

## A Most Dangerous Profession

by Richard LeBlond, University of North Carolina Herbarium Associate

As sciences go, botany has few, if any, mythic heroes: no Dian Fosseys, Steve Erwins, or Indiana Joneses. Even those botanists who are heroes aren't recognized as botanists—E.T. for example, and, arguably, Charles Darwin.

Yet the profession reeks of adventure. Who discovers that blue-green algae live in the ice on the high flanks of the Himalayas? Who scales a sheer, 1,000-foot cliff in Venezuela to discover the only known specimen of a fiery orchid? A botanist, of course, with the fruit of adventure disclosed in obscure journals and the specimens themselves doing time in herbaria.

No legends proclaim the adventures of David Douglas, a botanist from Scotland who explored the western United States in the 1830s when it was an untamed frontier. He gave his name to one of his discoveries, the Douglas fir, and he gave his young life in a terrible way—to a wild bull awaiting him in a pit designed to trap animals, and into which they both fell.

In my own botanical experience, I have been captured by Marines at Camp Lejeune (with UNC Herbarium Curator Alan Weakley), eyed by alligators too stupid to know how easy it is to overturn a kayak, and attacked during seaside surveys by aerial terns who employed both fore and aft gunneries. But these kinds of adventure are the stuff of comic strips, not of legends.

Getting arrested as a German spy on Cape Cod during World War I, though, has legend potential. Such was the fate of American botanist Frederick W. Grigg, who had come to Cape Cod in June of 1917 in search of “a certain flower,” as he later told his captors. Grigg’s “certain flower” was the golden club (*Orontium aquaticum*), a lovely member of our coastal plain swamp flora that reaches its northern limit in a few dune ponds in the Provincelands at the tip of Cape Cod.

After collecting the golden club, Grigg boarded the train in Provincetown to return to Boston. And that’s where his troubles began. He was seen using government maps and looking at the wireless (telegraph) station with binoculars, and the conductor reported him to a naval officer on board. Approaching Grigg, the officer found him peering out the window through his “binoculars,” which turned out to be thick-lensed opera-style glasses;

Grigg was near-sighted.

Neither hero nor spy, but nonetheless in hot pursuit of legend, Grigg did not help matters. He derided the navy, remarking that he had nothing more to say to “half-fed sailors,” and then scuffled with the officer and three other men as they seized, handcuffed, and searched him. They found his “government maps,” which turned out to be topographic quad maps, and a notebook with “mysterious notations” in a foreign language. But most damning of all, he was wearing a “botanist’s outfit.”

So Grigg was, in more ways than one, bound for Boston. Word of his arrest traveled fast, and a crowd of several hundred spectators was waiting at Boston’s South Station. In what may have been his first sensible act since boarding the train, Grigg

demanded on arrival that officials summon Harvard University’s dean of botany, Merritt Lyndon Fernald. Fortunately for Grigg, Fernald was available, served as a character witness, and identified the “mysterious notations” in the notebook as nothing more than the Latin names of the plants Grigg had seen and collected.

The golden club specimen now lies in state at the Smith College Herbarium. Fastened to it, perhaps by Grigg himself, are the news

clippings of his arrest and release.

In defense of the populace, it was a time of war. One day after Grigg’s arrest, and unrelated to it, Provincetown harbor was closed to shipping. German U-boats were reported to be as thick as whales on Georges Bank, and more than one Cape Cod fishing vessel had been sunk by torpedo.

Nor was Grigg the first suspicious Cape visitor to be wrongly arrested as a spy. The year before, in March 1917, a young man had been seen sitting on an Atlantic-side dune with what appeared to be a signaling device in his lap. Suspected of sending messages to offshore U-boats, he was arrested. The signaling device turned out to be a typewriter, and the “spy” was just about to emerge as America’s greatest playwright, Eugene O’Neill.



*Erratum:* We regret that in the May-June 2008 issue of this newsletter, we mistakenly identified the author of “Report from the Herbarium” as Gary Perlmutter. The author was Carol Ann McCormick, assistant curator of the UNC Herbarium.