

## **Remembering a Conservation Leader and Educator**

By Rich Henderson

On February 20, 2009, Wisconsin's conservation community lost a great naturalist and educator, Dr. John W. Thomson. John passed away peacefully at his rural home south of Mt. Horeb, WI, at the age of 95, surrounded by Olive, his wife and partner in conservation and environmental education for more than 72 years, and several members of their family. John and Olive raised five children, Dennis, Douglas, Norman, Roderic, and Elizabeth, and have seven grandchildren. I wish to share with you some of the contributions to conservation and environmental education that Dr. Thomson made during the course of his life.

John and Olive have long been enthusiastic supporters of The Prairie Enthusiasts and our mission (life members since 1993), and mentors to many people now active in conservation. They were certainly a major influence in my life. Their commitment to conservation has also been passed on to their children, as exemplified by their son Dennis and his wife Joan Schurch Thomson who established the 160-acre Schurch-Thomson Prairie preserve, which they have entrusted to TPE for care and maintenance.

Born in Scotland, John came to this country when he was 8 years old. He lived in New York City and graduated from Columbia University with a degree in botany. In 1935, he came to the University of Wisconsin in Madison to study with Norman C. Fassett, who was a plant geographer, taxonomist, teacher, conservationist, and a pioneer in preserving habitat for the rich native flora of Wisconsin. Fassett, along with Henry C. Greene, were Wisconsin's original prairie enthusiasts (see *A Botanist Remembers* in this issue of the *Prairie Promoter*).

Soon to be Dr. John Thomson, he began his career at Wisconsin as a graduate student in the Botany Department, helping with the first restoration experiments on Curtis Prairie in the UW-Madison Arboretum in 1935. Influenced by Aldo Leopold and Norman Fassett, John ended up doing his Masters and Doctoral theses on the prairie vegetation of the central sands region of Wisconsin; work that was eventually incorporated into John T. Curtis' *Vegetation of Wisconsin* (1959). While at the University, John also met and married (in 1937) Olive Sherman; herself a botany student and lover of nature, who grew up on the shore of Lake Koshkonong.

After receiving his doctorate in 1939, John with Olive returned to New York to be a naturalist with the American Museum of Natural History and taught at Brooklyn College. They returned to Wisconsin where John taught at UW-Superior for a short time. Then in 1944 he took a position with the UW-Madison's Department of Botany. He soon became the primary instructor of the University's plant taxonomy courses, teaching more than 5,000 students over the course of his 40-year career with the UW.

Through these courses, Dr. Thomson influenced thousands of students to appreciate the natural world, and in many cases, to enter careers in conservation. Many of his former students have made and are still making use of the taxonomic knowledge and enthusiasm for nature he passed on. They are working and volunteering as botanists, horticulturalists, conservationists, ecologists, foresters, and naturalists throughout the United States and the world. In 1974, I was fortunate enough to be one of those taxonomy students. I remember his lectures being informative and enjoyable – filled with anecdotes gained from his years of travel, study, and field observations. I can still picture Dr. Thomson, during the course of a lecture on the milkweeds, abruptly jumping on top of the lecture bench to demonstrate how an insect would have to position its legs in order to inadvertently hook and extract a pair of pollen sacks and then pull the sacks into a slot on another flower in order for pollination to occur. For 20 years, he was an advisor of undergraduate students in a College of Letters and Science's major called Biological Aspects of Conservation. I was privileged to be one of those students.

Over his 45-year career, Dr. Thomson became a world renowned authority on lichens, publishing nearly 100 articles, monographs, and books (five). In the 1950s and 60s, he made 14 expeditions to the Arctic to study and collect lichens. He ended up amassing one of the most comprehensive collections of lichens in the world, and identified an estimated 100,000 specimens during the course of his career. In 1992, Dr. Thomson was awarded the Acharius Medal by the International Association of Lichenology in recognition of outstanding contributions to lichenology. He also served as president of the American Bryological Society.

Among his many accomplishments, Dr. Thomson chaired the UW-Madison Arboretum Committee, and served as President of the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters (WASAL). He founded the Wisconsin Junior Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, which promotes scientific endeavors of school children. In the mid 1960's, he chaired a committee of WASAL that analyzed Wisconsin's natural areas protection program and made recommendations to the Governor for needed legislative changes. Many of these were implemented, most notably the creation of a professional staff within state government to administer a scientific areas program (now known as the State Natural Areas program). Wisconsin was among the first states to do so.

John and Olive were founding members of the Botanical Club of Wisconsin, and active in the Citizen's Natural Resources Association. Together they received the 1985 Gulf Oil Conservation Award (a national award) for their dedication to conservation education and improvement of the environment.

Dr. Thomson served on the board of the WI Chapter of The Nature Conservancy from 1983-1990. He also served for many years on TNC's Land Stewardship and Science Advisory committee. John and Olive also established a fund with TNC for land acquisition in the Military Ridge Area west of Mt. Horeb. TNC's Thomson Memorial Prairie is named in honor of their deceased son Douglas.

John was known for his warmth, generosity, and willingness to share his knowledge of plants and nature with amateurs and professionals alike. For many summers he taught botany classes at Lake Itasca Biological Station in Minnesota. Over the years he and Olive, lead many field trips for TNC and other conservation groups. I attended everyone I could, for they were always informative and entertaining.

In 1999, The Prairie Enthusiasts honored John and Olive at the annual TPE banquet with an award for life long commitment to conservation of our native ecosystems. They received a well deserved standing ovation.

John is going to be missed by many, and long remembered. He and Olive built a conservation legacy that very few can equal. Rest well John, you made a difference.

*NOTE: TPE has established a fund to accept donations in honor of Dr. John Thomson's memory. We are working with Olive and her family on the precise use of the funds. An idea at this time is the funding of a perpetual student internship with TPE in John's name. If you wish to contribute, send donations to TPE John Thomson Memorial Fund @ TPE, P.O. Box 1148, Madison, WI 53701.*