agrostology are legion. The grasses were his principal scientific passion, and he became one of the foremost agrostologists of this century. Although not a particularly religious man, he was fond of quoting from Isaiah (40:6) that "all flesh is grass. . ." to illustrate the importance of grasses to human civilization. When asked about growing grasses in gardens, he invariably replied, "All grasses are ornamental!" Dr. Pohl described a number of new species (Appendix IV), but he will be remembered best for his exemplary monographic and floristic treatments, especially with reference to tropical American grasses. His observations on bamboo flowering in Costa Rica over more than 20 years are also noteworthy. Dr. Pohl had a special talent for writing clear, workable identification keys to grasses and other groups of plants. His *How to Know the Grasses* is still in use in large measure because of the facility of the keys; in the forthcoming *Manual of the Grasses of North America*, the keys, which he wrote, are based largely on this prior book.

Dr. Pohl delighted in teaching others about plants. He influenced a large number of students through the botany classes he taught, but he also led tours of local prairie remnants in order to increase public awareness of the value of these endangered natural habitats (Fig. 8). He served as major professor for 32 graduate students (Ap-

pendix V), and helped many others in various ways through serving on their committees or as an informal advisor. Because of his great affection for Latin America and its people, Dr. Pohl took a particular interest in students from this part of the world, and was always ready to assist—he helped one student pay tuition, and gave another his down parka. Several of his former graduate students are employed as professors or museum curators, and some continue to study grasses, a legacy of Dr. Pohl's that will be felt into the next century. Indeed, as Dr. Gerrit Davidse, one of his former students, pointed out, Dr. Pohl "probably trained more graduate students in grass taxonomy than anyone else in the United States."

Dr. Pohl rarely passed up the opportunity to go into the field to collect plants, especially once he had become enamored of the tropics (Appendix III). Accompanying Dr. Pohl on one of his field trips was an experience never to be forgotten by his graduate students and other assistants. According to Dr. Mark Gabel, another former student, "Some of the best experiences in my graduate training were the three trips I took to Central America. . .with Dr. Pohl." He was tenacious in his pursuit of grasses, but exhibited great caution and would not expose himself or his students to undue risk—if he could not get to a given locality, he would simply save this as a justification for another trip. Dr. Pohl amassed some 15,800 collection numbers; most of these specimens were grasses, and the last 5,000 or so were tropical grasses. The Ada Hayden Herbarium of Iowa State University, which Dr. Pohl directed for many years, is especially strong in Central American grass holdings because of his collections.

This assessment of Dr. Pohl's professional impact would be incomplete without mention of his remarkable ability to identify plants. With his eye for detail, a very visually-oriented, keen memory, and years of experience, he could easily identify even small scraps of plant material that were brought over by weed and horticulture extension personnel or students and colleagues. It was nearly impossible to stump him, as several of us learned to our chagrin. He, however, often would bring in pieces of plants from the grocery store, the florist, or a walk outside to challenge and to educate his students and colleagues.

Dr. Richard W. Pohl, as his wife so lovingly describes in the following biography, was a uniquely gifted botanist. An everpresent theme in his professional life, from his experience as a range conservationist to his teaching and research as a professor to his retirement activities, was the connection between the plants he studied and the human condition. This perspective anchored his outstanding contributions to plant systematics. He will indeed be long remembered as the "dean of American agrostologists."

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