

# REFLECTIONS ON WILLIAM CHAMBERS COKER, PASSIONATE BOTANIST<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The Coker Arboretum at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill celebrated its centennial anniversary in the spring of 2003. The festivities began with a talk on botanist William C. Coker, which highlighted his humanistic traits. This paper briefly describes the events of the centennial celebration and provides the full text of the biographical presentation on Professor Coker.

## RESUMEN

El Coker Arboretum en la Universidad de Carolina del Norte en Chapel Hill celebró su centenario en la primavera de 2003. Las festividades comenzaron con una charla sobre el botánico William C. Coker, que subrayó sus rasgos humanos. Este artículo describe brevemente los eventos de la celebración del centenario y aporta el texto completo de la presentación biográfica del Profesor Coker.

## INTRODUCTION

William Chambers Coker (1872–1953) was a renowned botanist. His legacy includes important contributions in botany as well as in horticulture and landscaping. He arrived at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1902 as the newly appointed associate professor of botany in the Department of Biology. When the Department of Botany was established in 1908, Coker became its first chair. He set forward two major objectives: to foster a knowledge and appreciation of nature among people and to advance the discipline of botany. Among Coker's lifelong scientific endeavors, mycology would occupy center stage and bring him international acclaim. Couch and Matthews (1954) described his life and scientific accomplishments.

Coker was regionally known for his expertise in planting trees in Chapel Hill and in landscaping school grounds. Among his efforts to beautify the UNC campus, he began in 1903 to develop a five-acre arboretum on the northeastern edge of campus (Fig. 1). Planting the site with trees, shrubs, and vines native in North Carolina, Coker envisioned the collection as a living laboratory for botany students. Later, he added Asian species of woody plants. Today, nearly 575 species of trees and shrubs provide an inviting refuge and a living tribute to Coker.

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FIG. 1. View of the northern side of the William C. Coker Arboretum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, showing the conspicuous Walter's pine (*Pinus glabra* Walter)—in center. (Courtesy of Brian Nalley, 14 April 2003).



On the occasion of the centennial of the Coker Arboretum, the North Carolina Botanical Garden, the UNC Chapel Hill Libraries, and the Chapel Hill Museum hosted a series of events in the spring of 2003. From mid-March until mid-April, the UNC Libraries created several exhibits, all with a William Coker theme. The signature display was "W.C. Coker: Legacy of a Lifelong Botanist" (Fig. 2). On 11–12 April, a two-day celebration took place in Chapel Hill. On the morning of the first day, the staff of the UNC Herbarium presented a reception and gave tours of their facility. Noon-time tours of the arboretum were followed by a birthday party that drew a large group of attendees who watched several distinguished guests plant a seedling of *Crataegus marshallii*, one of Coker's favorites. Moving to the Morehead Planetarium, the group then listened to a number of distinguished speakers.

Later that day, the focus was the Chapel Hill Museum's exhibit "Coker Arboretum: The First Hundred Years." There, Mary Coker Joslin (Coker's niece) and illustrator Sandra Brooks Mathers signed copies of their book, *Essays on William Chambers Coker, Passionate Botanist* (Joslin 2003). Although Dr. Joslin had previously presented a talk on 20 March 2003 to mark the publication of the book, the signing was the official release date. Following this, Mary Jane and Woodrow Burns and Florence and James Peacock graciously opened their homes and gardens (formerly part of Coker's estate in Chapel Hill) with a reception. The first day of celebrations concluded with a formal dinner and a lecture. The next day, noted landscape gardener Chip Callaway entertained a large audience with the Evelyn McNeill Sims Native Plant Lecture entitled "North Carolina Natives—Gardeners and Their Gardens." To close the celebration, nearly 150 people enjoyed a luncheon at the North Carolina Botanical Garden. The festivities aptly commemorated not only the founding of the Coker Arboretum but also Coker's tangible record of service to the university and to botany.

The following commentary presents a humanistic view of William Chambers Coker, as related by Dr. Joslin at her 20 March talk. Filled with warmth, humor, and personal recollections of her uncle, the account provides a glimpse of Coker as a person.

#### WILLIAM CHAMBERS COKER, PASSIONATE BOTANIST

In these heartbreaking times of world violence and domestic threat to our environment, it is good to celebrate the contributions of someone who passionately loved our world, the real natural world, loved to learn of it, teach of it, and preserve it. It is also good for us to smile and laugh a little, which we may do in these next few minutes. Also, let's celebrate the first day of spring.

Thank you for allowing me to talk about William Chambers Coker (Fig. 3), lately one of my favorite subjects. My obsession with this topic has become so obvious that when I launch into an anecdote about him at a family meal, I hear comments like, "Oh, Oh! Uncle Will again." What a delight to have a captive au-





FIG. 2. Louis Round Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with the library's William C. Coker exhibit banners. (Courtesy of Brian Nalley, 14 April 2003).





FIG. 3. William Chambers Coker, ca. 1940s. (Courtesy of the John N. Couch Biology Library, Botany Section, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill).



dience this afternoon who will listen, I hope willingly, to a few stories about W.C. Coker, some of which are not recorded in our recently published *Essays on William Chambers Coker, Passionate Botanist* (Joslin 2003), where other tidbits may be found. Incidentally, I shall be referring to our subject in various ways according to context, using names such as William Chambers Coker, Will, Uncle Will, Professor Coker, Dr. Coker, etc. I hope this will be understandable and appropriate.

We South Carolinians have the reputation of idealizing selected ancestors or family members. I clearly remember an incident that lends some credence to that popular view. Some forty years ago, we were visiting my mother in Hartsville, South Carolina. Two of our young sons were bumbling about to the peril of various objects in their path. The younger child stopped, fixed his eyes on a somber portrait of my grandfather that hung over a fireplace. The artist had clothed him in a dark suit and posed him before an even darker background. His kindly face was bedecked with a flowing white beard. Our son grabbed his brother and asked, "Who is that?" Glancing up, the elder brother gave immediately what was for him a satisfactory answer before they dashed on: "Why that's God, I think."

True, my feelings toward my uncle, whom I knew and loved well, are tinted by admiration and affection. But maybe, even so, I can cast a realistic light on him. There was a real W.C. Coker; very human like ourselves. We need to remember this. His earthy humanity was a great part of his charm. One hundred and thirty years after his birth, Professor Coker has become an historic figure at the University of North Carolina, where he left his mark. What I hope to do today is to humanize him for you.

First, let's look at some of his character traits and then attempt to breathe life into them with anecdotes from family oral tradition and from my own memory's store. William C. Coker possessed a sense of humor that was quietly whimsical. He was brilliant, energetic, determined, tenacious, and even passionate in his work. He was a stickler for accuracy and he expected the same tenacity and accuracy of his students. In his determination to answer a botanical question, he went directly for it. He could ignore completely any inconvenience his floral quest might cause his colleagues, friends, or allies in the family. He took little note of the worldly rank of individuals on a societal scale. He was modest, even shy, not waiting for or even caring about recognition for his work. Rather, he directed his energies toward getting the work at hand done quickly and quietly and moving on to something else. He had no time or inclination to concentrate exclusively on the fields of botany in which he early became world-renowned, the Saprolegniaceae and the fleshy fungi. His interests were broader than these two fields. Nor did he have time regularly to attend meetings, where he would have periodically met with distinguished scholars and scientists.

Though he had no children of his own, he cared deeply about his greater



family: his parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings, nieces, and nephews. He was himself a poet and a collector of his favorite poet, Walt Whitman. He deeply appreciated natural beauty. He was a conservationist.

He was interested in literature and the visual arts. He had a good head for business. He was quietly generous. He had a succession of dogs and to each dog he gave his devoted affection.

Several anecdotes, which you may not yet have heard or read may serve to illustrate some of these character traits. Some are in our *Essays*; some are not. First, I will mention his whimsical sense of humor. Those of us who knew him remember his crooked smile and his chuckle, but no uproarious laughter. He could recognize his own foibles.

In recounting a rebellious incident of his early years, Uncle Will smiled at himself and at the same time paid tribute to the wisdom of his father. John Nathaniel Couch and Velma Matthews (1954), two of his former doctoral students, described one of their teacher's reminiscences. As there was no public school at the time, older children in Will's family were usually sent to live for a time with relatives in Society Hill, South Carolina, a community fifteen miles away. There, they prepared for a university education at Saint David's Academy, a good classical school incorporated in 1777 by the Saint David's Society of the Pee Dee River's Welsh Neck. Younger children were taught at home. There was for a time in Will's home in Hartsville, a live-in teacher from Virginia. Will recalled that in his early teens, he took a dislike to this inescapable lady under his roof. His reaction to her was so strong that he refused to pay attention to her instruction or even to do his assignments. The lady reported this rebellion to his father, who summoned Will and calmly offered him a choice: "Will, of course you may continue to pursue your studies respectfully, or, if you prefer, you may report at 6 A.M. tomorrow morning to our farm manager who needs your help in an area essential to our family's wellbeing." Will remained silent, but the next morning he reported for his studies and afterwards behaved himself.

Uncle Will had a way of softening a major personal loss with a whimsical comment. One summer, Professor Coker led a company of colleagues and students on a plant collecting excursion in western North Carolina. At a stop on their return to Chapel Hill, someone took from the expeditionary car a large box containing about one-third of the priceless botanical collection of their foray. Rather than bemoan an irreparable loss to the University Herbarium, Uncle Will chose to defuse the tragedy by understatement and by whimsically assuming the role of the disappointed robber. In 1923, Coker (1923) reported in the introduction of his book on clavarias that about one-third of the collection was lost through the activity of a misguided thief, who fancied he had found for himself something of value.

Professor Coker was a stickler for accuracy when plants were concerned. He had little patience with romantic ignorance. When asked to comment upon



an article in the *New York Times* in praise of the Japanese honeysuckle that perfumes late-spring moonlit nights of the South, he waxed indignant, calling the invasive creeper a “first class pest, the worst pest since the chestnut blight.” Noted botanist M. L. Fernald would later call it “the yellow peril of the South.” The vine, Coker said, reaches out to throttle, not only shrubs but sometimes a considerable area of woodland, if left to its own devices. By this forceful reaction, he effectively dispelled for his interviewer the fanciful daydream of an urban journalist. What would he have said about kudzu? But that plant probably would have no romantic champion.

The native courtesy of Uncle Will was sometimes sorely strained by the inaccuracies of the botanically uninitiated. I remember a campus walk with Uncle Will on a lovely spring day. A talkative lady with our small party remarked several times on “funguses.” Each time she used that expression Uncle Will, always a stickler for the correct use of botanical Latin, would mutter in a tone audible to most of us, if not to the lady in question, two clear syllables, “fun’-ji.”

William Coker was a modest, even shy individual, avoiding attention to himself if at all possible. Family legends illustrate that this character trait was evident early in his life. Two incidences ring of truth.

When Will was a small boy, someone at the family breakfast table singled him out for praise for some accomplishment or other. There was no means of escape. A child then could not leave the family table unless excused by a parent. So Will picked up the large pancake on his plate to cover his face.

Another delicious family story deals with his arrival back home after receiving his Ph.D. degree from The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. That the son of a South Carolina farming region could and did earn a Ph.D. in 1901 was a rarity, a source of pride for the community. Young Dr. Will returned to Hartsville, his home village, by train on the railroad spur built by local citizens to carry manufactured products and supplies to and from the town. As the train slowed to stop, Will spied down the track, to his horror, a considerable crowd of friends and relatives gathered to greet him. He even caught the strains of the local brass band playing “Hail the Conquering Hero Comes.” Though seemingly trapped, he quickly devised an escape. Grabbing his baggage, he descended from the train on the side away from the welcoming committee and temporarily vanished.

William Coker tried to ignore or to make light of honors that inevitably came his way and which he was obliged to acknowledge. In 1943, he received a letter informing him of his election as honorary curator of the Charleston (South Carolina) Museum. In his response, he avoided the traditional formula: an expression of gratitude, accompanied by a modest protest of unworthiness. He rather sidestepped the whole issue by diverting attention from himself to specimens in the museum’s collection. He vividly recalled his youthful visits there with his father during the years when the family lived for four winters in



Charleston. During these Charleston years, from 1878 to 1882, Will was between five and nine years of age. The honoree simply remarked that on a recent visit to the museum he was struck by the remarkable fact that the expressions on the faces of the great deer and the giant buffalo had not changed at all in over 60 years.

Coker took little note of personal rank in the eyes of the world. He tackled his work in the chronological order of his commitment to it. People had to wait their turn. He had agreed to submit landscape plans for the factory buildings of a prominent industrialist in Durham, North Carolina. On 21 October 1915, the gentleman in question wrote asking him to run over and talk with him about his industrial park at his earliest convenience. Nine days later, the botanist-landscaper answered the letter telling the gentleman that, though he was able to leave the university only at irregular intervals, he hoped to see him on Thursday or Saturday of the following week "as he was going to La Grange for Arbor Day and may have a few minutes in Durham either coming or going." Later, as a volunteer extension agent for the university, he was to design the school grounds of this east Carolina farming community of La Grange.

While pursuing any current subject of his botanical research and writing, Coker left no stone unturned to collect all possible data. His eagle eye was sharp to detect a plant of particular interest. He recruited or pressed into service friends who could help him gather the specimens he needed. While causing these victims no little inconvenience, strangely enough, he often infected them with his own enthusiasm.

On family trips, when Uncle Will was along, we could plan for no rigid schedule, as we expected an abrupt halt along the way if he spotted something special. I well remember one particular occasion. We had traveled some distance across a seven-mile causeway over a marshy area where the driver was forbidden to stop or turn around. The eagle-eyed botanist called a halt and asked us to drive on and return for him presently, as he needed to get something on the edge of the swamp. He left the car, climbed over the guard rail and let himself down into the rich vegetation. On our return, he had not yet finished his collection. We caught sight of him at some distance waving us on. Obligated to continue, we anxiously attempted to note some landmark, such as an extra tall cypress tree, in the pristine vegetation, where we had last seen him. After we had made at least two seven-mile crossings, Coker, pleased with his collection and unapologetic, was ready to climb back over the guard rail and return to Hartsville with his trophies. He then pressed them for eventual addition to the herbarium in old Davie Hall at UNC.

During World War II, when Coker (1944) was preparing his classic article on "The Woody Smilaxes of the United States," gasoline rationing denied him ready access to the South Carolina low country, where he needed to round up some key specimens he lacked. He leaned heavily on good friends there to col-



lect for him. Repeatedly and relentlessly, he wrote his friends G. Robert Lunz of the Charleston Museum and Frank Tarbox, master horticulturalist at Brookgreen Gardens on Pawley's Island, South Carolina, to seek, find, dig up, press, and send to him different species of smilax in various stages of development. This was no small favor to ask. The assignment involved constant vigilance for growth stages of the vines: male and female flowering and subsequent fruiting. It also meant innumerable sorties into a tangled woodland. Any woodsman knows that an encounter with some smilax thickets can be a very prickly experience. After the specimens were gathered, the collector had the time-consuming work of pressing the fresh plants, packing, and mailing them to Chapel Hill. These tasks, strangely enough, did not seem to turn Lunz and Tarbox against him—rather the contrary. Lunz was, during this period, an acting director of the Charleston Museum when Coker was made honorary curator and Tarbox shortly after his ordeal recommended Coker to Mr. Archer Huntington for appointment to a term as a trustee of Brookgreen Gardens, where he served for a period.

The Venus flytrap was another passion of Uncle Will's. He assumed a proprietary role in protecting this indigenous North Carolina carnivorous plant, whose habitat centers around Wilmington. In November of 1920, he sent to the *Georgetown Times*, Georgetown, South Carolina, an ad written in the urgent style of someone in pursuit of a criminal at large (Coker 1920b):

Wanted: Information about Venus' Flytrap. One of the most remarkable plants in the world, called Venus' Flytrap because it catches and digests living insects, was reported from near Georgetown many years ago by [Stephen] Elliott in his 'Sketch of the Botany of South Carolina and Georgia.' No specimen from South Carolina is now known. Information in regard to the present occurrence of this plant in South Carolina is greatly desired. Address W.C. Coker, Professor of Botany, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, N.C.

Coker (1928) subsequently published an article on the "Distribution of Venus's Fly Trap" in 1928, and he was always investigating reports of an extended range.

There was something alluring about the passionate botanist's single-minded devotion to plants, something akin to the medieval Holy Grail spirit. One somehow felt honored to be invited to become a partner in an important quest that could involve discomfort, risk, or danger. On 23 April 1938, Coker wrote his friend, the South Carolina poet Archibald Rutledge, thanking him for his recent hospitality. Coker enclosed for Rutledge one of his own poems. His letter expressed concern at the news that Rutledge had been sick, but quickly moved to the main question. The intrepid botanist greatly needed to know whether the Venus flytrap was indeed to be found in the "big ocean," a local term for a botanically rich area near Rutledge's home, and was counting on his friend to find it. Rutledge wrote to Coker in Chapel Hill of his initial failure. He had indeed searched for the flytrap one day, but instead of his finding the plant, he himself had come face to face with a diamond-back rattler. He bravely assured Coker, though, that he was returning to the area presently, as he knew the



plant was there. Though the poet had been sick, and though he had encountered a deadly serpent in his effort to help his friend, the tenacious botanist kept his friend focused on the most important matter at hand, the location and collection of specimens of this plant. In responding to Rutledge four days after the rattlesnake letter, Coker dutifully requested a word from Rutledge on whether or not he had been "bit." He ended the letter with the remark that he was looking forward with much interest to receiving the plants from Rutledge and that he greatly appreciated his continued interest.

In the effort to verify information that he needed for an article, Uncle Will at times demanded the well-nigh impossible of Miss Alma Holland, later Mrs. C. Dale Beers, for numerous years his able research assistant and coauthor. In 1919, he heard that a species of mountain rhododendron had been found growing naturally in sandhill country bordering North and South Carolina. Dr. Coker was then at his research desk in the New York Botanical Garden, where he worked from time to time during university vacations. Checking the report could not be delayed, as Coker's article on rhododendron had been thought to be complete and was already in the hands of the publisher. Hearing that Miss Alma had not yet succeeded in verifying the plant's location by correspondence, he urgently instructed her in a letter to visit the area personally. She was to take the train south to Rockingham, leaving Raleigh at 5 A.M. She was to find the plant, take specimens, and return the same day. Imagine the horror of that trip. The mere prospect of getting to Raleigh to take a train leaving at dawn, combined with the automobile transport of 1919, would have tempted a less dedicated botanist than Miss Alma simply to say, "I quit." The reflected August heat in the sandhills can be hard to take. You have to keep dumping your shoes as the hot sand sifts in. But our heroine succeeded in her quest and the article was published without error. Alan Weakley, our able herbarium curator at UNC, discovered the evidence. He reported two herbarium specimens of *Rhododendron minus* labeled "August 3, 1919, Richmond County, N.C., Collector, Alma Holland," thus providing ample proof of her strict obedience to orders and her success in accomplishing her mission. Weakley also checked the issue of the *Journal of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society*, where the article in question was published and found that Miss Holland's proof of the sandhills *Rhododendron minus* did indeed make the article before it was too late (Coker 1919). Our magnificent herbarium is a priceless archival research tool for solving all sorts of botanical mysteries.

Uncle Will was delighted to obtain a new plant and even to read about the wondrous plants of distant climes, epochs, and cultures. Dr. Paul Titman, a retired professor in Chicago who had studied with Coker in the late 1930s and had returned to earn a Master's degree in botany after his service in World War II, recorded for me in December 1998 his recollections of his old professor, which included the following incident illustrative of Coker's enthusiasm for plants.



Titman had described to Coker a particular kind of porcelain vine that grew in his grandmother's garden near Gastonia, North Carolina. Upon request, the student asked his grandmother to send a plant of this coveted vine for the Arboretum. Dr. Titman reminisced: "I still remember Miss Alma and Dr. Coker running through the Arboretum, where I was doing something, I don't know what, calling for me as if they were children at Christmas, to come quickly, that there was a package for me. And the gleam in his eye when that package was opened and he saw the anticipated vine was unforgettable." There is no more effective pedagogical tool than a teacher's own enthusiasm. Titman went on to earn his doctorate in botany at Harvard. He had planned to remain at Chapel Hill for his doctoral studies, but his professor advised him to seek instead, as he expressed it, "the cross-pollination of Harvard." Dr. Coker then pulled strings to assure that Titman was admitted to the doctoral program.

I myself shall never forget Uncle Will's excitement about the present William and I gave to him when he took the place of my late father at our wedding in May of 1946. By a stroke of good fortune, I found for him a beautifully illustrated book on an ancient Aztec herbal, reprinted under the title *The Badianus Manuscript* ([Cruz, Badiano, and Trueblood]1940). The volume is America's earliest known book on herbal medicine. Ardently hoping that it would please him, I watched with bated breath as he unwrapped his gift. His unfeigned delight with our gift surpassed my wildest dreams. Ignoring the family hurly-burly swirling around us, he sat down to study it with total concentration. I believe that of all the gifts I have ever chosen for an adult, this book was the most appropriate and the most happily received.

Uncle Will had real affection for some of his colleagues on the faculty, and good relations with most of them. Dr. William De Bernière MacNider opened letters to Coker with "Dear Old Man." He closed them with "Affectionately," or "Devotedly," or "Bless your heart." Dr. Dey of Romance Languages and Coker addressed each other as "Colonel," with a complimentary close of "Very sincerely" or "Most sincerely yours." The more formal "Yours truly" was reserved for business-like letters. Among his close friends were Collier Cobb, John Booker, Archibald Henderson, George Coffin Taylor, and our great librarian, Louis Round Wilson.

With the renowned Professor Horace Williams, relations were somewhat less cordial. Professor Williams, it appears, was openly skeptical to his students of the laboratory method of the sciences and of the rigid demands for scholarly documentation in historical and literary research. "Oh those footnotes that Professor Greenlaw requires," he might casually remark. These methods of research he considered far less valuable as tools for learning than the Socratic method, which Professor Williams used so successfully to arouse the curiosity and stimulate the thinking of his students. Naturally this attitude caused some of his colleagues in science, history, and literature to bristle.



The farms of Professors Williams and Coker were adjacent. The Orange County (North Carolina) Register of Deeds records that Coker bought this land from an H.H. Williams in 1906. I feel sure that this is the very gentleman under consideration here, though I have not definitively nailed it down. It would be natural for Professor Williams to retain a proprietary feeling for his former acreage. The following letter from W.C. Coker (1920a) to Professor Horace Williams reveals quite a bit about their relationship. I'll read it for you.

February 21, 1920  
Professor Horace Williams,  
Chapel Hill, N.C.

Dear Professor Williams:

I find that two of your sheep have been grazing every day on my wheat field for at least a month, - in fact, spend nearly all of their time on my place. I ask that you have your sheep removed to some other pasture, where they will not do constant damage to my crops.

Yours truly,  
[W.C. Coker]

When asked by the editor of the *Chapel Hill Weekly*, a local newspaper of Chapel Hill, for advice as to how to reach the ripe old age of seventy, one of Coker's answers was: "Marry the right woman and manage always to have around a congenial dog." Dogs were very important in his life. To each of an almost unbroken succession of canine friends, he gave his utter devotion. And it was amply returned. At their dinner table at "The Rocks," Aunt Louise sat at right angles to him, on his left. When she turned her head to address someone at the other end of the table, one could observe Uncle Will surreptitiously passing a tidbit from his plate to Tinkerbelle lying at his feet. Could this dinner-sharing be one reason why Uncle Will remained so pencil slim?

One of his more colorful canine friends, Mickey, strongly resembled the famous Victrola dog of "His Master's Voice," according to our own Laurie Radford, one of Coker's former graduate students and coauthor of the history of the University of North Carolina Herbarium (L. Radford and A. E. Radford, [2000]). Mickey was as much a one-man dog, as his master was a one-dog man. Uncle Will proudly wrote a niece that Mickey was the only dog he had ever owned who would actually bite. This statement reminds me of James Thurber's delightful story, "The Dog that Bit People." Thurber captures Uncle Will's feeling toward Mickey, his beloved friend who could do no wrong. In Thurber's tale, a one-dog lady replied to each victim's complaint with the remark "Yes, he does love to bite but remember this, he never holds a grudge."

There is not enough time to tell other cherished tales and memories of my Uncle Will. I just hope that I have been able to humanize for you this very vital



person who walked the paths of our University for more than fifty years and did what he could to make our campus more beautiful, to interest us in a great variety of plants, and to encourage us to understand and conserve the wonders of our native fields and forests. I never think of Uncle Will without a frisson of delight and gratitude for his infectious love for our natural world. He, of course, was but one of the considerable number of extraordinarily gifted faculty members at Chapel Hill during the first half of the twentieth century. If William Coker were magically to return to Chapel Hill this spring, he could scarcely avoid seeing himself prominently displayed. He would doubtless immediately descend from the wrong side of the train, so to speak, and disappear to botanize incommunicado in an unknown North Carolina field or forest, or to study in some remote herbarium until all of this nonsense blows over.

Please do forgive us, dear Uncle Will. We simply cannot help ourselves. You are irresistible.

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