

## EDWARD PALMER'S COLLECTION IN THE INDIAN TERRITORY 1868

*By Rogers McVaugh\**

In the year 1868 Dr. Edward Palmer, even then a veteran collector of fifteen years' experience, spent seven months in the Indian Territory and made a large collection of botanical, zoological and ethnological specimens. The localities visited by Palmer and the routes over which he passed have never been set forth in detail and, as far as the writer is aware, his collections of 1868 have never been the subject of any systematic investigation except as individual specimens have been examined incidentally by workers in the various fields of natural science. The exact source of Palmer's material has not always been clear to subsequent investigators, for the data accompanying his specimens were not of the fullest, and the localities at which he collected were frontier posts of a more or less temporary nature. Cope, for example, in his classical works on reptiles and amphibians, cites many of Palmer's collections of 1868, chiefly those from "Fort Cobb" or "Old Fort Cobb"; far from being aware of the actual location of Fort Cobb, he sometimes assigns it to Texas and sometimes to California!

The entire collection of 1868 became the property of the Smithsonian Institution, from which the duplicates were distributed. The plants, comprising some 450 numbered specimens, were supplied with printed labels as follows: "Distributed by the Smithsonian Institution. Collected by Dr. Edward Palmer in the Indian Territory, chiefly on the False Washita, between Fort Cobb and Fort Arbuckle, 1868." One set of the specimens was sent to Dr. John Torrey for naming<sup>1</sup> and is now at the New York Botanical Garden; a second essentially complete set is in the United States National Herbarium. Numbers were assigned to the specimens after the arrangement of the collection according to the system of Bentham and Hooker. Since no numbers were assigned in the field, it is impossible to derive any details of the collector's itinerary from the present arbitrary sequence of numbers. It is likewise impossible

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<sup>1</sup> There seems to be no list of these collections, either in New York or in Washington, and it may be that the aging Torrey never completed the work of identification. Palmer, upon returning to Washington late in 1870, wrote to Torrey inquiring about the date of his 1868 collections. Torrey's reply, dated Dec. 16, 1870, was in part as follows: "I will send the list of the Indian Territory plants, as far as they are determined. You shall have at least the genus, and a good proportion of the species named. Any that may be doubtful, I will study as soon as I get through with some other pressing work."

to determine the exact locality from which any given specimen may have come. In some cases, however, it may be found possible to ascertain the approximate source of a collection by consideration of the known flowering season of the plant, its geographical range, and Palmer's itinerary as set forth below.

The present account of Palmer's travels in the Indian Territory has been prepared chiefly from the following sources: (1) A series of letters from Palmer to Professor Spencer F. Baird, who was then Assistant Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. These letters are now in the historical files of the Smithsonian, under Accessions 1136 and 1317. (2) Letters and reports in the archives of the Office of Indian Affairs, U. S. Department of the Interior. (3) Palmer's journal, now lost, but quoted extensively in an unpublished manuscript by the late W. E. Safford. This manuscript is now in the files of the Division of Plant Exploration and Introduction. (4) Maps on file in the Division of Maps of the Congressional Library. The most important of these are a War Department map of the Indian Territory (by order of Maj. Gen. J. M. Schofield, 1869), and a map of Kansas, Texas and the Indian Territory (War Department, Engineer Bureau, 1867). (5) Unpublished material from the files of the Division of Birds, U. S. National Museum.

At the beginning of the year 1868 Palmer was in Washington. Here, early in January, he was appointed to the post of doctor for the newly established Kiowa-Comanche Indian Agency, in the Leased Lands west of what was then the Chickasaw Nation. Although he did not hold the degree of Doctor of Medicine, Palmer had had some medical training, and practiced locally in Kansas before the Civil War, and had served as an army surgeon both during and after that war. Colonel Jesse H. Leavenworth, the officer under whom he had served in Colorado in 1862, was to be the agent for the new Kiowa-Comanche Agency, and urged Palmer's appointment because of his previous good work as surgeon in the United States Army.

From Washington Palmer went by rail to Kansas City, stopping briefly in St. Louis to visit George Engelmann, to whom in previous years he had sent plant-collections for identification. On January 21st he wrote to Baird from "Leavenworth City," Kansas; he expected to leave the following day with Colonel Leavenworth and party for Fort Gibson, Arkansas (now Oklahoma), and Fort Arbuckle, in the Indian Territory.

After leaving Fort Gibson the party crossed the Arkansas River by ferry and stopped for a time at the Creek Agency, a few miles up the river in what is now Muskogee County, Oklahoma. According to Safford they reached Cherokee Town, in the Chickasaw Nation (that is, at the junction of Rush Creek and the Washita River,

near the present site of Pauls Valley, Garvin County), on February 17th. After a halt for dinner they crossed and made their way up the Washita. On the 19th they camped on the Washita about 20 miles below Fort Cobb, subsequently remaining at this camp about two weeks while awaiting a move to a permanent location. Palmer's reports indicate that his Indian patients, during this early period, were numerous. On March 3rd he wrote to Baird, noting that the following day he expected the move to the new camp.

By the middle of March the new agent and his party had established themselves at the first permanent site of the Kiowa-Comanche Agency, in Eureka Valley, just south of the Washita River, some ten miles<sup>2</sup> east of Fort Cobb in what is now Caddo County, Oklahoma. The presence of the Agency at this spot is confirmed by a letter from Agent Leavenworth to the Indian Commissioner, dated April 22, 1868, and headed: "Kiowa & Comancha In. Agency, Eureka Valley, L.L." The following year, 1869, the Agency was removed some 30 miles to the newly built Fort Sill, in the modern Comanche County, east of the Wichita Mountains. It is unlikely that Palmer ever visited the Wichita Mountains, as at the time of his stay on the Washita River there was relatively little travel southward from the Agencies on that river, and his letters contain no reference to any trip of this sort. He could scarcely have had any official reason for visiting the Wichita Mountains, as the site of Fort Sill was not selected until midsummer of 1868, after his departure from the Agency.<sup>3</sup>

Palmer's single reference to the Wichita Mountains, in his letter of March 18th, to Baird, is as follows: "The agent expects in a few days to start for the Witchata Mountains." If indeed the agent carried out his plan for such a trip, and even if Palmer accompanied him, it is clear that the latter was not absent from the Agency for any extended period, for among his letters and reports from Eureka Valley are three dated respectively March 31st, April 8th, and April 21st.

On April 22nd the agent, Colonel Leavenworth, wrote to the Indian Commissioner complaining of Palmer's inattention to duty. He regretted that Palmer's attitude had changed so greatly since his service in the Army in Colorado, that he was now wholly without interest in the ailments of his Indian charges, but was entirely absorbed in his avocation, the collecting of specimens for the Smithsonian Institution.

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<sup>2</sup> Palmer's notes accompanying specimens in the Division of Birds show that he made collections on March 14, 18, 19 and 21, and April 1, at the "Kiowa Agency 17 mi. s.e. Ft. Cobb." The actual distance is somewhat less than this.

<sup>3</sup> See the report of Brevet Maj. Gen. B. H. Grierson, dated July 14, 1868, in the Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for the year 1869, p. 67 (Washington, 1870).

Palmer wrote to Baird on April 23rd, and to the Indian Commissioner on April 25th, explaining his own position and maintaining his innocence of the charges made by the agent. In spite of this, Colonel Leavenworth on May 4th discharged him from his position as doctor to the Agency; this brought a vigorous protest from Palmer and also from Major Henry Shanklin, who was in charge of the nearby Wichita Agency, also located in Eureka Valley. Shanklin not only wrote to the Commissioner in Palmer's behalf, but had the latter move his effects to the Wichita Agency and continue his work there.

Some blame doubtless attaches to Palmer in this affair; from the amount of material he collected in 1868 it is clear that a considerable portion of his time and energy must have been spent on his own pursuits, perhaps to the detriment of his Indian charges. It may be, however, that Colonel Leavenworth was somewhat hasty in his judgment of the case; his management of other affairs of the Agency was not always above criticism, and his letters and reports published in the Annual Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs indicate that his temper was sometimes short.

After his removal, about May 8th, from the Kiowa-Comanche Agency to that of the Wichitas, Palmer seems to have maintained some degree of contact with both groups. Some of the Indians were friendly, but many were definitely hostile to him. This, according to Safford, was because of their fear of his "charms" and the possible ill effects of these upon themselves. Whatever the cause of the ill-feeling, its existence is well established. It was discussed by Palmer in his own letters and it was mentioned by Major Shanklin in a published report.<sup>4</sup>

In speaking of the Kiowas and Comanches, Shanklin says:

"Their conduct was insolent and humiliating to the last degree. . . Dr. Palmer, the physician of the district, and who made his home at the agency, had become a special object of hatred, to such an extent that threats were made that they would kill him . . . receiving information from one of their own tribe that they intended to burn the agency and kill the doctor, it was deemed prudent to move at once. The night after the building was burned with all its contents."

Palmer wrote to Baird from the Wichita Agency on May 31st. Soon after this, as detailed in a letter written from Fort Arbuckle on June 10th, he discovered the plot to kill him and left at once for the Fort, which he must have reached sometime during the first week in June. Fort Arbuckle lay a few miles west of the Washita River, between Wildhorse Creek and the Arbuckle Mountains, near the present site of Hoover, Garvin County, approximately 100 miles east of Fort Cobb. Palmer doubtless returned to it by

<sup>4</sup> Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for 1868, p. 287 (Washington, 1868).

the same route he had traversed the previous winter, that along the Washita.

From early June until late September Palmer worked out of Fort Arbuckle, apparently making his headquarters there between collecting trips into the surrounding country. His first trip, as indicated by the records of the Division of Birds, was to the eastward into the Choctaw Nation. We find him crossing Blue River (probably in the modern Johnston County) on June 20; on the 24th he made collections probably in the same area; on July 1 he collected at Boggy Depot (now Atoka County).

On July 12 Palmer wrote to Baird from Cherokee Town; presumably he had by this time returned from Boggy Depot and passed through Fort Arbuckle *en route*. From Cherokee Town he planned to return again to Fort Arbuckle, thence to make a trip to the southwest. On August 6 he wrote again to Baird, this time from Fort Arbuckle, still planning a trip (which seems not to have materialized) to Texas before returning to Washington. On September 22 he wrote again from Cherokee Town; he had been sick and was expecting to leave by carriage for Leavenworth, Kansas, at the end of the month. On October 10th he wrote from Leavenworth, summing up the situation in a characteristically laconic manner: "Arrived safe but in bad health."

Thus seems to have ended Palmer's field-work for 1868; he returned to Washington, doubtless by rail from Kansas City, during the fall or early winter. He is not known to have collected plants either during the return trip to Leavenworth or after his arrival there, but quite possibly he may have done so. His season's activity may be summarized as follows:

1. February 19 to about June 1. Vicinity of the Kiowa-Comanche Agency, in Eureka Valley, east of Fort Cobb. All the spring-flowering species in the collection were doubtless obtained here, for but few if any of these could have started to grow before this, while Palmer was on his way from Leavenworth to Fort Arbuckle in February.

2. June 1 to June 10. Trip from Fort Cobb to Fort Arbuckle, presumably along the road which at that time ran south of the Washita River and more or less parallel to it. Because of the haste with which this trip was undertaken, it may be supposed that relatively few specimens were collected *en route*.

3. Early June to late September. Vicinity of Fort Arbuckle. Most of the collections made during the summer and fall probably came from an area approximately that now comprised by Murray and Garvin Counties, within a radius of not more than 20 miles from Fort Arbuckle. The known exceptions are those collections made during the midsummer trip into the Choctaw Nation, when

Palmer travelled something over 50 miles from his base. He seems to have passed several times along the Washita River between Fort Arbuckle and Cherokee Town, and he may have made other trips out from his headquarters at the fort.

4. October 1 to October 10. Trip from the Indian Territory to Leavenworth, Kansas, probably by way of Fort Gibson. If, as Palmer had planned, the return trip to Kansas was made by carriage, there must have been relatively few opportunities for collecting along the way. The route followed was probably approximately as follows: East-northeast from Fort Arbuckle toward Perryville (now McAlester, Pittsburg County); this was the road to Fort Smith, Arkansas, and ran some miles south of, and nearly parallel to, the Canadian River. The road to Fort Gibson turned off to the northeast about 20 miles west of Perryville, and crossed the Canadian just above the junction with the North Fork; passing through Fork Town (or North Fork Town), in the present McIntosh County, it turned to the north and ran almost straight to Fort Gibson. The road from Fort Gibson to the north followed the valley of the Neosho River at least to the southern boundary of Kansas. In Kansas roads were more numerous, and the party with which Palmer was traveling may have elected to ascend the Neosho further so as to strike overland to Lawrence, or to leave the river a short distance north of the Kansas line and take the road eastward to Fort Scott before proceeding northward.