

Labor & Leisure: Liberty Hyde Bailey's Career and Retirement

Within two years, Bailey received another job offer, this time from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Bailey's interests in developing horticulture as a science that was relevant to rural people began to dovetail with his interests in agricultural education generally. He had experienced the effects of rural education available to country children firsthand in South Haven. He remembered "instruction" that consisted of children standing in the front of a small schoolhouse reciting from books that they did not understand, and he knew there were more engaging ways to educate.

As a teacher in the small rural school called Carl School while he was a student at MAC, he had tried such a different approach in his first teaching job. He took his students outside and began to develop a learner-centered method of instruction. It began with the curiosity of the child and emphasized the study of the child's world. One might study, then, the squirrels and dandelions in the schoolyard which the children see every day instead of recitations on rainforests and deserts which the children may never see. There are enough wonders in the everyday environment, Bailey argued, to keep anyone interested in a lifetime, and this process of "nature-study," when added to the teacher's pedagogical toolkit, would foster a love of those everyday wonders. "Little children love the dandelions," Bailey famously wrote; "why may not we?" And most importantly, hands-on learning engaged a greater diversity of children than other modes of teaching, since it involved all five senses and fostered curiosity and discovery.

Bailey became a leader in the nature-study movement, and at Cornell he founded an entire department devoted to nature-study, hiring the university's first women professors to begin leading the department. The department did not merely teach nature-study to future educators, but also became active in the publication of the Nature-Study Leaflets. These were mailed out to hundreds of teachers and students across the state of New York. That publication continued long after Bailey's time at Cornell and represented a major effort toward educational reform in the country. It became one of the university's efforts in "extension," which is the mandate that all land-grant universities must extend their educational efforts beyond the university walls for the wellbeing of the state.

It was an idea put into legislation by the Morrill Act, which established the land-grant system to provide colleges devoted to the "practical arts" as well as

the liberal arts in every state. Bailey considered it to be one of the most significant contributions to American democracy.

At the same time, Bailey became deeply involved in extension work with New York's farmers. He served as director of the New York State Experiment Station at Cornell for many years, which did experimental work applied to the practical issues relevant to the state's farmers. He was well-known during this time for his persistent outreach to farms all around the state. A farmer would write into the extension office with a problem related to soil or crops or livestock, and in some cases the next day they would see the tall figure of Dr. Bailey striding down the road toward their farm, offering what advice he had.

It wasn't long before Bailey became Dean of the College of Agriculture, which he proceeded to transform and vastly enlarge. Perhaps Bailey's most important legacy in this area was his insistence that the farmer represented a partner—a colleague—more than a student or pupil. Farmers knew what they needed, Bailey asserted, and did not need a professor to tell them that; his job was to listen and offer what he could. He often learned as much from them as they did from him.

Bailey was fast becoming the preeminent expert in rural politics and culture as well as in horticulture. He became the natural candidate for President of the Association of American Agricultural Colleges and Experiment Stations. At his presidential address in 1907, he gave a provocative address titled "The State and the Farmer," in which he put forward some of his opinions about the most pressing needs facing what was then being called the "country-life movement." Of primary concern was that the quality of life had been improving in urban areas, with amenities like running water and electricity, which was drawing young people away from their family's farms. The need, Bailey argued, was not for governmental edicts written by politicians or academics, but for a real survey of the needs of rural people, who could speak for themselves if given the opportunity. President Theodore Roosevelt was in attendance that day, and after the speech he approached Bailey and commended him on his efforts. Shortly thereafter, Roosevelt answered Bailey's call for what he called a national "Commission on Country-Life," and he appointed Bailey the national Chair.

The Commission surveyed rural people across the country, traveled through every state of the union holding open meetings with country folks, and finally compiled their many notes into a report in 1909 penned by Bailey. All this

Bailey led while simultaneously maintaining his position as Dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell. The direct results of the commission are still debated today, but Bailey's writing certainly articulated the rural situation of the day effectively and provocatively. The report has been credited by some with the development of rural electrification, the parcel post, and the modern highway system.

Liberty Hyde Bailey, Sr. passed away at the old farm in South Haven in January of 1912. It caused Dean Bailey to take serious stock of his situation. He had hoped to retire at the age of 50, and he was now behind schedule. He was at the height of his professional career and an incredibly popular professor at Cornell, but there was work outside of his institutional affiliations that he still desired to do.

He was also experiencing pressure from his friend, the former president Theodore Roosevelt, to run for governor of New York on the Progressive ticket—a position that did not interest him. He submitted his intent to retire, but at the urging of the college he taught three more semesters.

At this point in his life, Bailey was a bestselling author. He wrote on many topics, but especially popular were his books on gardening and farming. These incorporated the latest academic research into language that was easily accessible to the common farmer, gardener, and horticulturist. They always featured Bailey's trademark poetic sensibility and wit. He had entered into an agreement with Macmillan, one of the preeminent publishers of the time, stating that, as soon as he had a book project far enough developed for a title and a table of contents, Macmillan would send him a contract to publish the book.

Among his edited works were the massive *Cyclopedia of Standard Horticulture* and the *Cyclopedia of American Agriculture*, and he was already working on what would become *Hortus*, the first ever dictionary of horticulture. Now he was economically stable enough to retire and continue to support his family and his research with his writing.

Retirement came with the freedom Bailey desired to focus on the writing and research that he most wanted to do. One of his first ventures after retiring was a trip to New Zealand to deliver a series of lectures there on agricultural topics. On the long sea voyage, Bailey became inspired by the influence of the oceans and the vastness of the planet, and he began writing a new book

manuscript on the backs of napkins, scraps of paper, and whatever came to his hand. That manuscript would evolve into The Holy Earth, a work of environmental philosophy that would influence countless writers and thinkers after him, including Aldo Leopold, Pearl Buck, Wendell Berry, and Wes Jackson. It was also the first of a series of philosophical texts, the “Background Books,” that dipped into the areas of political theory, rural sociology, poetry, and even fiction.

Bailey also became renowned for his often-adventurous botanical explorations. He was developing a vast herbarium—or collection of dried and pressed plant specimens used for academic reference—which he called the “Hortorium.” This was the first primarily horticultural herbarium. The collection led him to many botanical publications and taxonomical studies. He became a major authority on many groups of plants, including *Carex* (sedges), *Brassica* (cabbages, broccoli, and many important vegetables), *Rubus* (raspberries and blackberries), *Cucurbita* (cucumbers, squash, and gourds), and many others. When he realized how little was known about the palms, that became his primary obsession. His palm explorations took him into the far reaches of Central and South America, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. As he grew into his seventies, eighties, and even his nineties, his solo plant expeditions began attracting public attention as everyone wondered where old Bailey would go next. But for him, it was all about the plants.

Bailey was planning his first solo palm-collecting expedition to the Congo Rainforest at the age of 92 when he was caught in a revolving door in Ithaca and broke his femur. From the hospital, he reported that the voyage was still on, but he began to decline, and eventually he became homebound. Bailey lived four more years, and he passed away in his home on Christmas Day, 1954, leaving a vast legacy of influence on American farming, education, conservation, and letters.