



Julian Steyermark's Arboretum Connection

The Morton Arboretum does not often mark the passing of persons with whom it has no direct connection. Dr. Julian Steyermark, who died on October 15, 1988, is an exception. Steyermark's connection with the Arboretum is not obvious, because he never was an Arboretum employee. Nevertheless, many of the details in this sketch have been furnished by Steyermark's "Arboretum connection."

North America has produced few field botanists as able and probably none other as active as Steyermark. When in his 20's, he began over 20 years of service at the Field Museum. Mostly on weekends and at night during that time, he worked whenever he could on his *Flora of Missouri*, which was published in 1965, after he had begun his long-term residency in Venezuela. Based mostly on specimens that he (and his student, see below) had collected, this work is still noteworthy for its comprehensiveness, consistency, clarity, and usefulness. If he had published no other work, he would have achieved a stature that few others gain, but he also produced a book on the vegetational history of the Ozarks, a definitive flora of Guatemala, and many other significant contributions. Because of the proximity of Missouri, Steyermark's work there has had considerable influence on our understanding of Illinois plants and vegetation.

In the late 1940's, Steyermark began an extended mentor relationship with a young and eager, aspiring amateur botanist who was working in the Field Museum herbarium as a volunteer. This volunteer, who had a truly insatiable desire to learn as much about as many plants as he could, began—in his own "spare" time—accompanying Steyermark on weekend trips. While in Missouri, they botanized at a furious pace and camped at night in "ravines as rugged and isolated from people as possible,"

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pressing and drying plant specimens far into the night.

Steyermark's worldwide knowledge of plants was truly encyclopedic, and he quizzed his student mercilessly—in camp, in the field, on the road, and in the herbarium—with questions about all kinds of plants from all over the world. The volunteer rose to the challenge, returned to Chicago to search the literature, and began working his way through the 2.5 million-specimen Field Museum herbarium to try to learn all of the world's plant genera. Often, the young botanist made his way down several floors of stairs in pitch darkness, as he left for home at midnight.

Steyermark assumed the traditional role of a teacher for only a brief period; he preferred to single out rare individuals who had a special aptitude for botany, and to work with them one-on-one. However, under the withering stress of his constant intellectual pressure, few survived to distinguish themselves as botanists. According to our source, one trip with Steyermark was more than enough for most students. For that reason, this "silent partner" in the *Flora of Missouri* project is one of the few students who comprise Steyermark's legacy as mentor. This student whose activities I have been recounting is, of course, none other than Floyd Swink.

For thorough taxonomic field training, Floyd could have chosen none better than Julian Steyermark for a mentor. As the Arboretum's senior taxonomist, Floyd is now well-known in his own right as the senior author of (and indisputable final authority on) *Plants of the Chicago Region*, the definitive flora of our region. It is interesting that D. G. Frodin, author of the distinguished publication, *Guide to Standard Floras of the World* (1984), reserved the comment of "excellent" for only two of the floras he reviewed: Steyermark's *Flora del Avila* (Venezuela) and Swink's *Plants of the Chicago Region*.

At the time of his death at the age of 79, Steyermark was still an active Curator at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, where he was coordinating the writing of a flora of the Guayana region of Venezuela (the subject of Arthur Conan Doyle's *Lost World*). Through his own personal funding, he was also supporting the related research of several field workers.

Since the Arboretum's reputation for careful taxonomic work was first established by Floyd Swink, we can see that the Arboretum has benefitted for a considerable amount of time from the influence of Julian Steyermark on his eager, able student. We are indeed fortunate that Floyd is still active here. The encyclopedic grasp of plants that we all admire in Floyd is his talent alone, and ably reflects the rigorous training that he received from one of the best field botanists that has ever lived.

