



Above: Aven Nelson in the *first* Rocky Mountain Herbarium; date unknown. Courtesy American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming.

Hardworking Young Man takes on 30,000 Dried Pressed Plants

By Hollis Marriott

On June 13, 1899, two botany students—Elias Nelson and Leslie Goodding—traveled by boxcar to Monida, Montana, then the western gateway to Yellowstone National Park. There they unloaded a wagon, three horses, camping gear, provisions for three months, six plant presses, and thousands of sheets of paper. Two days later a passenger train delivered their mentor—Professor Aven Nelson of the University of Wyoming, along with his wife and two daughters.

They were on a grand adventure—14 weeks in Yellowstone collecting plants!—all except Elias that is. Halfway through the project, he did exactly what imprudent visitors have done before and since—stepped off a path, sank into scalding mud, and suffered a serious burn. Incapable of further fieldwork, he was sent home. For the rest of the party, the adventure ended six weeks later, as fall approached and the weather deteriorated. In early September, they boarded the train home with some 30,000 dried pressed plants!

This enormous mass of plant material included about 1400 unique collections—distinct species from distinct sites; the rest were duplicates. At a given site, they tried to collect 20 to 30 duplicates of each species! These were later exchanged for specimens from institutions and private collectors around the world. Some duplicates were sold to raise money for field work.

With UW's humble herbarium about to grow substantially, Nelson convinced the Board of Trustees to designate it a separate institution, the Rocky Mountain Herbarium (RM), and to appoint him Curator. Elias Nelson, by then recovered from his geyser basin burn, would be paid \$500 to process the Yellowstone material. Elias (EL-lee-us) came from a poor Swedish immigrant family in Douglas. He entered the University as an undergraduate in 1894, finishing four years later with a reputation as skilled and hard-working. In the fall of 1898, he started a Master's project—a revised classification of North American phloxes. He was Professor Nelson's first grad student, and the first to graduate from the University.

During the winter of 1899-1900, Elias worked on Yellowstone collections as well as his phlox research. From field book notes, he prepared

labels. Some were printed by a now-forgotten printer; some were hand-written. Unmounted duplicates were shipped to destinations across the US, in Europe, and as far away as Calcutta, India (today's Kolkata). Specimens destined for the RM were mounted on herbarium sheets as is done today. But Elias didn't have the convenience of our water-soluble glue. Instead he attached plants using narrow strips of fabric tape—at key points across stems, and occasionally across leaf tips.

Surely some readers—former grad students, student herbarium assistants, volunteers—are nodding their heads in sympathy. We can imagine Elias working day after day, compiling collection data for labels, slowly making his way through piles of papers, pulling out pressed dried plants, carefully arranging and taping them onto herbarium sheets, gluing a label in the lower right corner, setting specimens aside to dry under weights, and then somehow filing them in the cramped herbarium. It all sounds so familiar!

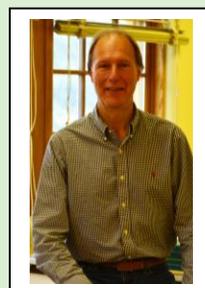
For more about the 1899

Yellowstone expedition, and the early prominence of RM in the region and nation, see the December Wyoming Native Plant Society newsletter, and Roger Williams's "Aven Nelson of Wyoming", pages 59 to 88.



http://www.wynps.org/newsletters/2015_12.pdf

Volunteers in the Spotlight



Far left:
Jay Dierks

Left: Barry
Hildreth

Jay Dierks and Barry Hildreth, both Wyoming natives, recently returned to settle in Laramie. Jay was HR and Finance Director for various agencies and then dedicated most of his career to the State Judiciary System of Colorado. He graduated from University of Wyoming in Organizational Communication (aka Human Resources). Barry, too, graduated from University of Wyoming with a Master's in Chemistry and Math Education. He first worked as a science educator at Lingle High School. He went on to work in telecommunications with MCI (now Verizon), including residential accounts receivable, business analyst for their IT group, and managing an Access database that tracked credit balances and escheatment. Jay's zest for more knowledge and Barry's life-long appreciation of plants are translating into many volunteer hours each week at the RM, while transforming our monumental pressed specimen backlog. We are thankful for their generosity!

Reminder: *Next Herbarium Night*
April 21, 5:30-7 pm