

Dr. Bertram Whittier Wells (1884 - 1978)

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Objektyp: **Obituary**

Zeitschrift: **Veröffentlichungen des Geobotanischen Institutes der Eidg. Tech. Hochschule, Stiftung Rübel, in Zürich**

Band (Jahr): **68 (1979)**

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

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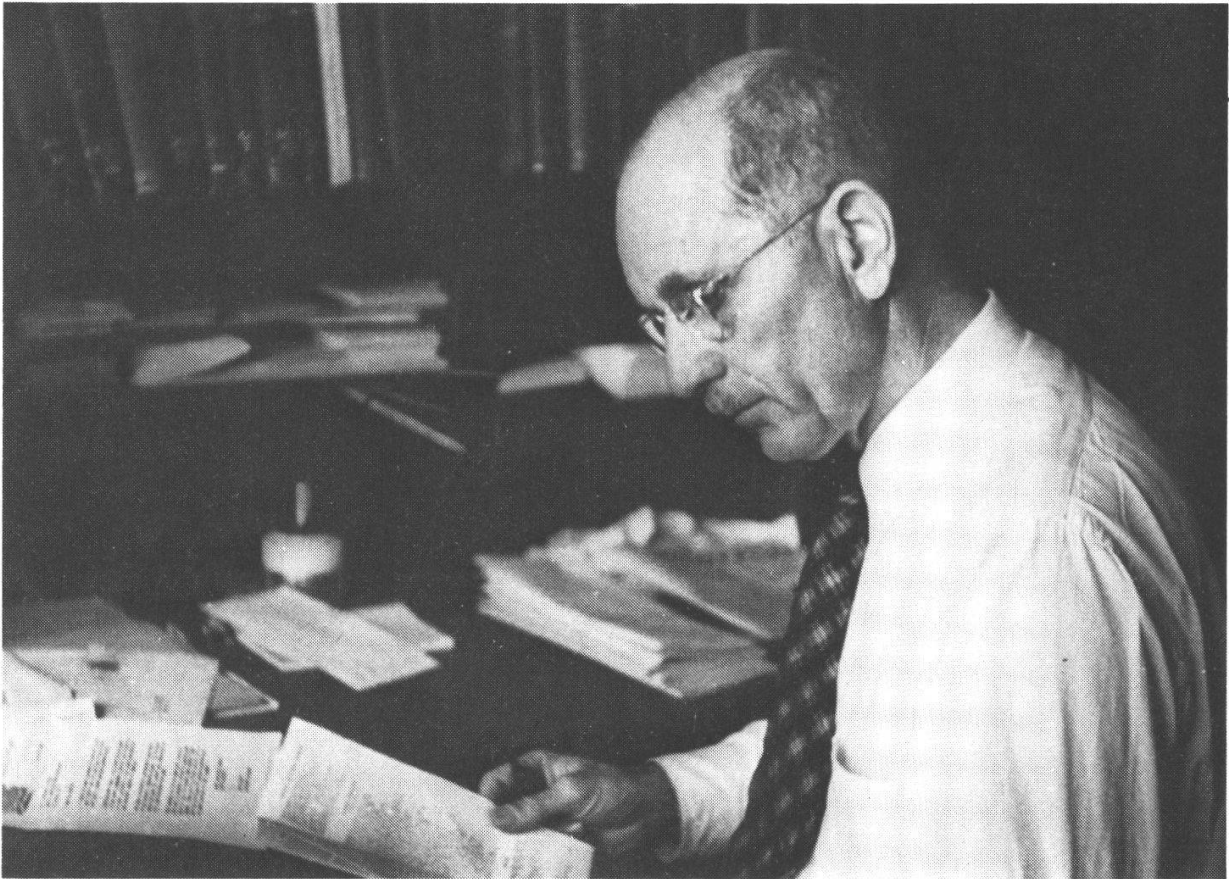
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Dr. Bertram Whittier WELLS (1884-1978), taken in 1939
Author of: Natural Gardens of North Carolina

Bertram Whittier Wells died in Raleigh, N.C. on December 29th, 1978. His death occurred in the year of the 16th IPE through the SE USA. He was the last of the United States' original generation of plant ecologists. It is therefore appropriate to start this book with a dedication to Dr. Wells.

Wells' contributions included the teaching of several generations of students at North Carolina State College in Raleigh and considerable original ecological research on the natural vegetation of North Carolina and the southeastern United States.

Dr. Wells was born in Troy, Ohio, on March 5th, 1884. He attended schools in Ohio and graduated from Ohio State University in 1911. After brief

teaching assignments at Knox College and Connecticut and Kansas Agricultural Colleges, he obtained his M.A. degree from Ohio State in 1916, and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1917. Although his doctoral research involved studies on insect galls in plants, a field in which he was a major authority, his contact with H.C. Cowles and the early plant ecologists at Chicago instilled in him a deep interest in ecology, the field in which he was to make his greatest contributions. Wells came to North Carolina State College in 1919 as head of the Department of Botany and Plant Pathology and he held that position until his retirement in 1949. During his tenure, the department grew from 3 to 30 members and developed from a teaching department to one with full teaching and research programs commensurate with those of a major university.

Wells' research in ecology is presented in nearly 30 publications from 1910 to the mid-1950's. He was a careful interpreter of the landscape. Most of his concepts of ecology and interpretations of natural phenomena were made as a result of personal field work, much of which was done on foot in some of the most remote parts of North Carolina. Although he did not carry out much experimental work, he did show an ability to use experimentation in simple, carefully conceived ways to assist in the development of an explanation of field observations.

His first publication upon reaching North Carolina, released in 1924, was a synopsis of the major plant communities of the state. It was characteristic of the man that he was able, within a short period of time, to see enough of the state to generalize about its vegetation with reasonable accuracy. For the next twenty years his research was concentrated in the eastern Piedmont and Coastal Plain. Major studies of old field succession, and savannah, long-leaf pine, and pocosin vegetation types were completed. These studies emphasized the importance of soil factors and fire as determination of vegetation patterns. In fact, his diagrammatic summary of the coarse sand, high fiber, high fire cycle in long-leaf pine forests is, in a way, a forerunner of today's systems models. In studies conducted near Ft. Fisher, which are remarkable for their simplicity and clarity of insight, Wells and his fellow N. C. State associate Ivan D. Shunk showed that the sheared appearance of the coastal trees and shrubs found there was due to wind-driven salt spray and not to the wind itself. This theory withstood direct experi-

mental efforts to refute it and has now become well accepted. In the 1930's, Wells turned his attention to the mountain grass balds, seeking an explanation for these enigmatic patches of grass in an otherwise forested area. After countless hours spent tramping mountain trails and peaks, he concluded that these balds were indian summer camp sites and that they owed their existence to primitive man's activity. About this time, Wells also became interested in the Carolina Bays and concluded that these curious elliptical depressions were best explained as the result of the impacts of meteorites striking soft Coastal Plain sands.

Both of these hypotheses proved to be highly controversial. Each helped to stimulate considerable research and, consequently, other hypotheses. Although it now appears that indians may well have played a major role in bald formation, other factors were almost certainly involved. Despite the fact that subsequent studies have suggested other, more tenable theories for the origin of the Carolina Bays, Wells' vigorous defense of the meteorite theory represented a fascinating combination of good science and even better rhetoric.

One of Wells' finest contributions was his *Natural Gardens of North Carolina* published with the assistance of the North Carolina Garden Club in 1932. This book presented a discussion of the major vegetation types of the state, their ecology, and keys to identification of the important species found in them. The writing, though not scientific, was accurate and, more importantly, caught the reader's interest and imagination. Wells' book succeeded in interesting people in a subject that, all too often, is regarded as dry and uninteresting. Original copies of the *Gardens* are collector's items and it has fortunately been reprinted. The book was a significant source book for the 16th IPE.

Wells was active in professional societies, particularly in the southeast. He was past president of the Southern Appalachian Botanical Club and of the North Carolina Academy of Science.

Wells' passing marks the end of an era in United States' ecology. He was the last of the old-time, natural history ecologists, scientists who did their research by travelling on foot or on primitive roads to study

plants and plant communities throughout the state. Wells' theories were derived from careful observation of the landscape. It is unimportant that some of the theories he derived from his observations were incorrect. What is important is that he attempted to explain what he saw in terms that both the scientist and the layman could understand. It is, therefore, altogether fitting that this volume of papers on the vegetation of North Carolina is dedicated to Bertram Whittier Wells.

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