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## A Tribute to Robert Benson Gordon

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## A Tribute to Robert Benson Gordon

Robert Benson Gordon, born on 23 July 1901, was the Professor Emeritus of Science at West Chester University in 1964 and after whom West Chester University's Gordon Natural Area is named.

He was a most accomplished man of science, and his career as a college professor began right here at WCU. He earned his Bachelor of Science in Applied Optics in 1922, Master of Science in Botany in 1928, and PhD. in Botany in 1931 from Ohio State University. Between 1922 and 1924 he practiced optometry, but soon found that his true passions lied in more biological pursuits. For most of his career, he taught general biology, plant ecology, and conservation at various colleges and universities. His accomplishments include:



- Beginning his career as a college professor at WCU in 1938, becoming Head of the Department of Science in 1944, and becoming Professor Emeritus of Science in 1964.
- During the summers, taught at Franz Theodore Stone Laboratory of OSU from 1946-47 and 1950; Audubon Nature Center in Greenwich, CT from 1948-49, and the New Jersey School of Conservation, Stokes State Forest (1951-52).
- Member of teaching staff at the Arboretum of the Barnes Foundation in Merion, PA.
- Professor and Head of Biology Dept. at Cabrini College, Radnor, PA from 1963-64.
- Instructor of Horticulture Science at Longwood Foundation, Kennett Square, PA from 1968-69 and 1971.
- Research Associate with Ohio Biological Survey at OSU during the summers of 1964-67 and 1973-74.

Though his interests were many, he specialized in the "mapping and understanding of natural vegetation of the northeastern United States" (Ohio J. Sci.) in relation to planning for land use, and entitled his dissertation "The Primary Forest Types of the East Central States" (1931).

His hallmark contribution was an "eight colored, comprehensive map" (Ohio J. Sci.) entitled "Natural Vegetation of Ohio at the Time of the Earliest Land Surveys", published by the Ohio Biological Survey in 1966. The map was "the first of its kind in scope and methodology prepared for any state in the U.S." (Ohio J. Sci.) and was very well received. He also contributed a bulletin entitled "The Natural Vegetation of Ohio in Pioneer Days" to the Ohio Biological Survey in 1969. It is known that "these two contributions on Ohio's original vegetation was his greatest research love." (Ohio J. Sci.)

Thus, West Chester University dedicated the 67 acre woodland on south campus in 1973 to Dr. Gordon in honor and recognition of all his vast efforts and accomplishments in biological conservation and beyond.

Information courtesy of: The Ohio Journal of Science. v81, n4 (July, 1981), 187-192.



Dr. Gordon passed on 11 February 1981. Below are some thoughts and sentiments from his daughter Virginia and son Robert.

*Reflections of my father, Dr. Robert B. Gordon*  
By Virginia Gordon Hatch  
31 December 2007



My first thoughts of Dad were of his kindness and dedication to family, teaching, the church and community. A quote from a former student's letter to him in May 1963 reads: "Most of all, however, we were and are deeply appreciative of your dedication to our welfare and our growth as teaching biologists."

I remember as a family going on the Christmas bird census with the West Chester Bird Club and then a pot luck supper and meeting sometimes at our home. I remember going to the lab at Christmas vacation to water plants or check on things.

The summer of 1940 or 41 we drove to the Grand Canyon, some of the national parks, Yellowstone, Bryce Canyon, Salt Lake City, and saw the Pueblo and Hopi Indian homes, stopping in Columbus to see family before and after. Summers he often had positions elsewhere and the family would go together. Several summers were at an Ohio State Biological Station at Put-in-Bay Island in Lake Erie in the 1940s. In 1949 or 1950 we were at an Audubon site in Greenwich, Connecticut where teachers took one or two week courses on the ecology of woods, lakes, farms, and the tidewaters. Because there were evening activities such as films of the dust bowl, strip mining and resultant flooding or singing and camp stories, I saw him to be humorous in story telling.

He was well rounded in his interests. We attended college plays, music programs, saw museums and art. He had a workbench in the basement and did household repairs and constructed a train platform for my brother. We had a victory garden off north High Street during the war and in the back yard. Soldiers away from home sometimes shared holiday dinners. I remember him canvas sassing for the Community Chest.



*Remarks added by son Robert L. Gordon, 15 January 2008*

I think Virginia touched on a lot of the family remembrances, so I will just add those things that come to mind about his love of his profession.

When I was on field trips with him, and even around my yard, he would tell you both the common name and the Latin name, and the family name of the species. For him, this was the proper way to know a plant.

I think he was most happy the day he discovered a plant that was not classified, or known, and I think he had that one submitted to the scientific journals and then named after him.

One of the cleverest things I think he was responsible for was a guide to finding out what kind of tree you were looking at. You worked your way down, from general observations, like rough or smooth bark, alternating branches or not, and so forth, until you got to the leaves. By then, the tree was identified, or you had one of two choices, and he helped you pick the right one. Another project done after he retired was a very detailed colored map of Ohio showing the entire native flora before it was changed by farming and development, done by using information and notes from the original scouts, surveyors' and courthouse records.