

## ROBERT DEWITT IVEY, NEW MEXICO NATURALIST

In his grandmother's living room, the small boy gazed upon cabinets stretching from corner to corner, an array of long, shallow drawers. Easing one open, he saw first a foot, then a tail, and finally, with the drawer fully open, a complete silvery-gray wolf skin. Another drawer held a Russian sable, another a silver fox. His grandmother was a furrier who had worked for a subsidiary of the Hudson Bay Company in Michigan before moving to Florida. She would give the lad skins to play with and scraps to cut up and sew together. Three quarters of a century later he would say of those times, "There is something about touching a mammal's fur that intrigues." That child was named Robert DeWitt Ivey.

He was born in Tampa, Florida on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October 1923. The Ivey's actually lived in nearby Plant City. In 1928, his father got a new job and the family packed up and headed to Jacksonville, where they settled into a house not far from the St. Johns River. The river would be the source of much learning and pleasure for young Ivey. He sailed quietly through public schools in Jacksonville, already owning a taste for learning. At home he raised flying squirrels in his bedroom, tended his pet alligator in an old pigeon pen in the yard, studied birds and mice, and absorbed all that nature could not hide along the St. Johns. At Robert E. Lee High School he took Spanish and Latin, with dreams of going to South America. He saved biology for his senior year so he would be mature enough to gain the maximum benefit. He was quite interested in art, but there were no art classes. He drew birds and mammals for extra credit in other classes.

In the fall of 1941 he entered Florida Southern College (now Florida Southern University.) Despite the start of World War II in December of that year, military service did not affect him. He was rejected on account of his height and large feet. It was at Florida Southern College that he had his first opportunity to take classes in art. By the end of his second year at Florida Southern, he decided to transfer to the University of Florida in Gainesville. In his own words: "When I arrived at the University of Florida I had trouble deciding whether to major in biology or English and I finally decided on English probably because my father was a writer." He concentrated on English, but continued taking classes in art and explored biology as well. Later in his junior year his future was changed by a knock on his door. A graduate student stood outside.

"Are you Robert DeWitt Ivey?"

"Yes."

"Are you the one who likes to draw birds and animals?"

"Yes."

"We have a biology instructor who needs someone to do a job for him. Would you be interested?"

"Yes."

The two went over to the biology department and met with an ornithologist who had a juvenile hoatzin, a curious tropical bird that is able to clamber around tree branches with a vestigial "finger" on its wing before it can fly. DeWitt agreed to

draw the bird for them. Another professor happened by, and seeing the drawing in progress, started chatting with Ivey. This was Dr. Harley Sherman, professor of mammalogy. The two realized that they had much in common when Ivey shared his techniques for locating nests of golden mice and beach mice. Sherman later became aware that Ivey was majoring in English and suggested that Ivey could take some extra courses in biology and graduate with a double major and then become a graduate student in mammalogy. In the spring of 1945 that goal was accomplished. He received his bachelor's degree magna cum laude, was Valedictorian of his class, and became a member of Phi Beta Kappa.

That fall Ivey began graduate work in mammalogy under Sherman. The topic of his master's degree research was a study of the mammals of Palm Valley, Florida, which he defined as the seaside area between St. Augustine and the St. Johns River. He could reach the northern portion by bicycle from his uncle's house in Jacksonville Beach, but access to the southern portion was far more difficult. While still in high school he and a friend had crafted a dugout canoe. He was able to sail or paddle his way to the area from St. Augustine, where the canoe was moored. The young naturalist was in his element. His childhood mammalian intrigue had come full circle. He was awarded a Master of Science degree in mammalogy in the spring of 1947.

That summer he made the decision to seek employment. He wrote some 20 letters seeking a position and received two offers, one from the University of Florida and one from the University of New Mexico. Always possessed by a spirit of adventure, he arrived in Albuquerque in August to begin as an instructor in the biology department at UNM. By 1949, however, he determined that his future at the University level would be jeopardized by the lack of a Ph.D. He applied to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor to begin work on a Ph.D. in mammalogy. He was accepted and was in Michigan in June. Within a year he decided that pursuit of the advanced degree was not in his best interest and began seeking another job. He landed a temporary position for a year at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, where he taught entomology and other courses. He lived on Sullivan's Island and spent a year reminiscent of his time at Palm Valley. As the year there drew to a close he began to realize that he very much missed the vastness and openness of New Mexico. "I decided I was homesick for New Mexico. I didn't care what I had to get. I'd come out here and look for a job."

By the fall of 1951 he was teaching biology at Albuquerque High School, the only high school in the city. He was calm at last, comfortable in his place in the educational process. He simply wished to excite students, to create in them an awareness of the natural world, and to imbue them with the scientific skills necessary to develop their interest. During his time there he developed the curriculum for a second year biology course, the first in the district's history. In 1959 he transferred to Sandia High School, where he continued his efforts for the next 31 years.

During the 1950's and 1960's he continued to gather specimens of mammals and to elucidate their life histories. "I started doing field trips to areas all around New Mexico. I was working on the tassel-eared squirrels and made a big trip throughout the southwest sampling them in different mountain ranges." His

mammal collection proved invaluable in his classroom. "I had all these mammal specimens I could teach from and I could take kids on field trips. They gave me a school bus. I could take my science club anywhere." After a few years, recurrence of bubonic plague and later the advent of Hantavirus made it risky to do field work with students. He began turning his attention to plants. His work in mammalogy had necessitated working with plants. "Plants are the home and food of mammals, the environment of mammals." He had been drawing plants since his college days, but in the mid-60's he approached it more seriously. "Finally I got into it pretty hard and made units of study for my advanced biology class."

By 1983 he had enough material to assemble the first edition of *Flowering Plants of New Mexico*. In 1982 he had married Vivian Porter. She was very much a lover of the outdoors and enjoyed fishing and hunting. On weekends and in summers they took trips to every corner of New Mexico, as well as longer adventures, like driving all the way to Alaska, all the while studying plants. In 1986 the second edition of the book appeared. Work continued. The third edition arrived in 1995, the fourth in 2003, and the fifth in 2008. Thousands of copies are in the hands of flower enthusiasts all over the state. *Flowering Plants of New Mexico* is by far the most consulted plant reference in the state. The book is used at the University of New Mexico in its Flora of New Mexico course.

Ivey officially retired from the classroom in 1990. He donated his extensive mammal collection to the University of New Mexico. His bird collections went to Adams State College in Alamosa, Colorado. Personally, he had all the reward he needed in his career watching his students grow scientifically and seeing them gain interest in the living world around them. However, others associated with him chose to recognize his contributions. In 1963, he was designated Science Teacher of the Year for New Mexico by the National Science Teachers Association. The following year, the NSTA selected him as Science Teacher of the Year for Region 7 (a five state area containing NM). In 1993 the New Mexico Chapter of The Nature Conservancy awarded him with their Leopold Conservation Award. In 1995 he was given the Sigma Xi award for his dedication to the teaching of science. In Santa Fe, in 2003 New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson recognized his decades of contribution to the natural history of the state. The Native Plant Society of New Mexico presented him with a lifetime membership in honor of his efforts. Most importantly for him, even 20 years after his retirement, he still hears from old students about their successes and his influence in their lives. In 2008 Jacqueline Ericksen, his student in 1967, wrote of him:

My teacher, Robert DeWitt Ivey, was absolutely the best teacher ever. For starters, he was 6'7" and very good looking. Better yet, he grew up in the Florida Everglades and all his lectures were peppered with wonderful personal stories that brought to life everything we studied, down to the tiniest organism... I now have a doctorate in Physics... So beyond just teaching me some great biology, DeWitt Ivey taught me to see, how to take notes, how to create the tools I need from whatever material I have at hand. Most importantly, he taught me how to think and to learn, to teach myself whatever it is I want to know.

He has been a scholar of language all his life. While still a senior in high school he ran across a book on Portuguese grammar in a used bookstore in Jacksonville, and was able to read his first book in that language. He insisted on reading Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in the original Spanish. In January of 2009 he realized his dream of going to South America. During the months before he gathered books in Portuguese from a used bookstore in Santa Fe, not only to read, but also to enjoy the national language of Brazil. He procured audio disks to gain facility in speaking. The trip up the Amazon was a real adventure. He was able to communicate there and, in one small city, get directions to a used bookstore in order to buy more volumes in Portuguese.

Life can be a labyrinth of obstacles, or a vast reservoir of opportunity. Some of us seize opportunities, some are buried in troubles. For Ivey there would be no choice. He always found value in challenge. Dr. Harley Sherman once met Ivey's mother on a street in Gainesville. As they talked, sharing stories of the young Ivey, they agreed that Ivey always seemed to find the most difficult way of doing things. From his upbringing he was led to the study of language. He made drawings simply because he had the chance and carried an undiscovered talent. He came to the pursuit of science by sheer happenstance. There is an almost imperceptible boundary between destiny and vision.

Robert DeWitt Ivey always chose to adore the process of living and to grasp each moment fully. Tales abound. He built a catamaran to sail the lakes of New Mexico. He dabbled in taxidermy. He taught ballroom dancing. He developed his own style of mammal trap. He spent the decades since his "retirement" working to make the vast natural universe real and accessible for those around him. He gave countless talks all around the state, and was always willing to help others with identification of their plants. In 2012, in conjunction with Dr. Kelly Allred of New Mexico State University, he published *Flora Neomexicana III: An Illustrated Identification Manual*, a book that allows botanists to determine the genus and species of any vascular plant known in New Mexico.

He passed away on June 23, 2013. He will be missed and remain treasured by many all over New Mexico. His mark on the natural history of this state is indelible.

- Eugene Jercinovic