

ELINOR LEHTO, ARIZONA BOTANIST, 1915–2009

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Arizona State University Herbarium

On Sunday February 22, 2009 the botanical community lost a dear friend.

Elinor (Dixon) Lehto passed away at the Regional Medical Center in Richardson, Texas early Sunday morning, February 22, 2009 after a lengthy illness. Elinor was born in Dayton, Washington on 23 September, 1915 to Ott P. Dixon and Flora Ellen Keith. She was the oldest of four children. She received her elementary education in the Winona Public School and secondary education at the Endicott Union High School. She married Emil Lehto in March, 1939. The family moved from Washington to Arizona in 1960 and she entered Arizona State University in September, completing a Bachelor of Science degree in botany in 1966. She was Curator of the Herbarium, Botany Microbiology Department, Arizona State University on a half-time basis from 1962 to June 1966, and full-time staff from July 1966 to 1980. She completed the requirements for a Master of Science degree in biology in May of 1970. At ASU she was a member of Beta Beta Beta Biological Honor Society.

Elinor was the mother of three children – daughter Mary Lehto of Savannah, TX; son Stephen Lehto of Honolulu, HI; and was preceded in death by daughter Sylvia Stewart. She was divorced December 1966. She is also survived by one brother, Donald Dixon of Spokane, WA, two grandsons, and one great grandson.

Elinor lived a full life, spending her working years at Arizona State University as the Curator of the Herbarium. After retirement, she turned to quilting to occupy her time, piecing together a variety of hand-made works of art. She was also a crochet and knitting enthusiast and had countless afghans to show for it - no doubt adorning the sofas and beds of various family members. She naturally enjoyed gardening, and had numerous exotic plants growing in pots all over the house.

In 1988, Elinor moved to the Dallas area to be closer to her children and grandchildren. She continued her hobbies, and became an active member of the Iris and Rose Society of Dallas, and the quilting club. She made many friends through these associations.

Elinor got a late start in her formal botanical education. She was over 50 when she entered graduate studies at ASU, but probably always had an interest in plants. As an undergraduate, she took a class from Dr. Norman Russel which apparently sparked her enthusiasm. Elinor's master's thesis was a floristic study of Lake Pleasant Regional Park, supervised by Dr. Donald Pinkava, Dr. Duncan Patten and Dr. Mont Cazier. She was interested in expanding our knowledge of the Upper Sonoran Desert flora and providing data for future comparisons. She also included a checklist of common lichens in the Park. She identified 364 vascular plant species (two new for Arizona) with added discussion on geology, climate, and vegetation of various habitat types and exposures – standard fare for a floristic study. But basic contributions to our knowledge of the flora of Arizona at the time were much

needed, and most importantly, provided frameworks for future botanical, ecological, and environmental studies.

Elinor's contributions to the ASU Herbarium were monumental. A simple search on SEINet [<http://seinet.asu.edu/seinet/collections/index.jsp>] brings up roughly 15,700 records in the four main regional herbaria with Lehto numbers. However, these records represent mostly Arizona taxa, so the total is much higher (probably around 25,000), as she collected all over the US and Mexico whenever she traveled.

One of her first tasks as Curator was apparently to begin assigning accession numbers to the collection. Beginning with the lower plants, as well as recording new accessions as they came, she hand wrote each taxon and number in journal entries. In 1962, there were approximately 11,500 sheets in the collection. By the time Elinor retired – 31 journals later, the collection had increased nearly 10-fold to over 112,000 specimens.

“Elinor absolutely loved to collect plants.” says David Keil, a fellow grad student and self-described “herbarium groupie,” currently Professor of Botany and Director of the Robert F. Hoover Herbarium at California Polytechnic State University San Luis Obispo. He first met Elinor in the spring of 1966 while taking Arizona Flora from Dr. Donald Pinkava. David recalls the “wow” moment when he was invited on a collecting trip to Lake Pleasant with Elinor and Don. That was the day he decided floristics was the career path for him.

Elinor was not an official teaching assistant for ‘Arizona Flora’, but went on field trips associated with the class – Utery Mountains, Mount Lemmon, Canyon Lake, etc. She was invaluable on those trips, as Dr. Pinkava was new to Arizona and unfamiliar with the flora at the time. Her knowledge of the Arizona flora was impressive and she seemed to know everything about the subject. Dr. Pinkava candidly admits to relying on Elinor a great deal in his first year teaching ‘Flora.’ Former students such as David Keil and Eric Sundell similarly credit Elinor for tutoring them in their first years at ASU.

In the early 1970's, Dr. Pinkava wrote a grant to travel and collect in Arizona. The purpose was to build the collection, especially in underrepresented areas of the state. The field trips often included the trio of Pinkava, Keil, and Lehto. Elinor was an enthusiastic, tireless field hand and “keeper of the notes.” They would “collect by day, and bale by night,” then get up and do it again the next day. They collected intensely in those first few years, and added thousands of important accessions, including range extensions, introduced species, and many new state records.

Keil looks back fondly on the countless hours they spent in the field and herbarium, sorting through exchange material playing “name that plant,” and exchanging plant jargon across the room. The Herbarium Gang also periodically included Lyle McGill, Harry Tate, Tim Reeves, and others. Sometimes the green house manager and even janitor would gather for some herbarium banter and plant exploration.

Elinor had a knack for keying out plants. Many of the taxa she identified were yet to be represented in the Herbarium, but she was not shy about assigning an *Astragalus*, *Cryptantha*, or *Eriogonum* species name to a collection that had no

reference sheet. We all have our blunders, but Elinor, amazingly, got it right the vast majority of the time. She was intuitive, but also savvy with regional references to supplement Kearney and Peebles, 'Flora of Arizona'. Rarely can you thumb through a folder and not come across a Lehto specimen – one that she personally collected or annotated. Indeed, there have been several times when, after hours of searching and keying, and finally determining, you browse the cabinet for the taxon you are sure is new to the collection, only to find a thin folder containing a sheet with the familiar Lehto label. Sometimes you find that she collected the very same odd plant in the same place that you collected it years afterword.

Elinor dedicated nearly 20 years of her life collecting, identifying, and mounting plants for the ASU Herbarium. Her contributions have greatly increased its value to the botanical community and will continue to be appreciated in the future. But her untold hours assisting students, faculty, and visitors were equally important. Anyone associated with Elinor Lehto seems to recall similar fond memories - her knowledge and love of plants, willingness to always give a helping hand, and her loyal friendship.



Elinor Lehto, Arizona Botanist, 1915–2009. Elinor in the ASU Vascular Plant Herbarium (photo from the State Press, Oct. 13, 1965; courtesy of Don Pinkava)