
IN MEMORIAM

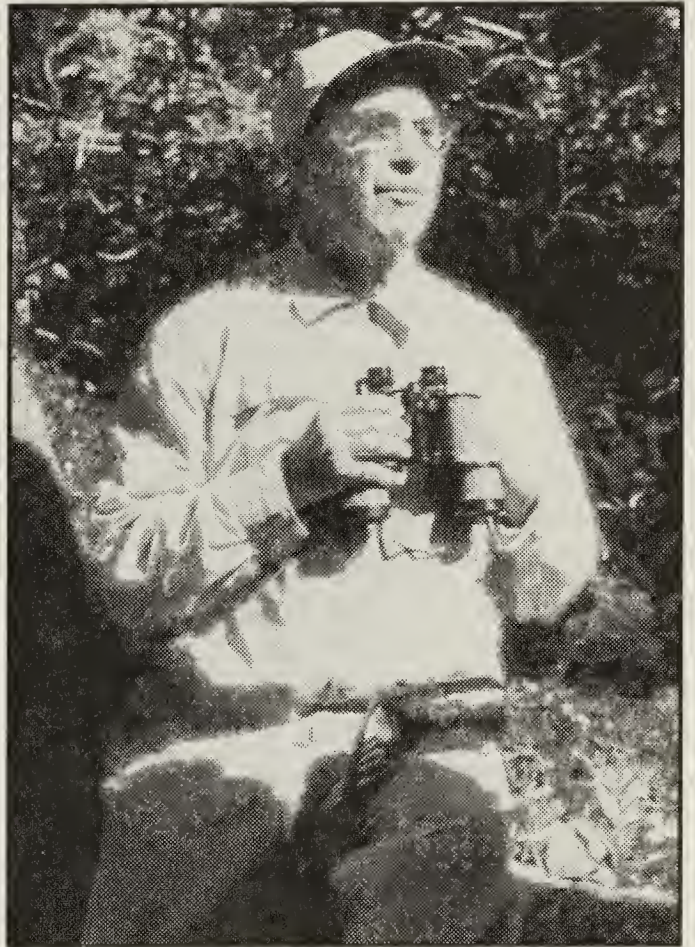
FENTON RUSSELL VANCE, 1907 - 1997

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A summer with a such a profusion of prairie wildflowers seems an appropriate time to write of the life of Fenton Vance. On days such as this, Fenton would be jumping to get on the road to see what was blooming on the prairies, or in the Cypress Hills, or along the South Saskatchewan River valley, or at some native prairie closer to Regina. Now that more than two years have passed since Fenton's death in Regina on April 2, 1997, and other more personal and professional tributes have appeared in the University of Manitoba Alumni Bulletin and elsewhere, the naturalist side of Fenton's life deserves to be chronicled in the Blue Jay.

Fenton was born (in Ontario?), on April 26, 1907. His working life started early, at age 15, as the night telephone agent at Kamsack, Saskatchewan, where his mother operated the telephone exchange. After completing high school, Fenton went to work for SaskTel as we know it now. After some years his employer granted him a leave of absence to further his training. He attended the University of Manitoba and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering in 1941. In later years, he became "traffic manager" of SaskTel, ensuring the smooth flow of telephone service through the multitude of telephone exchanges of that time. The exchanges were then operated by human beings, not by a mass of electronic relays.

Fenton retired in 1972 to give his full attention to a project he had underway. His aim was the development of a series of colour slides of all the native flowering plants of Saskatchewan. When I first came to know Fenton, about 1968, he and his wife Irene regularly attended each Saskatchewan Natural History Society field meet. His wildflower slides contributed a special thrill to "member's slides" at the provincial society fall meeting, or to winter programs of the Regina Natural History Society. By this time



Fenton Russell Vance

Photo courtesy of Bob Cunningham

Fenton also made his slide shows available so that teachers and students in public schools could get an appreciation of native wildflowers firsthand. In short, what was "just a flower" to many people took on a reality after they saw a slide show by Fenton Vance.

By this time, Fenton and Irene had an impressive collection of photographs of nearly 400 species of Saskatchewan wildflowers, and Fenton was searching for a way to make his colour images available to a wider audience. Most books at that time featured either a mix of flowers from other areas of the continent, or were mainly black-and-white photographs. In 1973 my wife, Shirley, and I approached Fenton with a plan to get his wildflower photographs in print. In 1974 we made many pleasant trips together to add new species to the collection. Our adventures included snow in the Cypress

Hills in mid- May, black flies and mosquitoes at the Smoky Burn campsite, and a thunderstorm at Hudson Bay.

The result of all this was *Wildflowers Across the Prairies*, by Fenton R. Vance, J.R. Jowsey, and J.S. McLean, published in 1977, with a second edition in 1984. The book went through nine printings. Sales had exceeded well over 90,000 copies by Fenton's death in April 1997.

In his later years, and after the death of Irene in 1985, Fenton's mobility and eyesight

deteriorated. His only contact with the flowers was through visits by friends who knew the wildflowers as he did. Even in his last year, living in a care facility where he felt very confined, Fenton had two ambitions. One was to reach his 90th birthday. He fell short of this goal by only 24 days. The other was to have his book reprinted again, and have sales reach the 100,000 mark (Fenton kept close track of his royalty records!). With release of the third edition (the tenth printing) in June 1999, this goal has already been attained.



American Hen-Harrier [now Northern Harrier]

"This bird takes its prey from the ground, hunts long and diligently for it on the wing, and quarters the district regularly, so as to survey every spot, wheeling backwards and forwards in easy, graceful circles, with little seeming effort of flapping of the wings. It is wary, but not timid, – avoiding the sportsman, but not easily driven away from its hunting-grounds. It is a common species on the plains of the Saskatchewan [near Fort Carlton], seldom less than five or six being in sight at a time."

John Richardson, *Fauna Boreali-Americana* 2:55, 1832.