

Teaching in the Time of COVID-19

It has been a spring for the history books here at Sewanee as we navigate the business of the University through this time of COVID-19. Due to the threat of the pandemic, the vice-chancellor made the difficult decision over spring break to cancel on-campus classes and move all courses to distance learning. Students were told not to come back to campus, and spring break was extended a week while faculty scrambled to acquire online teaching techniques using Zoom and Blackboard. I have been teaching Conservation Biology as a large-lecture format course for three years, so I was already using Blackboard extensively. Blackboard is a virtual learning environment and learning management system that allows you to create an internally managed website for students in your course. It allows the professor to post course materials, make announcements, give exams and quizzes, and engage students in discussion forums.

My biggest challenge, along with most of my faculty colleagues, was to figure out how to give lectures and hold office hours with students. This is where Zoom entered our lives along with the rest of society trying to conduct face-to-face meetings while sheltering in place. Faculty at Sewanee got a crash course in using Zoom, and I quickly began to record lectures at home in my study and post them on Blackboard. Basically, students watch a small inset screen of me talking superimposed on a Powerpoint presentation. There is a big difference between giving a lecture in front of a large audience in a big auditorium and giving a lecture by yourself talking to a laptop computer screen. Takes some getting used to! Some faculty are broadcasting live lectures, using Zoom at the regularly scheduled class times. With my large class size consisting of students with varying degrees of online

access in different time zones, it made sense to post lectures and let students download them at their convenience.

My face-to-face interaction with students comes during extended office hours each week. Students log into my Zoom personal meeting room at the appointed time, and faces start to stack up on my computer screen like the opening of the *Brady Bunch!* Students seem to relish the opportunity to talk to faculty. The main topic, of course, is how they are weathering this crisis back at home. This format for live student interaction works incredibly well. When enough students log on, I can break them up into discussion rooms, and I can move from room to room and guide discussion about news articles we are reading for class. This works so well that I will likely continue to use this format even when classes are back on campus.

What does not work as well during this distance learning version of Sewanee are the special faculty mentoring opportunities like the herbarium fellows program. The fellows had a full agenda planned for this spring, including Earth Day posters about plant awareness, plant discovery field trips, movie nights showing the BBC Attenborough series on plants (flyers advertising this are all around the empty halls of Spencer/Woods), and caring for the new tropical plant collection gifted to us from Vanderbilt University now in the Woods greenhouse (more on this next issue). The herbarium fellows continue to work on their plant research projects from afar, and I meet with them over Zoom as well. George Burruss has been selected for a National Science Foundation funded internship at the Missouri Botanical Garden this summer, and Angus Pritchard is scheduled to work with me at Sewanee in June to re-inventory our long-term vegetation plots. Both opportunities are on hold for now.

Fortunately our newest fellow, Cade Sterling, was a resident at Sewanee over spring break and was able to complete his genetic work on sassafras before the campus was closed to students.

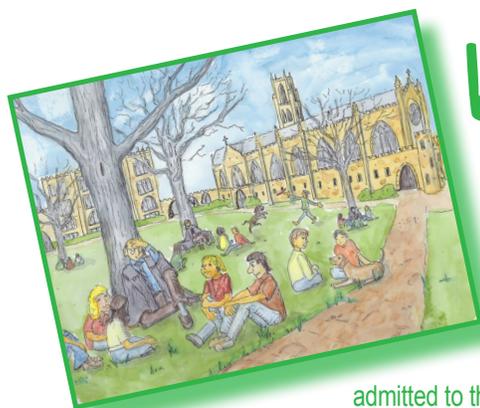
It remains to be seen what the future holds for this fall. The University is exploring different options to consider later this summer. Nonetheless, it is likely that things will never be the same again in the academy. My guess is that there will be fundamental changes going forward in how we conduct business in a post-pandemic world. Will we ever be comfortable again packing students in vans for field trips during flu season or even shaking hands? The opportunity for online learning has revealed tremendous potential, and it is unlikely that, even at small liberal arts colleges like Sewanee, that genie can be put back in the bottle. One thing is certain however, there is no substitution for being in the field and botanizing with students. I am looking forward to getting back to that as soon as possible!

—Jon Evans

Herbarium Director and Biology Professor



Earth Days in Sewanee



Where were you on the very first Earth Day, April 22, 1970 ... that is, if you were even alive 50 years ago? I was right here in Sewanee, a sophomore newly transferred in. It was the first year that women were admitted to the college.

In the world outside, the Vietnam War was raging. Civil rights issues were on the forefront, and air and water pollution were the order of the day. Sen. Gaylord Nelson suggested an environmental awareness “teach-in,” which came to be named Earth Day. That landmark event in modern history gave birth to the first green generation and ushered in present-day environmentalism.

Within months, the Environmental Protection Agency was created, and the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts were made law, followed shortly by the Endangered Species and Safe Drinking Water Acts, among others. In our state, the Tennessee Environmental Council was formed. And Gov. Winfield Dunn oversaw the passage of the Tennessee Water Quality Control and Surface Mining Acts.

Professor Gerald Smith describes the day on our campus:

“Earth Day 1970 was a day of magic, wonder, and work in Sewanee. I don’t think I have seen since then the deep consensus of thought and action we felt that day. It was the medieval couplet of theoria and praxis realized in harmonious community that day. For the first time in memory the faculty voted to call off regular classes and join students in a day of campus-wide outdoor seminars and helpful work.

“Trees were planted, roadsides were scoured of trash, and more than 50 tree seminars were conducted on the Quad, around Woods, and in Manigault Park. Small groups of students went from great tree to great tree where they sat for a time in dialogue with a pair of faculty members. Faculty were paired across disciplines to make the dialogues richer. The weather was perfect—a blue sky, warm spring day that can only happen in Sewanee. I look back across years and still remember that day at the top of *all* of my Sewanee experiences. It brought to life our motto, ‘Behold how good.’”

The students requested that the chapel conduct a special service that day. I attended and was personally moved by what became known as “the infamous garbage service.” Professor Hugh Caldwell described it in a letter to the editor of the *Sewanee Purple* the following week:

“For some of us the most significant part of the ‘Environmental Teach-in’ was the Earth Day Chapel Service, ‘planned and led by students concerned about the use and misuse man has made of God’s creation.’ The emphasis was on the obligations of stewardship God has conferred upon man to treat with reverence the gifts of God. ... I thought they did a superb job ...

“Two incidents in the service have provoked criticism and controversy. Beer cans were dumped on the floor, and a

motorcycle was ridden through the crossing. They were not essential to the service, and perhaps they should have been eliminated. For some they were a distraction, and for some they were an offense. I can understand and appreciate their objections.

...
“Happy would it be if those who were outraged by the beer cans and the motorcycle in a house built by man were half as outraged by the desecration of God’s creation.”

Regarding the day’s community clean-up effort, Vice-Chancellor Edward McCrady noted, “But unless every one of us individually takes responsibility for carrying this work on, the benefits will disappear quickly; and Earth Day will turn out to have been a faddish gesture. ...”

So here we are, 50 years later, the campus virtually empty of students, classes available only online, and community members sheltering at home. This Earth Day, we are more aware than ever of the beauty and fragility of this planet on which we and all other species—and our descendants—depend. Besides the threat of this coronavirus, today’s environmental problems—the rate of species extinctions, the general degradation of terrestrial and marine ecosystems, and the specter of human-caused climate change—have brought a new urgency to the cause.

And we carry on. Although there won’t be a chapel service or teach-in, no tossing of Earth Balls or organized tree planting, Earth Day 2020 will be celebrated in Sewanee. The Office of Environmental Stewardship and Sustainability is carrying through with “Earth Month 2020,” which includes a number of online activities, notably participation in a state-wide Solve Climate by 2030 webinar. The office sends a regular email to faculty, staff, and far-flung students describing earth-minded activities for every day in the month of April.

Vice-Chancellor McCardell has appointed a COVID-19 Emergency Management Team, and two community members, Ki Fort and Lisa Hartman, are heading up a group of volunteers to address social planning during this time. Issues range widely, from taking care of the day-to-day needs of the elderly to promoting social activities, all while maintaining social distance.

A virtual display of Earth Day posters created by Sewanee children and their parents, as well as St. Andrew’s-Sewanee and University students, will take place. The Arthur Knoll Memorial Community Clean-up will go on. Residents of Sewanee and surrounding communities are being asked to collect roadside waste/trash around their homes and neighborhoods, while staying a safe distance from traffic and from other people.

Altogether I would venture to say that “the deep consensus of thought and action” that Professor Smith noted on Earth Day 1970 is much in evidence in the Sewanee community today. Wherever you are, I hope Earth Day 2020 is a happy and meaningful day for you.

—Mary Priestley



Friends of the Sewanee Herbarium

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Spring Wildflowers in COVID-19

Normally, this space would hold a list of the herbarium's spring wildflower walks and related activities, but travel restrictions, social distancing, and isolation to prevent the spread of COVID-19 have put an end to even those events. Trails and Trilliums has been canceled, as well as the Smokies Wildflower Pilgrimage, the latter for the first time in 70 years. Herbarium staff have led walks and activities at both these events for many years. The University of the South has closed all trail portals and parking areas. Even the Tennessee State Parks are closed, at least through April 14. And yet, the glorious annual unfolding of spring blooms is occurring all around us and can bring comfort and inspiration in these most difficult times. This article will review what we might have seen if we had been able to go out as well as possible opportunities still to do so.

The herbarium often sponsors a walk in Shakerag Hollow in very early spring, sometimes billed as the hunt for the first hepatica. Actually, the very first wildflower to appear there is usually harbinger-of-spring (or pepper-and-salt). This is a tiny member of the carrot or parsley family, hard to spot among the leaves on the forest floor. The pepper-and-salt name comes from the dark-colored anthers amid the tiny white petals. One also has to get out early to catch the best of the bloodroot bloom. On a sunny day there can be dozens if not hundreds of these showy poppy family flowers scattered across the forest floor. Other early bloomers are hepaticas (of course), toothworts, rue anemone, spring beauty, giant chickweed, little sweet Betsy trillium, and halberd-leaved violet. These are all lovely and yet can easily be missed by the unobservant hiker.

Another good spot for early wildflowers, especially bloodroot, giant chickweed, and rue anemone, is a trail at St. Mary's-Sewanee. Called the Turkey Hollow Trail, it runs below the bluff and has started to be included on the Trails and Trilliums schedule as an easier-to-hike alternative to Shakerag Hollow.

Shakerag is rewarding all through the spring, worth walking through on a weekly or biweekly basis. Early April is usually the best time to catch the greatest diversity, although



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The Sewanee Herbarium
Dr. Jon Evans, Director
Department of Biology
The University of the South
735 University Avenue
Sewanee, TN 37383

WEBSITE

sewanee.edu/offices/herbarium

EDITOR

Mary Priestley
mpriestley0150@gmail.com

CONTRIBUTORS

Jon Evans
jon.evans@sewanee.edu

Yolande Gottfried
ygottfri@sewanee.edu

COMPOSITOR

Tammy Elliott

*Earth Day poster by Maggie Lu Rudd.
Other drawings by Mary Priestley,
including these spring wildflowers: hepatica,
halberd-leaved violet, wild geranium,
and little sweet Betsy trillium.*

HERBARIUM PUBLICATIONS

Fiery Gizzard: Voices from the Wilderness
What If Trees Could Walk?
Trail Guide to Shakerag Hollow
Sewanee Wildflowers in Watercolor

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THE UNIVERSITY OF THE SOUTH

Sewanee Herbarium
Department of Biology
735 University Avenue
Sewanee, TN 37383-1000

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Spring Wildflowers, continued from page 4

this year, according to the National Phenology Network, spring is around two weeks earlier than usual in our area. Dutchman's breeches, celandine poppy, trout lily, and large-flowered white trillium will reward those who hit the trail at the right time. By the time this is published, though, even the purple phacelia, wild geranium, blue phlox, dwarf larkspur, foamflower, sulcate trillium, and Solomon's seal may be passing.

A spring hike in Collins Gulf is always included in the Trails and Trilliums offerings and/or the herbarium calendar, and the flowers there are certainly as good as (dare it be said, better than?) in Shakerag. Great swaths of large-flowered white trillium leave a lasting impression, and finds such as dwarf ginseng and goldenseal indicate the richness of the site. Keep it in mind for next year, since the park is closed for now.

In any case, as of press time, trails on the Domain are still open if you can find an access point that is not one of the closed trail portals and parking areas.

Looking ahead, mountain laurel bloom often coincides with the University commencement exercises in mid-May, though these are now postponed. The Caldwell Rim and Beckwith's Point trails are graced with a good amount of mountain laurel. A pink lady's slipper or two may also be seen on the Caldwell Rim Trail. Even a walk along the road to Morgan's Steep is going to be beautiful, if the trails are not accessible. Just remember the six-foot distance rule, on the trail or along the road.

—Yolande Gottfried

