

WILLIS LINN JEPSON

The passing of Willis Linn Jepson on November 6, 1946, closed the career of one of the most colorful, dramatic, and stormy figures in the history of California botany. His detailed biography (Science, in press, 1947) has been written by others; his botanical work will stand on its merits. It is my purpose here to depict the man as I knew him—as a friend, as a teacher, and as a colleague.

Jepson was the son of a pioneer California family that settled in the Vaca Valley to the northeast of San Francisco Bay. He was a native son who never quite forgave the march of progress for its inroads on the pristine landscape that was early California. He yearned for the return of the days of the "open range" when the Sacramento Valley stretched before him as a seemingly endless, open, fenceless plain, for the days when he had wandered waist deep in its native flora. He resented the "foreigner from beyond the Sierra" who was tempted into the region by the wealth of its flora to poach upon what he regarded as his special heritage by right of birth, the flora of California. This resentment included those who preceded him as well as his contemporaries, save for one early botanist, the Scotchman, David Douglas. To Jepson, Douglas, "The Indefatigable," along with Bentham and Hooker, constituted the Saints and Apostles of Botany. They were set up as ideals for his students to emulate: Douglas, because of his tireless persistence and devotion to botany in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles and dangers; Bentham, because of his attention to detail and his eagerness to dissect and sketch all plants that passed through his hands; and Hooker, because of his orderly mind, meticulous habits, and prodigious energy. No student ever left Jepson's laboratory without gaining an appreciation of the virtues and accomplishments of these three men. He all but ignored the continental schools of botanists from Linnaeus to DeCandolle and Engler. His leanings were wholly toward the British school and, except for his reverence for Douglas, he worshipped wholly at the altar of Kew.

As a teacher, Jepson was an exponent of the theory of self-reliance and personal experience. He frankly discouraged students who were not able to pursue and solve their own problems by themselves. He would give counsel and advice when asked, but the student had to work out his own salvation. Rarely would Jepson answer a question directly; often he would change the subject and not answer the query at all. There was little of what might be classed as formal teaching in his methods. Problems were solved as they arose and never were they anticipated. In effect, the student group was largely its own teacher through a process of pooled experience, a group which soon learned to consult the professor only when the problem was outside the experience of any of its members and could not be solved by consulting

the literature. Although Jepson was genial and friendly with his students, he was very formal and kept them at a distance. Each student soon learned that the professor was never to be disturbed when his door was closed and that he must never be waylaid when passing to and from his quarters. However, when the door was left open, or when the professor came into the laboratory, the student was welcomed with a friendly smile. There were times when the door remained closed for many weeks on end. The only recourse the student had during such times was to exercise patience or to write the professor a letter which in due time might be answered. Jepson cultivated an atmosphere of mystery as to his comings and his goings. Usually no one knew when and if he would come on any particular day, or where he had been or where he was going. He chose his entries and his exits carefully. He almost never took a student into the field with him.

Jepson never married. His time was entirely his own to devote as he chose—to himself, or to the flora of California. He lived a singularly lonely life surrounded by friends whom he would not accept. There were few, if any, of his fellow men whom he trusted; he was suspicious of the motives of anyone who offered unsolicited favors. Every word and every move was carefully scrutinized lest it carry some imagined hidden meaning, construed, as he thought, to undermine his prestige or to betray him to his fancied "enemies." He relied solely on his intuition in determining other's motives. His decision was final and irrevocable even unto himself. The countless hours spent in brooding over fancied wrongs cost him dearly in time and in energy and robbed him of the vitality that he needed to complete his life work. Of his students and friends he demanded service, loyalty and extreme forbearance such as he himself was constitutionally unable to reciprocate. In spite of all this, he was socially very versatile. On occasion he was a most genial and gracious host, and a charming and witty companion. He revelled in reading or reciting the works of the poets of whom Kipling was most cherished. He excelled in recounting in vivid language the incidents of his experiences. These were always cloaked in dramatic settings. Actually almost every incident of his stormy life was a drama, a fact that was always in his consciousness even to the point of histrionics.

His chief obsession was a fear that he would be robbed of a rightful place in posterity by the wilful chicanery of his "enemies." His suspicions were always directed toward a succession of individuals who usually had no idea of the bitterness and depth of resentment which he felt for them, nor of the reason for his resentment. Attempts to reconcile Jepson to reality were futile; he irrevocably closed all avenues of approach. To overcome these imagined situations, Jepson turned his attention early in life to the preparations for his own commemoration, completely for-

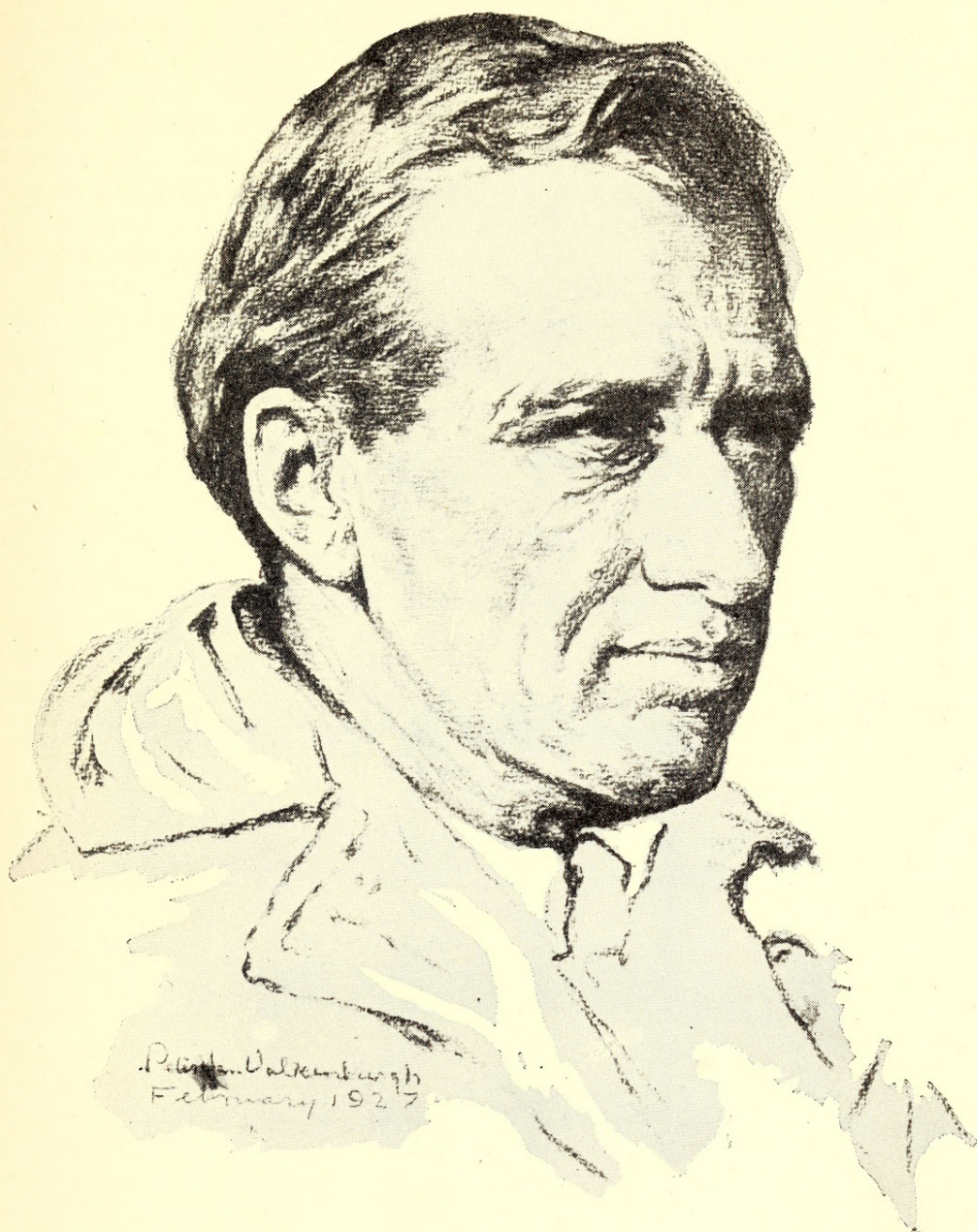


PLATE 8. WILLIS LINN JEPSON

Portrait by Peter Van Valkenburgh, February, 1927.

getting that posterity would judge him by the volume and character of his botanical writings. It was his often expressed hope to be remembered as the Hooker of American botany. To this end, he chose to endow the symbols of the physical setting of a botanist at Kew and pedestal upon them his own memorial. Here again, time, energy, and money were diverted from his life's work, which, on his passing, remained unfinished—a memorial to a tragic life.

To those of us who knew him longest and best, it was obvious that these outward incidents were but evidence of a struggle he was having with himself. It was amply clear that the significant storms of his life were wholly within himself—a one-sided struggle between uncontrolled suspicions and the charming, friendly Jepson.—HERBERT L. MASON, Department of Botany, University of California, Berkeley.

NOTES AND NEWS

OLD WORLD PLANTS APPARENTLY RECENTLY INTRODUCED INTO TEXAS. After twenty-one years of traveling around Texas and studying the native vegetation, the following four Old World plants were met for the first time in 1944. Certainly three of these, and possibly all four, are herein reported for the first time from Texas.

POLYGONUM ARGYROCOLEON Steud. ex Kunze. Railroad siding, Rankin, Upton County, May 11, 1944, *Cory 44176* (Herbarium of Dr. J. F. Brenkle, Mellette, South Dakota). This Central Asian species had previously been reported from California and Arizona.

ERYSIMUM REPANDUM L. (*Cheirinia desertorum* Woot. & Standl.). Dry and gravelly bed of Four Mile Draw, a tributary of the Pecos River in northeastern Pecos County (16 airline miles northwest of Sheffield), April 6, 1944, *Cory 44092*, in flower; May 10, 1944, *Cory 44172*, in fruit (Herbarium, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas).

SWAINSONA SALSULA (Pall.) Taub. In and along an irrigation ditch, crossroads four miles southeast of Ysleta, El Paso County, July 14, 1944, *Cory 45017* (Gray Herbarium, Harvard University). *Swainsona* has robust rootstocks as much as a foot or more under the surface of the soil and forms dense stands. This plant, with its numerous papery, inflated pods, reminds one of an *Astragalus*. It is an Asiatic genus which has become established occasionally in the Western states, the nearest locality to ours being Holbrook, Arizona.

SENECIO VULGARIS L. Winter Garden Experiment Station, near Winter Haven, Dimmit County, March 27, 1944, *Cory 43829* (Tracy Herbarium, A.M. College of Texas).—V. L. CORY, Institute of Technology and Plant Industry, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.



Mason, H. L. 1947. "WILLIS LINN JEPSON." *Madroño; a West American journal of botany* 9, 61–64.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/185075>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/169923>

Holding Institution

Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

Sponsored by

Biodiversity Heritage Library

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In Copyright. Digitized with the permission of the rights holder

Rights Holder: California Botanical Society

License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>

Rights: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/permissions/>

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.