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Albert Spear Hitchcock

James P. Smith Jr.

Humboldt State University, james.smith@humboldt.edu

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ALBERT SPEAR HITCHCOCK (1865–1935) THE WORLD'S LEADING AGROSTOLOGIST

**James P. Smith, Jr.
Professor Emeritus of Botany
Department of Biological Sciences
Humboldt State University
Arcata, California**

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Albert Spear Hitchcock was born in Michigan in 1865, grew up in Kansas and Nebraska, and went to Iowa State Agricultural College (now Iowa State University), where he graduated in 1884 at the ripe old age of 19. While there he studied under the eminent American botanist, Charles Edwin Bessey. He was then a faculty or staff member at Iowa State, the State University of Iowa, the Missouri Botanical Garden, Washington University, and Kansas State Agricultural College (now Kansas State University). In 1901 he moved to Washington, D. C. as the Assistant Chief of the Division of Agrostology in the U. S. Department of Agriculture. He would spend the remainder of his career working there, becoming the head of the grass collection of the United States National Herbarium, and one of this country's most respected systematic botanists. His office was in the old "Castle" of the Smithsonian Institution. During his career, Hitchcock and his colleague Agnes Chase would create the world's largest collection of grass specimens. Willis Lynn Jepson, the distinguished University of California botanist, once inscribed a book to Hitchcock, calling him an "*eager explorer, far-seeing botanist, and wise promoter of scientific research in America.*" Hitchcock died in 1935, on board a ship returning from an International Botanical Congress in Europe. At the time, he was considered to be the world's leading agrostologist.

Hitchcock was the author of more than 250 books and scientific papers. His best known work, the "*Manual of the Grasses of the United States,*" was published only months before his death. The first printing sold out in a matter of weeks. The U. S. Government Printing Office finally had to give up on reprinting the second edition because the plates had worn out! The comprehensive nature of the work, its keys and illustrations (many by Agnes Chase), made it the "Bible" for people of my generation who needed to know about grasses. Its system of subfamilies and tribes, and the names of individual grasses, would dominate regional and state floras for decades. It was the required "lab manual" during my many years of teaching agrostology at Humboldt State.

Hitchcock was an avid field botanist. He visited every state and a number of foreign countries. During his career he made about 25,000 numbered collections. His field notebooks are held in the Smithsonian Institution's archives. On one trip, he walked 242 miles in 24 days collecting into a wheel barrow that he modified for the purpose. He would take a train, get off in the middle of nowhere because it looked like a good grass stop, collect, and then get back on a train to take him home.

He was a recognized expert on plant nomenclature and an early proponent of an international code of plant nomenclature and advocate of the use of type specimens when describing a new species. He was the father of the Index Herbariorum, an international directory of plant collections, their staffs, and holdings. He was also concerned about the destruction of tropical rain forests. He was directly responsible for saving Barro Colorado Island in Panama as a biological preserve.

TIMELINE

- 1865 Born in Owasso, Michigan (4 September)
- 1884 Graduates from Iowa State Agricultural College with B. S. in Agriculture
- 1886 Awarded M. S. degree at Iowa State
- 1886 Appointed Instructor in Chemistry at the State University in Iowa City (until 1889)
- 1889 Appointed Curator at the Missouri Botanical Garden (until 1891)
- 1890 Marries Rania Dailey in Ames, Iowa, with whom he had five children
- 1890 First major collecting trip (to the West Indies) with J. T. Rothrock of the Univ. of Pennsylvania
- 1892 Appointed Professor of Botany at Kansas State Agricultural College (until 1901)
- 1901 Appointed Assistant Chief of the Division of Agrostology in Washington, D. C.
- 1905 Promoted to Systematic Agrostologist and Custodian of the Grass Herbarium at the U. S. National Museum
- 1907 Trip to Europe and Russia to find types of American grasses
- 1912 Appointed Custodian of Grasses (without compensation) at the U. S. National Museum

- 1914 Elected to the Washington Biologists' Field Club (->1935)
 1914 Elected President of the newly founded Botanical Society of America
 1928 Promoted to Principal Botanist in charge of Systematic Agrostology in the U. S. D. A.
 1920 Becomes Chair of Executive Committee of Institute for Research in Tropical America (-> 1926)
 1929 Delivers paper on "Grasses in Relation to Man" in South Africa
 1934 Awarded honorary Doctor of Science by Kansas State University
 1935 Dies of a heart attack aboard the S. S. City of Norfolk, returning from Europe (16 December)

HITCHCOCK QUOTES

"Although grasses have so important a place in the life of mankind... they are the least noticed of the flowering plants. They seem to be taken for granted, like air and sunlight, and the general run of people never give them a thought. Many do not even know that grasses are flowering plants."

"Grasses have been so successful in the struggle for existence that they have a wider range than any other family, occupying all parts of the earth, and exceeding any other in the number of individuals."

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