

Ralph R. Stewart (1890-1993)

Biographical Sketch

Ralph Randles Stewart was born April 15, 1890, in New York, to Thomas A. Stewart and Mary Isabel Randles. He attended Columbia University (1907-11) for his B.S. degree and in 1911 went to teach at Gordon College, Rawalpindi, India (now Pakistan).

"In 1911, as a fresh graduate of Columbia University in New York City, I began to lecture in Botany and Zoology in a tiny Presbyterian Mission college in Rawalpindi with only 86 students. I had a three-year appointment and not expecting to be in India again I wondered what would be the most interesting way to spend the two summers, I expected to have in the East, on a slender budget. My salary was \$600 a year with a room in a dormitory. It was a different dollar in those days and the first year my food cost me the equivalent of \$0.41 a day and \$0.50 the second.

In 1911 with four young men, two Americans, a Bengali and a Scot who wanted an adventurous summer vacation, we decided that a good way to utilize the summer of 1912 would be to hike in Kashmir and Western Tibet (Ladak). Two of us worked in Gordon College, Rawalpindi, which is at the beginning of the cart road to Kashmir constructed in 1890 with a good deal of cost and difficulty. It crossed the first Himalayan Range at Jhicca Gali near Murree (c. 2100 m), descended to the Jhelum River at Kohala and then followed the river to Srinagar, a distance of 196 miles. The other three lived in Lahore.

We had nearly three months of vacation and we left Rawalpindi at the beginning of July on our push-bikes. It was still in the horse and buggy age, just before the Model T Fords and the buses began to carry visitors to Kashmir. Our cook and baggage travelled in a one horse, spring-less vehicle called an *ekka*. I was the only botanist in the party. The others were interested in taking pictures and seeing new country. We spent the summer in Kashmir and Ladak and I enjoyed the trip so much that I helped organize an even longer expedition for the summer of 1913.

We again rode bicycles to the Kashmir Valley and again hiked to Leh, the capital of Ladak. Instead of returning to Kashmir we turned east from Leh, crossed the Rupshu plains and entered Lahul by the Baralacha Pass; left Lahul by the Rotang La, visited Kulu and then walked further east to Simla and returned home from there by train.

I collected industriously both summers and gathered enough material to work on for a PhD thesis at Columbia University. When my three years at Gordon were complete in the summer of 1914, I returned to New York; was given a Teaching Fellowship and graduated in 1916. My PhD thesis was entitled 'The Flora of Ladak, Western Tibet', Bull. Torrey Bot. Club 43: 1916-17. This little book was the only one available on the plants of Ladak until the book of Kachroo's." (History and Exploration... p. 103)

Thus began a life-long interest in the botany of Kashmir and NW India.

In 1916 Stewart completed his PhD degree, married Isabelle Caroline Darrow, and was appointed to teach at Gordon College by the United Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. Before beginning his work at Gordon College, he used a Cutting Travelling Fellowship to spend a year collecting plants in Punjab and Kashmir. From 1917-22 he taught botany, zoology and English at Gordon College, and served as honorary superintendent of the Rawalpindi Leper Asylum. His two daughters,

Jean and Ellen, were born in 1919 and 1921 respectively, and both later graduated from Woodstock School, Mussoorie. The year 1922-23 was spent on missionary furlough, but working at the New York Botanical Garden naming the plants he had collected in India. From 1923-32 he again taught at Gordon College, and in 1934 assumed the responsibilities of college principal, a position he held until 1940. Toward the beginning of WWII he returned to USA, filed as a conscientious objector with his draft board, and spent four years as Curator, Oriental Plants, at the New York Botanical Garden.

As the war wound down Stewart returned to India, and the years 1944-55 were again spent as Principal of Gordon College, while the trauma of the partition of India and Pakistan was taking place in 1947. Sadly, in 1953 he lost his first wife, Belle Stewart, to cancer. In 1954 he married Hladia Porter who had served for 35 years at Kinnard Girls College, Lahore. His last term in India, 1955-60 he served as Vice-Principal of Gordon College, managed three high schools, and looked after the disposal of mission property. His plant collection was gifted to the Government of Pakistan and now forms the basis for the National Herbarium (Stewart Collection) in Islamabad, under the Pakistan Agricultural Research Council.

On reaching 70, the mandatory retirement age of his society, he retired to the USA and took a position as Research Assistant at the University of Michigan where he continued to work on Asian plants, and spent 14 summers collaborating on plants at the Kew Gardens, UK. At Michigan he completed work on his monumental 1028 page "Annotated Catalogue of the Vascular Plants of West Pakistan and Kashmir" published as part of the Flora of West Pakistan series in 1972. After 7 years at Michigan, the pay ran out and his status was changed to "volunteer", but the work continued. By 1981, he completed his "History and Exploration of Plants in Pakistan and Adjoining Areas" published in 1982, again as part of the Flora of Pakistan series.

This difficult to obtain volume, written when Stewart was 91, provides a minutely detailed and wide-ranging survey history of plant collection in the various districts of Pakistan and adjoining areas of Kashmir, Ladakh and Afghanistan, complete with lists and dates of all collectors, the locations of their collections, lists of their publications, and recommendations for further work in the area. Kashmir and Ladakh were clearly his first love, and the longest sections of the book are devoted to this area. He returned to Kashmir at least 30 times prior to 1947, and collected in all the remote corners. In addition to detailing the work of others before him and his own work, Stewart also provides advice to future students and collectors on botanical areas that need further work. For example, "There are large numbers of Pakistani and Kashmir ferns in collections and I wish that some one would have line drawings made of each of our ferns and produce a book on the lines of Beddome which would be attractive to visitors and Pakistani plant lovers. At 91 I am too old to volunteer." (History and Recollections... p. 180).

But he still wasn't done. At the age of 100 he was still spry enough to make a trip to Pakistan. In 1990 he was invited to return to Pakistan as Chief Guest of a

Symposium on Plant Life of South Asia, organized by the Department of Botany, University of Karachi. Distinguished botanists from 40 nations attended the symposium and more than 1000 people came to greet him on his return to Pakistan. He was accompanied to Pakistan by his daughter Ellen, and three of his grandchildren, shown in the photo below.



Ralph and Hladia retired to Westminster Gardens, Duarte, California in 1981, and he died there in 1993, aged 103.

Ralph R. Stewart publications in the MCADD collection at www.pahar.in

1917 Flora of Ladak, Western Tibet by Stewart s.pdf (PhD thesis)

1972 Flora of West Pakistan--Annotated Catalogue of Vascular Plants of West Pakistan and Kashmir by Stewart s.pdf

1982 History and Exploration of Plants in Pakistan and Adjoining Areas by Stewart s.pdf