

LeRoy Ellsworth Detling (1898-1967)

Contribution to a book in preparation, *Plant Hunters of the Pacific Northwest*

By Eileen Flory

Abstract

LeRoy Detling was born in South Dakota and grew up in that state, Washington, and California. He received his BA in Romance languages from the University of Oregon (1921) and his MA in French from Stanford University (1923). After an eight-year career teaching French and Latin at the high school and university levels, he attended Stanford once more for an MA in botany (1933) and a PhD in biology (1936). He immediately went to work at the herbarium at the Museum of Natural History, University of Oregon, serving as curator from 1939 until his death in 1967.

Detling worked on the collection and taxonomy of far western plants and plant fossils (with monographs on *Cardamine (Dentaria)*, *Descurainia*, and *Lupinus*), and on the ecology and origin of Oregon plant communities, with particular attention later in his career to plant migration. This subject took him on several trips to Mexico, where he collected many specimens for the herbarium.

LeRoy Detling was born on October 23, 1898 in Groton, South Dakota, the youngest of eight children. His grandparents came to the United States from Germany, settling in the Midwest, and his parents, like so many of their generation, emigrated west, where they were farmers and orchardists in Washington and California.

Detling graduated from Gridley (California) Union High School in 1916. He attended Philomath (Oregon) College and then went to the University of Oregon, where he received his BA in Romance languages in 1921.

In 1921-22 he taught high school Latin and French in Wallowa, Oregon. A love of languages that would stay with him all his life prompted him to go for an advanced degree, and Detling received his MA in French from Stanford University in 1923. He then returned to Oregon to teach Romance languages at Willamette University in Salem (1924-26) and at the University of Oregon (1927-1930). Study abroad at the Sorbonne in 1926 helped keep the French language alive for him.

During the teaching years at Oregon, Louis F. Henderson, then curator of the plant collection, served as Detling's mentor, training him in the techniques of collecting, identifying, and caring for herbarium specimens. (Henderson had a degree in Romance languages from Cornell and this mutual interest may have originally brought the two men together.) Eventually Detling took the leap to science and went back to Stanford, receiving his MA in 1933 and his PhD in 1936.

The year Detling returned to the University of Oregon with his new PhD, the Museum of Natural History was created, with the herbarium as one of its four units. Henderson formally became curator of the herbarium, but his health was poor and he needed help. Detling was hired part time and, when his old mentor retired in 1939, he succeeded him as full-time curator.

For nearly 30 years, Detling directed and developed the herbarium for public service, research and instruction, also teaching for many years in the departments of botany, zoology, and finally biology. After 1957 he focused almost entirely on herbarium work, limiting his teaching to small classes of advanced students in plant taxonomy and species distribution, plus advising numerous graduate students in their theses and dissertations.

Detling gathered thousands of specimens from the far West (most notably those on which were based his monographs on *Cardamine (Dentaria)*, *Descurainia*, and *Lupinus*) and compiled a collection of the Willamette fossil flora.

Over the years, Detling became as much an ecologist as a taxonomist, focusing on biogeography, specifically plant migrations and the origins of current western flora. This interest took him to Mexico five times and once to Costa Rica. His most significant Mexican collecting trip was a sabbatical leave for a year and a quarter in 1961-62. The Mexican collection comes largely from the western Sierra Madre in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Aguascalientes and Colima. It was in hopes of completing this work that he stayed on the job past his official retirement date of 1963.

Detling served as curator of the herbarium until his death in September 1967. His wife cared for the herbarium until a successor could be found, and she finished and published his last, posthumous work. The collections of the University of Oregon herbarium now reside at Oregon State University in Corvallis.

After an unsuccessful first marriage, Detling married Mildred Riechers, on whose master's degree committee he had served, in 1944. Soon afterwards they built, plumbed, and wired a house among the walnut orchards just north of Eugene. At the time, Mildred was a zoologist studying foraminifera; she later became a scientific illustrator for the University of Oregon's Museum of Natural History; a writer, editor, and teacher; and an accomplished metalworker.

Weekends, holiday breaks, and summers often found the Detlings camped out, botanizing. Once their children arrived (Eileen in 1948 and Clifford in 1951), field work became a family affair. The children were introduced early into the routine of changing the plant press driers by laying the damp ones in tidy rows in the warm sun to dry and then inserting them between the sheets of newspaper with specimens folded inside. If he couldn't take the family out collecting, Detling would at least come back with stories: of following a bear up the trail or of running across an ex-student in the field. On the

herbarium front, the youngsters helped with setting dishes of fumigant on the shelves of the plant cabinets and keeping the counters clean. He always claimed that “*Pseudotsuga taxifolia*” were his first-born child’s first words, followed closely by “xeric island” and “chaparral.”

At home in Eugene, the back yard was a *Metasequoia* nursery for a time. The seedlings, of a species previously thought to exist only in the fossil record, were lined up planted in tin cans awaiting adoption; placement always came with a warning that the trees would shed leaves and twigs in the wintertime and were not to be abandoned as dead. The Detlings planted a *Metasequoia* in the yard, and it had grown huge by the time of Detling’s death. It was subsequently moved onto the University of Oregon campus.

Detling’s commitment to botany extended beyond the herbarium and the home. He served as an officer of the 4-H organization in Lane County and was on the staff at Camp Lane, a 4-H camp in Oregon’s Coast Range. Once the family 4-H projects started, he led forestry and entomology clubs for many years. And from time to time he was also called into court to identify plants, once to find that the contents of a suspicious cigarette were Scotch broom flowers!

The trips to Mexico were high points in Detling’s career. Not only did they extend his study of plant migration far to the south of Oregon, they also allowed him to use his language skills and they left him (and the rest of the family) with a love of all things Mexican. These trips lasted anywhere from two weeks to three months to a stay of over a year, when the Detlings packed the family into a 21-foot trailer and established “base camp” in a trailer park in Guadalajara.

Any frustrations of work in Mexico (mechanical breakdowns, bureaucratic red tape, illness) were heavily outweighed by exciting new activities. Country people welcomed the strange botanist and his family into their homes and fields, explaining at length over fresh-squeezed limeade what each plant was used for. Scientific work was a perfect entrée into the local culture. Visiting and dining with the watchman at the university, chatting in German with Mennonites in the wilds of Chihuahua, stopping at the one-horse sugar mill, at the bare-bones tequila factory, at the open-air brickworks—all contributed to a depth of experience that transformed collecting trips into full-fledged adventures. The Detlings briefly considered moving more or less permanently to Mexico, but gave up the dream as impractical. (The equally impractical notion of bringing back a baby burro was also left unfulfilled.)

One of Detling’s strengths as a collector was the meticulous ecological data he included with his specimens. He taught his students and his 4-H-ers the whys and hows of noting down such details as other plants in a specimen’s vicinity, the altitude (from his old brass altimeter), soil characteristics, which direction a slope faced, weather conditions—any observation that might help future researchers understand the plant in question.

His affection for the plant world came through clearly, wherever he happened to be. He had a habit of cupping a specimen in his hand, smiling, and saying, "Pretty little thing, isn't it?" Bushwhacking, hiking along a trail, or driving the roads of the West and of Mexico, his eyes would tend toward the flora, and he was always ready to expound on it all to anyone willing to take a few minutes to listen.

On September 19, 1967, LeRoy Detling died of a heart attack as left his house to walk to an evening of work at "the herb." The minutes of the next University of Oregon faculty meeting recorded, "We will miss this quiet, patient man. Even those who were only casually acquainted with him will be saddened at the loss. . . . The many thousands of plants he collected will serve botanists and students for many years to come. His memorial will be the simple statement on the label of each of these specimens, 'Collected by LeRoy E. Detling.'"

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