

2011

## William R. Overlease (1925 - 2007)

Jack Holt

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## William R. Overlease (1925-2007)



When Bill passed away on November 30, 2007, we lost more than a botanist. We lost an ornithologist, an ecologist, a historian, a mentor, and a friend.

Bill was born October 2, 1925, in Elkhart, Indiana, where he spent his early years. Then like so many of his generation he answered the call of his nation, spending four years from 1943 to 1946 with the US Navy in the Pacific. This tour of duty awoke in him a desire to travel, and in later years he managed to visit all seven continents. But Bill was always happy to come home, not only to Indiana, where he spent a number of years after the war working as a naturalist in the state park system, but to Benzie County, Michigan, where he spent many summers exploring the woods, swamps, and dunes of that part of the lower peninsula, collecting plants, studying birds, and conducting ecological studies.

Bill was tireless in his quest to learn why plants and birds they grew where they grew and lived where they did. He was fascinated by plant distribution and succession and forest ecology. After graduating from Michigan State University in 1950 with a bachelor of science degree in forestry, followed up by a master of science in conservation (1952) and a doctorate in botany and plant pathology (1964) he moved to West Chester State College (later University), where he taught ecology and botany from 1963 to 1986. Once there, among other projects, he set up a plant succession study in an abandoned cornfield at the southwest corner of Tigue Road and New Street, which he monitored for 34 years (see pp. 97-104 of this issue). One of his greatest contributions while at West Chester, and one he was

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very proud of, was helping to persuade the Board of Trustees in 1973 to formally establish the Robert B Gordon Natural Area at the South Campus as a permanent natural laboratory to study plants and animals in a suburban setting. Before and after its establishment as a preserve he spent much time there studying the structure and composition of the woody vegetation.

With his teaching load, field studies, and other scholarly duties, it was often a wonder that Bill was able to get out in the field as much as he did. But when he did, he was an exhaustive and careful note taker. And when he got back, he spent innumerable hours writing them up, posting to his catalog of index cards and then hammering the data into shape for publication. Bill published innumerable articles on plants, birds, and other subjects, never letting weather, illness, or anything else interfere with his work.

Botany was not his only love. Bill spent probably as many hours studying birds, both in Indiana, where he participated in many summer surveys both before and after his sojourn at West Chester, Michigan, and in Chester County, where he was a regular participant in the annual Audubon Christmas Count, as he did plants. He was an amateur historian, gathering, writing down, and publishing the tales and oral traditions of the frontier days of the Midwest. Not surprisingly, as befitted a man who spent years in Bruce Catton country, he was also a Civil War buff, collecting lyrics of marching songs, photographing old cemeteries, and gathering and publishing information on many of the unsung and forgotten contributors to the Northern war effort.

It has been said that behind every great man is a woman. This was so true for Bill, for without his devoted wife, Edith, he would not have accomplished nearly as much he did. They first met at Turkey Run State Park in Indiana, in the 1950s, and were married in a log church there in 1955. Edith and Bill were inseparable, traveling, working, and writing together. Their last papers, published jointly, are in this issue (pp. 97-111).

Bill was an incurable optimist, always able to see the silver lining in every dark cloud, to find the rare plant lurking amidst a mass of invasive aliens. As a result he was able to inspire generations of students to emulate him, not only in the field of botany, but in other pursuits. His memorial service and dedication ceremony on April 18, 2009 at West Chester was attended by a horde of former pupils ranging from college presidents to landscapers. This member of the greatest generation will be missed.

JACK HOLT  
NOVEMBER 2010

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