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<i>A Botanical Problem</i> : PROFESSOR MARGARET C. FERGUSON	193	<i>Ligation of Earthworms to Remove the Anterior or Posterior End</i> : L. S. ROWELL	212
<i>Herbert Hoover and Science</i> : DR. VERNON KELLOGG	197	<i>Special Articles</i> :	
<i>Obituary</i> :		<i>On a Release-Phenomenon in Electrical Stimulation of the "Motor" Cerebral Cortex</i> : DR. J. G. DUSSEY DE BARENNE and CLYDE MARSHALL. <i>The Etiology of Swine Influenza</i> : DR. RICHARD E. SHOPE. <i>Measuring Absorbed Phosphates and Nitrogen</i> : DR. W. J. SPILLMAN	213
<i>Memorials; Recent Deaths</i>	199	<i>Science News</i>	10
<i>Scientific Events</i> :			
<i>Museum Specimens; Field Museum of Natural History; Fellows of the Guggenheim Foundation; National Research Fellowships in the Biological Sciences; The Indianapolis Meeting of the American Chemical Society</i>	200		
<i>Scientific Notes and News</i>	203		
<i>Discussion</i> :			
<i>Origin of Palouse Hills Topography</i> : DR. VIRGIL R. D. KIRKHAM, M. MELVILLE JOHNSON and DONALD HOLM. <i>A Fossil Cycad in New Jersey</i> : PROFESSOR M. A. CHRYSLER. <i>Plural Fractions</i> : DR. C. E. WATERS. <i>Why Pathogene rather than Pathogen?</i> PROFESSOR F. L. STEVENS	207		
<i>Scientific Books</i> :			
<i>Willis on Living Africa</i> : PROFESSOR CHARLES SCHUCHERT	211		
<i>Scientific Apparatus and Laboratory Methods</i> :			
<i>A Method of Staining the Oocysts of Coccidia</i> : H. B. CROUCH and PROFESSOR E. R. BECKER. <i>The</i>			

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A BOTANICAL PROBLEM¹

By Professor MARGARET C. FERGUSON

DEPARTMENT OF BOTANY, WELLESLEY COLLEGE

"CONSIDER the lilies how they grow." Thus spake the great Master now just nineteen hundred years ago. And this statement from Him is prima facie evidence that the people of this period knew something of plants and of their growth. For it was the habit of this Teacher to base His lessons on the known and familiar. But we have evidence from many other sources that the study and observation of plants was at this time by no means new. When one searches the records for the beginnings of man's interest in and work with plants, one finds the story extending back not only to the earliest days of recorded history but far into those more remote times regarding which the archeologists have as yet found only the most fragmentary evidence, and then on into the mists of the past where conjecture alone

can guide us. There is very general belief that the plants of the open plains and of the forests were one, doubtless the most potent one, of the factors influencing primitive man as he started on the long trail upward to civilization and his modern supremacy. We know that Neolithic man grew cereals, raised flax and cultivated plants bearing fruit and nuts. Moreover we find his grains such that they must have been the result of long ages of cultivation and improvement. With those still earlier practices, which must have antedated by many epochs those of Neolithic man, one's imagination may play at will.

Whatever the first abodes of man, whether caves or the sheltering branches of trees, the fact of a more or less fixed habitation, a pausing in his wanderings at some definite point, was undoubtedly a most significant step in that progress which led eventually to man's present estate. We know that two factors

¹ Address of the retiring president of the Botanical Society of America, read at Cleveland, December 31, 1930.

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CONTENTS

JANUARY 3

The Teacher as Cobbler: JOHN ADAMS.

Educational Events:

The London Schools; Revision of the Juvenile Statutes of Massachusetts; Safety Education; National Advisory Committee on the Education of Negroes; The Scholastic Rating System of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; The Hubert Bequest.

Educational Notes and News.

Discussion:

1931 as a Centennial Year in the History of Education: WALTER CROSBY EELLS. *The So-called Honor System:* JOHN PALMER GAVIT.

Special Correspondence:

Menmonite Schools and Colleges: SILAS HERTZLER. *Subsidizing Scholarships:* OSCAR A. ULLRICH.

Quotations:

College Athletics.

Educational Research and Statistics:

Leadership in Curriculum Building in Large City School Systems: M. A. NORTON. *Constants and Variables in the High-school Program of Studies:* E. W. BAKER.

Index to Volume XXXII.

Educational Review, edited by WILLIAM MC-ANDREW.

JANUARY 10

The Future of the Liberal Arts College: R. L. KELLY. *A Brief History of the National University:* CARL W. TVEDT.

Educational Events:

The Study of Foreign Languages in the New York City Schools; Films and Exhibits of the Children's Bureau; The National Committee on Education by Radio; The Budget of the State University of Minnesota; The Dismissals from Mississippi Colleges; Officers Elected at the Cleveland Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; The North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools; The Indianapolis Meeting of the Association of American Colleges and the Council of Church Boards of Education.

Educational Notes and News.

Discussion:

Sexagesimal Fractions: G. A. MILLER.

Special Correspondence:

Individualized vs. Group Instruction in the Sistersville, West Virginia, High School: R. B. MARSTON. *Comprehensive Final Examination Plan Adopted for Franklin and Marshall College Seniors:* ROBERT J. PILGRAM.

Quotations:

Student Activities in South American Revolutions.

Reports:

American Education during 1930.

Educational Research and Statistics:

The Ratio of Candidates for Eight Conservation Classes: J. E. W. WALLIN.

JANUARY 17

Native Education in South Africa—the Community Outlook: C. T. LORAM.

Who Shall Apply the Rod? ESTHER CRANE.

Educational Events:

The Children's Gallery in the Kensington Science Museum; Proposed Appropriation for Vocational Education; Military Training in the Schools; New School Buildings; Bequests and Gifts for Education and Other Public Purposes; The Dedication of the Student Union Building of the University of California at Los Angeles; The Victimization of New York City Teachers; The Eleventh Annual Ohio State Educational Conference.

Educational Notes and News.

Discussion:

The Minister's Degree: R. E. O'BRIAN. *Attributes Desired in College Instructors:* C. D. CHAMPLIN.

Special Correspondence:

An Experiment in Alumni Education through Evening Study at the Graduate Level: P. R. KOLBE.

Quotations:

Intellectual Cooperation.

Reports:

The Status of the Instructors in Public and in Private Junior Colleges: JOHN T. WAHLQUIST.

Educational Research and Statistics:

Student Honesty as Revealed by Reporting of Teacher's Errors in Grading: W. G. CAMPBELL.

JANUARY 24

Educational Books of 1930: JOSEPH L. WHEELER.

Psychological Studies of the Public Museum: EDWARD S. ROBINSON.

Educational Events:

Educational Broadcasts in Great Britain; Earnings of Students in Land-grant Colleges; "School Life" and the Educational Activities of the Government; The Use of Portable School Buildings in Baltimore; Budget of the Chicago Schools; The Indiana Conference on Child Health and Protection; Military Training in Land-grant Colleges; The Yale Curriculum; The American Association of Teachers of Physics; Junior High-school Conference; The Educational Research Association of New York State; The New York State Teachers College at Buffalo.

Educational Notes and News.

Discussion:

President Butler's Athletic Record: J. McKEEN CATTELL. *The Teaching of Civics:* RICHARD WELLING. *The Cost of Test Blanks:* PURCHASER.

Special Correspondence:

"Cultural" Mathematics at Antioch: J. D. DAWSON.

Quotations:

Teaching is Getting Better. President Hibben.

Reports:

Settlement of Professor Lough's Lawsuit against New York University.

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