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JOHN W. THIERET (1926–2005)

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ABSTRACT

John W. Thieret (1926–2005), an internationally recognized American plant taxonomist, is remembered as a consummate field botanist, exemplary teacher, acclaimed author, superb editor, fine herbarium director, inspiring mentor to students and colleagues, and noble friend.

RESUMEN

John W. Thieret (1926–2005), taxónomo de plantas estadounidense reconocido en todo el mundo, es recordado como un consumado botánico de campo, un profesor ejemplar, un autor aclamado, un magnífico redactor, un excelente director de herbario, una inspiración como mentor para sus estudiantes y colegas, y un noble amigo.

One of the most renowned American plant taxonomists of the 20th century has died. It is with great sadness and a profound sense of loss that this reflective tribute is written about the life and career of John W. Thieret, Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences at Northern Kentucky University, retired Director of the Northern Kentucky University Herbarium, and Associate Editor of *Sida*, *Contributions to Botany*, and Editor of the *Journal of the Kentucky Academy of Science* (JKAS). John suffered a brain aneurysm at his home in Alexandria, Kentucky, on 6 December 2005, while editing a manuscript for the JKAS. He never regained consciousness and died on 7 December. He was 79 years old.

John William Thieret was born on 1 August 1926, in Chicago, Illinois, the only child of Hans and Lorena Thieret. Growing up, he was interested in plants and became an avid student of botany during his school days at Hyde Park High School. At Hyde Park, John met his future wife, Mildred Wolf, fittingly in a botany class. After working briefly in Chicago, John moved to Logan, Utah, to study at Utah State University. Three years later, Mildred also moved to Logan and attended Utah State. They were married on 13 March 1950, by one of their professors, after completing their Evolution final exams. Both earned their B.S. degrees in 1950: John's in Botany and Mildred's in Bacteriology. They remained at Utah State University for graduate work and in 1951, John earned his M.S. in Botany with a thesis in barley genetics and Mildred completed her M.S. in Bacteriology. They then returned to Chicago, where John attended the University of Chicago to work on his doctorate under Theodor K. Just, Chief Curator of the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History. John received his Ph.D. in Botany in



John's senior high school photo at Hyde Park High School, Chicago, ca. 1946.

1953. The title of John's dissertation was "*Gross Morphology of the Seeds of the Scrophulariaceae and Classification of the Family.*"

Later in 1953, John became Assistant Curator of Economic Botany at the Chicago Field Museum and then Curator of Economic Botany from 1954 to 1961. While at the Field Museum, he made collecting trips to Cuba, Mexico, the north-

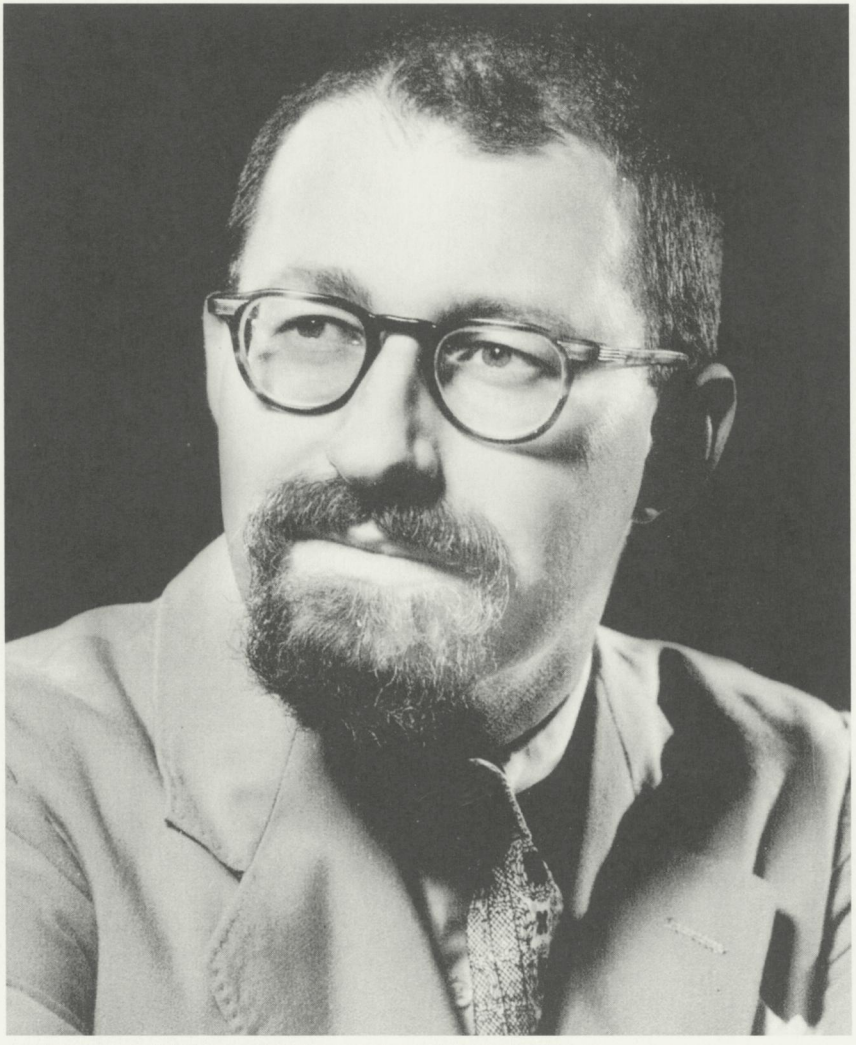
ern Great Plains of the United States, and the Northwest Territories of Canada. John authored 26 publications during that time and his special interests in the Poaceae and Scrophulariaceae were evident in his published works. John published five new nomenclatural combinations while at the Field Museum. He also wrote three articles on the flora and vegetation of the Canadian Northwest Territories.

John left the Field Museum to become Associate Professor and later Professor of Biology at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette (USL) from 1961 to 1973. At USL, he sponsored undergraduate research projects, and directed six M.S. theses and one Ph.D. dissertation. During this period, John conducted most of his personal research in the southeastern United States, with an emphasis on the Louisiana flora. At USL, he authored or co-authored 47 articles. John named four plant species new to science that he discovered in Louisiana: *Cyperus brevifolioides* Thieret & Delahoussaye; *Cyperus louisianensis* Thieret; *Isoetes louisianensis* Thieret; and *Limnophila* × *ludoviciana* Thieret. From his work at USL, John published 11 nomenclatural combinations. He also published his first two generic flora treatments of the southeastern United States, five more articles from his investigations in the Canadian Northwest Territories, and several new United States or North American plant records.

John made his final academic career move in 1973, when he joined the faculty at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) in Highland Heights, as Professor and Chair of the Department of Biological Sciences. The opportunity to teach at NKU, the presence of the Lloyd Library in Cincinnati, and relocating his family to live in a cooler climate, were especially appealing to him. John served as Chair until 1980 and continued as Professor until retiring in 1992, with the title Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences.

John loved teaching and was an exemplary teacher in the classroom, laboratory, and field. His classes were challenging, enjoyable, informative, popular, and he helped many students reach their full potential. He always was available to students and colleagues for discussions about botany, academics, or just about life. John was a strong believer in providing students with actual plant specimens, either fresh or dried, for a “hands-on” approach, and he went to great effort to accomplish that goal. In the field, John’s passion for botany was especially contagious and he always felt rejuvenated after a field trip with students. John generously shared his expertise and enthusiasm for botany, especially plant taxonomy, with students, colleagues, and the general public for 32 years. His exuberance, magnetic personality, and knowledge were inspirations to everyone his activities touched.

For many years, John’s summer activities were focused on teaching at various biological field stations. He served as Visiting Lecturer in Botany at the Itasca Biological Station, University of Minnesota; the Oklahoma Biological Station, University of Oklahoma; the Michigan Biological Station, University of Michigan;



John's faculty photo at University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, 1972.

and the Franz Theodore Stone Laboratory, Ohio State University. John enjoyed the flora of cooler climates, and biological stations provided Mildred and his children (Robert, Nancy, Richard, Jeffrey, and Jennifer) new environments to experience. He also conducted major field travels in the southeastern, southwestern, and northwestern United States, the Great Basin of Nevada and Utah, and the Canadian Arctic, Newfoundland, and Ontario.



John with Fraser magnolia in West Virginia during 1998 (D.M. Brandenburg).

John authored or co-authored with other botanists, 58 refereed journal articles at NKU. He frequently collaborated in research activities and publications with current and former undergraduate and graduate students and younger NKU colleagues. Indeed, he was a mentor whose enthusiasm was con-

tagious and inspired botanists from many other institutions to pursue research activities. The scope of his collaborative research ranged from investigations in Kentucky, research elsewhere in the United States, to the massive North America flora project. John was the prime mover and inspiration of the Kentucky flora project, which culminated with the publication of Ronald L. Jones' *Plant Life of Kentucky* in 2005. John served as Editorial Associate and contributed the treatment of the Poaceae for this comprehensive flora.

During his tenure at NKU, John was the author or co-author of five books. These books were entitled: *Louisiana Ferns and Fern Allies*; *Aquatic and Wetland Plants of Kentucky*; *Trees: A Quick Reference Guide to Trees of North America*; *Assessment and Management of Plant Invasions*; and *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Wildflowers: Eastern Region*. His books continue to serve many audiences, from professional botanists to amateur plant enthusiasts.

One of John Thieret's crowning achievements was establishing the Northern Kentucky University Herbarium (KNK) in 1973. As its first Director, he built the herbarium from his personal collections, additions by colleagues and students, and through an active specimen exchange with various national and international herbaria. Currently, KNK has over 35,000 mounted specimens with strong representation from Kentucky, the Southeast, and the Midwest. The KNK collection has the highest species diversity among Kentucky herbaria collections. Through his efforts, the KNK herbarium has become the best-curated herbarium in Kentucky. John donated his entire 600 book reference library to the herbarium to further support botanical research.

John was a consummate field botanist whose excellent field abilities and extensive experiences were essential components of his accomplishments. He had an incredible memory for all of the plants that he had ever encountered and would make accurate field identifications even if he had seen the plants only once from several decades ago. This lifetime inventory combined with an amazing eye for detail enabled John to locate species that others would pass. John made an astounding number of new state, regional, United States, and North American plant records during his career. Most contemporary alpha plant taxonomists concentrate their study on a few groups, write floras at the local or state level, pursue floristics, or other taxonomic works. John was one of the last of a rare and remarkable group of field naturalists whose breadth and depth of knowledge of botanical life throughout the United States and Canada was unparalleled in his later years. He was an ardent plant collector throughout his professional career with specimen accession numbers over 62,000. John accurately identified all plants he deposited into various herbaria and meticulously mounted his own plant specimens.

John Thieret was an internationally known botanist, excellent educator, wise scholar, and gentleman. He dearly loved his family, and after family, his



John in the NKU herbarium, one his crowning achievements at Northern Kentucky University.

great passion was plants. Although John was focused on plant taxonomy and learning new plants his entire life, he had other diverse interests including classical music, particularly opera. He also enjoyed sharing his knowledge far beyond botany and the natural sciences through verbal discourse about diverse topics in history, literature, art, religion, and the social sciences.

Scientists often are judged by the number of articles by them or about them. If this is any measure of a person, John stands taller than a coastal redwood. During his professional career, John authored at least 157 refereed journal articles and book articles. Forty-two articles appeared in *Sida, Contributions to Botany*, which was his favorite journal. He also regularly published in *Bartonia, Canadian Field-Naturalist, Castanea, Economic Botany, Journal of the Arnold Arboretum, Rhodora, Taxon*, and *Transactions/Journal of the Kentucky Academy of Science*. In addition to books, journal articles, and 19 nomenclatural combinations, John wrote 136 book reviews, 65 articles for *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 46 articles for *Encyclopaedia Americana*, and many popular science articles.

John served several significant editorships and advisory roles during his professional career. He was a Member of the Editorial Board of *Economic Botany* from 1959–1965, Book Editor of *Economic Botany* from 1959–1984, Editor from 1986–1990, and Associate Editor from 1992–2002. He was a founding Member of the Editorial Board for the Vascular Flora of the Southeastern United States project from 1981–2005, and wrote seven southeastern generic flora treatments.

John served as the Associate Editor of *Sida, Contributions to Botany*, from 1972–2005, and contributed to its excellence and prestige through his dedicated work. Barney L. Lipscomb, current Editor of *Sida*, Botanical Research Institute of Texas, notes, “John was a towering lighthouse to the editors of *Sida*. His steadfast editorial, ‘light,’ was a never ending source of guidance and navigation in keeping *Sida* on a positive course.”

From 1981–1995, John served as Abstract Editor of *Transactions of the Kentucky Academy of Science* (TKAS). He then assumed the position of Editor of TKAS in 1996 and changed the title from *Transactions* to *Journal of the Kentucky Academy of Science* (JKAS) in 1998 to better reflect its content. Through his efforts, John greatly enhanced the stature of the JKAS as a multi-disciplinary journal of state and regional scientific literature.

During 1983–2005, one of his most significant roles was serving as a Member of the Editorial Committee of the monumental multi-volume project, *Flora of North America North of Mexico*. He edited the first 10 published volumes and prepared 25 family and generic treatments. John also was an Advisor in Botany for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* from 1959–2005 and a Member of the Advisory Committee at the Lloyd Library in Cincinnati from 1992–2005.

John loved editing and his ability as an editor was extraordinary. He was a perfectionist and a superlative editor second to none, but his efforts always brought out the best in authors. Those who submitted manuscripts for John’s

editorial scrutiny often found them returned with a profusion of red ink on the printed text. When his recommended changes were made, the greatly improved manuscripts always told the story better.

John received many awards and honors during his career. One of his most esteemed honors was having a mint in the Lamiaceae that he discovered in Louisiana named for him. In 1964, botanist Lloyd H. Shoiners named this new species *Scutellaria thieretii* Shoiners.

He received the 1984 Distinguished Kentucky College/University Scientist Award from the Kentucky Academy of Science for his significant academic research and teaching contributions to the Commonwealth. John was recently presented the 2005 Outstanding Academy Service Award from the Kentucky Academy of Science for his outstanding editorial contributions to the JKAS.

To commemorate his contributions to the Northern Kentucky University Herbarium, it was officially renamed The John W. Thieret Herbarium by the Northern Kentucky University Board of Regents on 22 March 2006.

In 1994, he established The John W. Thieret Research Award as an annual award to the NKU biological sciences student who accomplished the most significant research. The Thieret family would like to continue this student honor, and have asked that donations in his memory be sent to the Northern Kentucky University Foundation, designated to that research award.

John is survived by his devoted wife of 55 years, Mildred Thieret, his five children, Robert, Nancy, and Jeffrey in Minnesota, Richard in China, and Jennifer in Kentucky, seven grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

John Thieret was one of the patriarchs of North American plant taxonomy, and one of the last great field naturalists of the 20th century. His death marks the ending of a botanical era, but his legacy continues through the work of many former students and colleagues. John was an inspiring and stabilizing mentor who enriched the lives of those who knew him. He will be greatly missed by all.

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