

Paul C. Standley, An Appreciation

WILSON POPENOE¹

It seems appropriate that this issue of CEIBA—the first to appear after a lapse of nearly two years—should be dedicated to the memory of that tremendously productive, brilliant, and extremely modest botanist Paul Carpenter Standley, who devoted most of his life to the study and classification of Central American plants.

Particularly it is appropriate that we should dedicate this issue of our little journal to his memory, because the last years of his useful life were spent at Escuela Agrícola Panamericana. It came about in this fashion: Paul had spent six months—November 1927 to March 1928—at Lancetilla Experiment Station, near Tela, on the north coast of Honduras, where he collected more than 3000 numbers which subsequently formed the basis of his "Flora of the Lancetilla Valley", he had become fond of Honduras and the Honduran people. So, when he reached retirement age, he thought of this country, and wondered if he might spend his last years at Escuela Agrícola Panamericana, where Louis O. Williams was actively engaged in developing a great herbarium of Central American plants.

He moved down from Chicago, bringing with him, as he said, all his earthly possessions in two suitcases (this was literally true) and he lived and worked in the herbarium and library building at the school, going out on collecting trips at the start, later, as the years began to weigh heavily upon his shoulders, limiting himself to describing new species (often in collaboration with Louis O. Williams); "matching" specimens sent or brought in by other botanists, and answering letters, which were many, for Paul Standley was recognized as the outstanding authority on most Central American families of plants.

The years 1950 to 1955 were active ones in the herbarium of Escuela Agrícola Panamericana. I recall one occasion in particular: A man came in with a bundle of plants under his arm, and asked, "Have you, by any chance, a botanist here who might be able to name these plants for me?" I replied, "We will be glad to see what we can do; it happens that we are rather short handed at the moment. But we

1. Director Emeritus, Escuela Agrícola Panamericana.

700678

do have with us for the winter Elmer D. Merrill, who is sometimes called the Dean of American botanists; and of course Paul Standley lives here, he has written more Floras of Central American plants than any other man alive or dead; and we have Louis O. Williams in charge of the herbarium, he is an authority on the Orchidaceae, if you are interested in that group; and we have Paul Allen, who is writing a book on the trees of western Costa Rica, and it happens that Jason R. Swallen, the authority on grasses from the U. S. National Museum, is with us for a short time. May be we can help you out”.

Seriously, those were the days when the herbarium of Escuela Agrícola Panamericana was in apogee, and Paul Standley added his full share of scientific prestige to the little herbarium in the back country of Honduras, which now numbers approximately a hundred thousand sheets.

When Paul died at Hospital Viera in Tegucigalpa on 2 June 1963, I had known him for exactly half a century. He was working across the room from William R. Maxon in the United States National Herbarium when I joined the Department of Agriculture in May of 1913. We became well acquainted, because we were both interested in tropical plants and I was shortly to head for the West Indies, Brazil and then Central America. Paul was not socially inclined, reticent, almost painfully so; he took almost no part in the social activities of the scientific set in Washington to which by right he belonged. He much preferred to come down to the tropics on a collecting trip, get out in the field, drop in to the thatched hut of Juan Garcia, have a cup of coffee, and ask Juan the common name of a plant he had just pulled up in the forest, and what was it good for? This ability to get close to the common people of the country, and fill his floras with authentic plant lore, was one of Paul's greatest assets. In this respect, few botanists have been his equal. His memory of plants and botanical names was prodigious.

When he decided to leave the U. S. National Herbarium in 1928, he confessed to me that he was on the horns of a dilemma. He could choose between Boston and Chicago. He wanted to go to Boston, but he said, as an uncouth westerner, he was afraid. If you will devote a few moments to criticizing his literary style — read a few pages of his Flora of the Lancetilla Valley (published 1931) — I am sure you will agree that Paul used the English language in a masterly way. I have always suspected that he may have been influenced by his contact with William R. Maxon, who would rather have gone to jail for three days than split an infinitive.

Because I think his Floras are such excellent examples of what floras can and ought to be, I am going to quote a description of one species from his “Flora of the Lancetilla Valley” which Antonio Molina, who worked with him in the herbarium at Escuela Agrícola Panamericana, says Paul referred to as “the bible”, feeling that it was the best job he had ever done:

Guadua aculeata Rupr. Tarro. A very large plant, resembling in its habit of growth and general aspect the common bamboo; culms sometimes 15 meters high and 15 cm. or more in diameter; young



PAUL C. STANDLEY

Photo: Louis O. Williams

branches armed with short stout recurved spines. Abundant in swamps at low elevations, and often forming extensive groves; ranging from Guatemala to Panamá. This is a very fine and handsome grass, notable for its graceful habit. It is one of the conspicuous features of the landscape in the coastal regions of Guatemala and Honduras. The young shoots are very large and thick when they issue from the ground and they grow with astonishing rapidity. At first they are naked poles, but when they have attained their full height, they send out many feathery lateral branches full of leaves. This bamboo often forms dense thickets, which are almost impenetrable because of the spiny stems. The larger stems are used like those of bamboo for the walls and rafters of huts, and for many other purposes. Sections of them are used at Lancetilla for flower pots. In the region I saw one hut whose sides were made of the stems of this bamboo which had been flattened out, and were nailed down like boards. Such a type of construction is very rare in Central America, although well known in some regions of South America, whence this particular hut perhaps had received its inspiration".

To me, that description — typical of many in the "Flora of the Lancetilla Valley" — is ideal. It should be mentioned that this Flora is illustrated with 68 beautiful plates from life-size photographs taken by Frederick Coville.

I shall not attempt to enumerate his published works — this is not intended to be either a biography or bibliography. I think it well to mention, however, that his "Trees and Shrubs of Mexico" (1920) proved so useful as to result in those parts which were out of print being reissued recently at great expense, and without revision.

Paul loved the valley of the Río Yeguaré, in which Escuela Agrícola Panamericana is situated, and the little town of San Antonio de Oriente, which overlooks it from the neighboring mountainside. It was his desire that he be buried in the little cemetery of this village, where he was loved by everyone.