

Note on the Passing of Ruth M. Stearns

The ecological community lost an inspirational couple and two dear friends last year. Ruth M. Stearns, age 79, and Forest Walden Stearns, age 80, passed away within three months of each other in northern Wisconsin in 1999. Ruth died 14 December 1999. Much has already been written about Forest Stearns, but he and Ruth truly operated as a couple, supporting each other and complementing each other's skills and backgrounds. Both possessed a rich intellectual curiosity that enlivened interactions with students and colleagues. And those of us who had the pleasure of visiting them in their home were graciously entertained and treated to an unpretentious style of hospitality, with the discussion ranging widely as both Ruth and Forest conversed intelligently on any manner of topics.

Ruth Heitz was born on 4 June 1920 in Wirt, Indiana. She received a B.S. degree in Home Economics from Indiana University, and an M.A. in Textiles and Clothing from Michigan State University. She taught textiles and clothing science at Michigan State College (Dowagiac, Michigan), Central Michigan College (Mt. Pleasant, Michigan), Butler University (Indianapolis, Indiana) and served as the State 4-H Club leader at Purdue University. As a college instructor, Ruth was clearly outside the tradition for women at that time. But "breaking the mold" was nothing new for Ruth, who had won various championships for her shooting expertise. In 1956, she and Forest were married in

Lafayette, Indiana, and she abandoned a successful academic career to help raise Forest's three children from a previous marriage, and then their own son, who died of leukemia at age 12.

They moved from Indiana to Mississippi, then to Minnesota and northern Wisconsin, before finally settling in Milwaukee in 1968, where Forest was offered a position as Professor of Botany at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. A community is never the same after an institution starts in it, and brings in men and women who possess great skills and are set free to seek the truth. Ruth and Forest Stearns used their skills, special experiences, and knowledge in supporting several generations of students. They created a sense of community and nurtured their academic family, urging us to bring our own strengths and outlooks to shape the work we did. In a time when such behavior was in short supply, they truly served as mentors.

During Forest's tenure as Botanical Editor and Coordinating Editor for the Ecological Society's journals and as Editor for the *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts and Letters*, many a manuscript had two sets of editorial marks on it—one was his and the other Ruth's. She ably supported and enhanced Forest's career, drawing on a natural history background gained from a rural upbringing. She would occasionally reminisce about picking tobacco on the family farm, and could always remember to add a Southern drawl to her speech when she wanted to make a point of growing up on the Ohio River.

The northern Wisconsin forest was Forest's muse. And in Ruth he

found a kindred spirit and someone with whom he could share a lifetime of botanizing and natural history discovery. During his years in the U.S. Forest Service, Ruth could often be found in the field as an able assistant, contributing insights and observations to the various projects. There was no question that they would retire to the North Woods, and in 1988 they moved to Rhinelander, Wisconsin and lived in a delightful lakefront home nestled beneath the tall pines, too full of books and manuscripts and plants, where they entertained ecological visitors from around the world. A visit to their home often meant a field trip along the winding forest roads, discussions on various botanical topics, and the occasional lecture from Forest on forest ecology or phenology. In the spring, he and Ruth would take particular delight in looking for the first flowering of the trailing arbutus.

I had the opportunity to visit each of them shortly before their deaths. I was concerned about their health, but their thoughts and conversation were more about their former students and colleagues, wanting to know the latest news and offering words of encouragement and praise. Forest and Ruth accomplished a great deal. They were respected educators and scientists who used their special expertise and knowledge to touch the lives of many young people, all of whom came away with a greater understanding of the natural world, and many of whom went on to make the field their career.

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