The Twilight Years of William Alphonso Murrill

by James W. Kimbrough

When I joined the faculty of the University of Florida in 1964 to assume a newly created Mycology position in the Plant Pathology Department, I quickly became aware of the tremendous impact Dr. William A. Murrill had made during his tenure in Gainesville. There was a large framed photograph just outside the door leading into the Herbarium and a plaque that read "In Memory of William Alphonso Murrill, 1869-1957, Mycologist, Naturalist-Humanitarian, Friend" (Fig. 1). Requests to obtain loans of Murrill's types came almost weekly, and in retrieving those specimens from the cases, I was amazed at the number of type species he had described locally. Realizing that a new mycologist was on campus, many faculty and staff would ask me if I knew Dr. Murrill, who they lovingly called "the Mushroom man." Unfortunately, Dr. Murrill had passed away almost seven years before I came to the University.

Figure 1: Plaque honoring Murrill at University of Florida, Gainesville

I was very fortunate, however, to meet Dr. George F. Weber, Professor of Plant Pathology and the person responsible for teaching mycology before I came. Dr. Weber and Erdman West, Curator of the Herbarium, were Murrill's closest friends and Weber was the one who placed his photo and plaque outside the Herbarium. Much Many of the things that I learned about Murrill came from George Weber, who after retirement visited my lab and joined me on frequent field trips after his retirement. My greatest regret is that I did not carry a tape recorder with me. This is especially true of an a day-long outing with Dr. Weber in which we had an opportunity for a day-long visit with Dr. Fred J. Seaver, who had lived in Winter Park, Florida for close to 15 years (Fig. 2, p. 24) after retiring from the New York Botanical Garden. On that occasion, the 75-year-old Weber and the 90-year-old Seaver shared one amusing anecdote after the other, inevitably turning to W. A. Murrill - Seaver wanting to know about Murrill's last years in Gainesville, and Weber and I wanting to know more about Murrill's activities at the New York Botanical Garden.

Figure 2: Fred Seaver and George Weber in Winter Park

Murrill's Pre-Gainesville Years

Most of the early years of W. A. Murrill are covered in his obituary in *Mycologia*, written by George Weber (1961). He was born in 1869 to Samuel and Virginia Murrill on the Pammell Farm near Lynchburg, Virginia. In his autobiography, Murrill (1945) tells of his grandparents and parents and the pride he had in his heritage. He speaks fondly about his four siblings and how well they did in their professional lives. During the early years, his family moved to three different farms in the area. He felt fortunate in being raised on farms and in his book "Billy, the Boy Naturalist" (Murrill, 1918) records all of his exploits before the age of twelve.

Murrill started to school at the age of four, carrying his books and school supplies a mile up the hillside

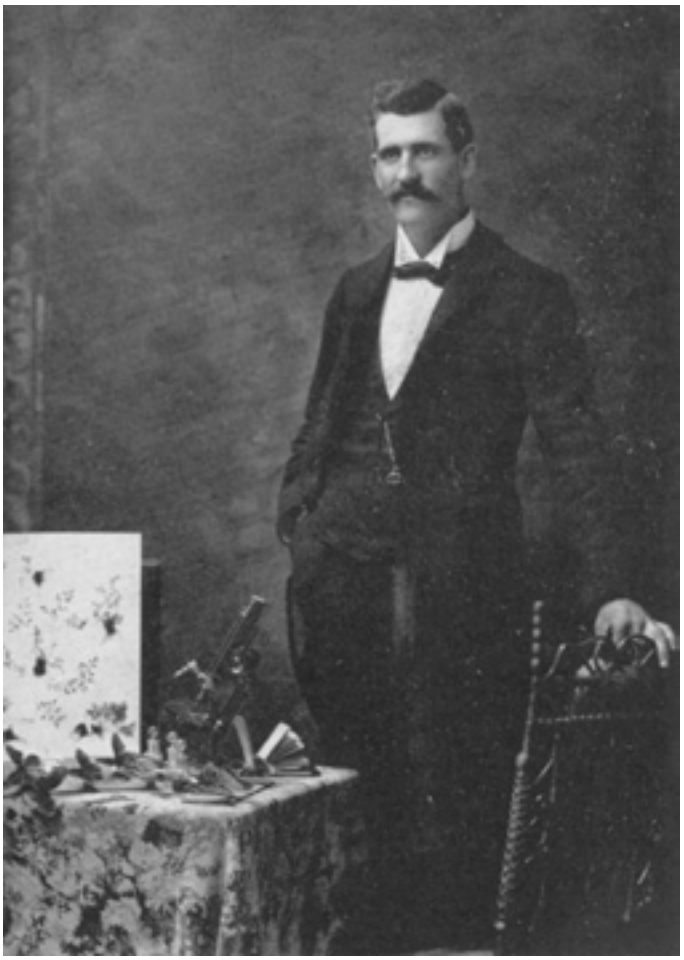

Figure 3: Murrill at Staunton

to the school. Most of his early schooling was in Blacksburg, where his family moved to the Miller farm just south of town. He first took piano lessons at the age of nine and his mother encouraged him in the area of fine arts. He later became an outstanding pianist, artist, writer, and was highly creative in a number of fields. At the age of twelve, he completed high school and became a student at the Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College in Blacksburg. He received his BS with highest honors there in 1887, at the age of sixteen. The following autumn, he took charge of a small country school near Blacksburg. Murrill (1944) recounts his mother having high ambitions for him, and when an opportunity came for him to be able to go to Randolph-Macon College in Ashland, Virginia, she urged him to take advantage of it. He received a second BS degree at Randolph-Macon in 1889, followed soon by a Master's of Art in 1891. At this stage, Murrill pondered what was he going to do first. That was soon answered when he received and accepted an offer of a teaching position at Bowling Green Female Seminar where he taught for two years.

In 1893, Murrill joined the Wesleyan Female Institute in Staunton, Virginia, where he spent four enjoyable years (Fig. 3). There, he was involved with curriculum planning and in student recruitment, which carried him to Missouri and Arkansas, seeking top-flight candidates. With opportunities to see beyond the south-central regions of Virginia, Murrill became increasing interested in field biology. By this time, he was consistently referring to himself as "the Naturalist." He frequently visited the University of Virginia and attended lectures of prominent chemists, zoologists, and geologists; even being of assistance in the anatomy labs of the medical center. Trips to Washington and visits to the National Museum peaked his interest in natural sciences. During his tenure at Staunton, he became convinced that he wanted to specialize in biological sciences and do graduate work.

During his second year at Wesleyan, Murrill began to think seriously about graduate school and had initially decided to go to John Hopkins and study Zoology, Botany, and Chemistry. A family friend, Dr. Gildersleeve, secured a fellowship for him, and in his final years at Wesleyan he prepared himself for studies at John Hopkins. On a trip to Washington, however, a couple of friends, both Cornell graduates, suggested to him that job opportunities would be far greater in Botany and suggested that he do his graduate studies at Cornell. Murrill made his decision to attend Cornell and stated in later years that he never regretted it. In the summer of 1897 he actively collected and prepared specimens of parasitic fungi to bring and accession in the Cornell Herbarium. He was given a fellowship in Botany where

Figure 4: Murrill starting out at the New York Botanical Gardens

[1] Also known as Diaporthe parasitica, Cryphonectria parasitica, and probably a couple of other names, too. - LS

(continued from p. 23)

he worked with Professor Atkinson. In September 1897 he married Edna Lee Luttrell and, as Weber recounts, their only child, a son born in 1899, died in infancy. In his autobiography, Murrill

Figure 5: Murrill standing on dead chestnut tree

does not mention marriage or the son, and does not say anything about his family while at Cornell. In his second and third year at Cornell, he lived in Cascadilla Hall, a male dormitory that I lived in for one term 51 years later!

When Benjamin Minge Duggar retired from Cornell in 1898, Murrill was given the position of Assistant Cryptogamic Botanist which he held until 1900, the year he received his PhD. After a trip to Paris to attend the International Botanical Congress and a brief time of job-hunting, he contacted a Virginia friend who offered him a job teaching biology at DeWitt Clinton High School in New York. In subsequent years, he spent his summers traveling to museums abroad and collaborating with professors at Columbia University, close to where he lived. With his increased involvement in the Torrey Botanical Club and growing popularity as a great speaker at home and abroad, Murrill was in a perfect position to be selected as Asssistant Curator at the New York Botanical Garden when Franklin Sumner Earle was appointed Director of the Experiment Station in Cuba (Fig. 4).

Figure 6: Murrill examining a tree at Kew Botanical Gardens

Murrill enjoyed 20 highly productive years at the New York Botanical Garden. He enjoyed the hustle and bustle of the big city with its museums, theaters, music halls, zoos, and baseball parks. Although he had established himself as an international authority of mushrooms and bracket fungi, about this time a devastating disease of chestnuts appeared and he immediately set out to find the cause and cure. Within a year, he discovered that the dieback was caused by *Endothia parasitica*,[1] much to the chagrin of a group of USDA mycologists who had been unsuccessful in determining the cause (Fig. 5). The cure for chestnut blight is still being investigated.

Murrill traveled extensively and was in great demand as a speaker on a large variety of subjects. He visited all of the major museums throughout of Europe and made a number of expeditions to the Caribbean, Mexico, Brazil and places between. Unfortunately, all was not rosy for him in New York. He and Nathaniel Lord Britton, Director of the Garden, became at odds over rules of nomenclature and slowly but surely their relationship deteriorated. On his return several months late from a European excursion, Murrill found himself demoted to a position of Supervisor of Public Instruction with a very low salary. Fred Seaver, one of Murrill's co-workers at the Garden, shared that a polycystic kidney problem hospitalized him in a small French town where he almost died and had no way to contact his wife or colleagues at the Garden. Murrill's wife traveled with him all throughout the US, but absolutely refused to accompany him abroad, having a deadly fear of water. With his extensive travel abroad, his wife spent an inordinate amount of time alone.

Fig. 7: Murrill building his log cabin in Virginia

Weber (1961) states, "His busy existence became clouded by a series of circumstances that culminated in the tendering of his resignation to the Director-in-Chief of the Garden in August, 1924, ending his public career that possessed every indication of abundant accomplishments. Dr. Murrill changed from one plagued with the worry and responsibilities of a complicated society in high places to one devoting all his thoughts to his own individual self." According to Weber, Murrill was hospitalized intermittently for over a year for nervous instabilities and physical exhaustion. His wife left his home and shortly thereafter served him with a divorce decree. As financial problems developed, he became a haunted man. Mentally troubled, alone, and discouraged, he left the Garden and went to live with an aunt near his birthplace near Lynchburg, Virginia. The Naturalist soon associated himself with trees, flowers, birds, and the other wildlife in mountains close by, and soon became busy building a log cabin there (Fig. 7).

Figure 8: The "Tin Can Tourist Camp" where Murrill initially stayed in Florida

Before his resignation from the Garden, Murrill had made collecting trips to Florida as late as 1923. After a year in Virginia, as his mental and physical health improved, he again made his way to Gainesville, and for the next couple of years he made regular trips from Virginia. It was during one of these visits that Dr. Weber and his wife Kate discovered this "tall, robust, dignified, pleasant stranger providing a piano concert for the transient tourists at their recreation hall in the local tourist court." Weber recalled that he immediately recognized the gentleman as Dr. Murrill.

Murrill's Twilight Years in Florida

Weber was unsure as to how Murrill arrived in Gainesville or how long he had been living in the tourist court where they first spotted him. Dr. Weber, noting that Murrill looked unkempt, frail, and haggard, more or less took him under his wing and, along with Prof. West, saw that he was properly dressed and fed. Murrill spent his final 32 years in Gainesville, built a small home and rental cottages here, and went to the University of Florida daily to visit George Weber and Erdman West.

While visiting the Florida Museum in the old capital building in Tallahassee recently, I saw a large photo of the Tin Can Tourist Camp in Gainesville taken in the early 30s (Fig.8). This discovery stirred my curiosity: could this be where Murrill stayed? I think so. Among items in the Alachua County Library District Heritage Collection 2002, there is a feature on the Tin Can Tourist Camp. It states, "Today's travelers move on superhighways and stay in modern motels; they also have the choice of traveling with campers and recreational vehicles that offer many of the comforts of home. But in the 1920s after World War I, when many folks began moving to Florida, moving meant braving uncertain lodging. Tin Can tourism (using the car and a tent for lodging) was a common solution. One camp, aptly named "Tin Can Tourist Camp," was located in Gainesville, located at the present-day site of Shands Alachua General Hospital."

Since Murrill did not drive, it is highly likely that he traveled with friends from Virginia to Florida, stopping at various Tin Cup Tourist Camps throughout the Southeast. Interestingly, the site of the Tin Cup Tourist Court was only a few blocks from where Weber and his wife Kate lived. Weber shared with me that the two of them went to the tourist court frequently to purchase jams, jellies, fruits, and vegetables that farmers from the countryside would bring to sell to the travelers. It was not known until recently how long Murrill lived in the tourist camp. Correspondence between Murrill and John Kunkel Small (another colleague from the NY Botanical Garden) reveals that Murrill wrote to Small on March 9, 1927, commenting that he was still at the Tourist Camp but he was starting to build a studio to use as a storeroom while he worked on his main dwelling (Fig. 9). We know that Murrill

Figure 9: Murrill's first house in Gainesville

Figure 10: The second house that Murrill built

was very interested in the plants around north central Florida and corresponded frequently with Small, who was working on *A Manual of the Southeastern Flora*. Two post cards dated 1926 written by Small were addressed to W. A. Murrill, Tourist Court, Gainesville, Florida, one indicating that he had visited Murrill in Florida recently. In Murrill's 1927 letter to Small, he states "I am at the Tourist Camp in a cottage, when you came last I was off on a watersnake hunt." Very likely, Murrill came to the tourist camp in Gainesville in the winter of 1925.

Two different stories emerge when you compare Murrill's account of the early days in Gainesville to what Weber recollects. Murrill states in his autobiography that for a few years after he had built his cabin near Lynchburg, "he followed the birds to the south and wandered about from one lovely spot to another until returning spring beckoned him northward again.... The final stage came when the study of mosquitoes and spiders required him to spend the first summer in Gainesville. Only then did he come to realize the richness of the endemic biota, and especially the vast opportunity in the fleshy fungi, which caused him to return to this group almost exclusively in later years." Weber says that Murrill had every intention of returning to Virginia in the summer as was his practice, but he was hospitalized in the University Infirmary with his recurring kidney problem. His stay in the infirmary lasted for several weeks and on his release the summer rains were here. And so were the mushrooms, in abundance! Weber recalled that this was the first "spark of life" he had seen in the "old man's eyes" during the months that he had been in Gainesville. Murrill was excited: this was the first time he had seen the summer flushes of mushrooms in Florida. He needed collecting supplies, a desk, and a microscope. Crowded for teaching, research, and herbarium space, they provided him with a desk, microscope, and lamp on the third floor stairway landing in Rolfs Hall, close to the Herbarium and to the offices of Weber and West.

With a new "lease on life," Murrill asked Weber if he would determine if he had money at the New York Botanical Garden from the sale of his book *Edible and Poisonous Mushrooms* and the accompanying color chart, published by him in 1916. He quickly received a check for $600.00 and a stack of unsold books and charts. With this money he bought a small lot, some tools and building supplies, and built a small woodframe house at 203 NW 9th Terrace between the University and downtown Gainesville (Fig. 9). Murrill (1945) states that "Having built one little house in Gainesville, the Naturalist tried another and another just for the fun of it." Weber said that he built them for rental property (Fig. 10).

Although Murrill lived alone, he was seldom alone. He spent most of his time on and around the campus of the University of Florida, where there were many tree species that supported all sorts of ectomycorrhizal mushrooms: several flushes in the summer and other flushes during mild winter months. He became a fixture on campus with his basket and walking cane, poking around shrubs and hedges for mushrooms. Students and faculty were amazed with him and enjoyed joining him on excursions around and near the campus. He was a great story-teller and he fascinated everyone with his tales of travels to exotic places, entertaining royal families in various European countries, and his familiarity with every plant or mushroom species around. The nurses in the infirmary

Figure 11: Murrill (in front) with team of Florida botanists and fallen cypress tree

and secretaries around campus all "fell in love" with him and delighted with the opportunities to chat with him and learn of his escapades. Many of the Plant Pathology and Forestry Faculty would take him to the fields and forests around north central Florida. On rare occasions he would be able to visit state parks in the lower peninsula of Florida. In August 1938, he, Weber, West, R. K. Voorhees, and A. S. Rhoads discovered cypress trees infected with *Fomes geotropus,* the fungus that was later determined by Murrill to be the cause of "pecky cypress" (Fig. 11).

During the late 30s and early 40s, Murrill shaved away his beard and

mustache for a few years (Fig. 12). He looked forlorn and unusual because he had been adorned with a mustache from graduate school days in Virginia and with a distinct beard going back to his tenure at Cornell. This was the beginning of a period when he started to actively describe and publish again on the new fungi he was finding. Murrill (1945) states "the gilded net had disappeared; routine work was no more, like a boat above the rapids on a quiet lake he cruised on gentle waters without compulsion or fear, devoting his attention freely and forcefully to things he loved."

Murrill had strange work habits, rising after midmorning, getting his basket and collecting gear together, and striking out around campus or favorite woodlots in the suburbs. Some of his favorite sites included the Devil's Millhopper, SanFelasco Hammock, Sugarfoot Hammock, Planera Hammock, Kelly's Hammock, Muck Pond, Paynes Praire, and a number of others close by and within walking distance. He would return to his desk on the Rolfs Hall landing and proceed to sort, identify, and prepare his collections for drying. Most of the specimen labels were hand-written and carefully sorted. During the mushroom season, he seldom returned to his home which was 12 or 15 blocks from campus. Instead, he would work late at his desk in Rolfs Hall and in the early morning hours cross the street and make his way into the lobby of the Student Union Building. There he would find very soft couches on which to sleep for the remainder of the night. As students came to the Union cafeteria for breakfast, they would wake Murrill and invite him to breakfast, enjoying every moment of their meal with the old gentleman. Weber recounted that seldom did Murrill ever have to buy or make his breakfast.

During the last fifteen years of his life, he had no income beyond the revenue he received from his rental houses and the sale of popular and scientific articles that he published himself. Because of his significant contribution of specimens to the Experiment Station Herbarium, Professor West persuaded the administration to give him a $50.00 per month honorarium. In some of his last few years, he received

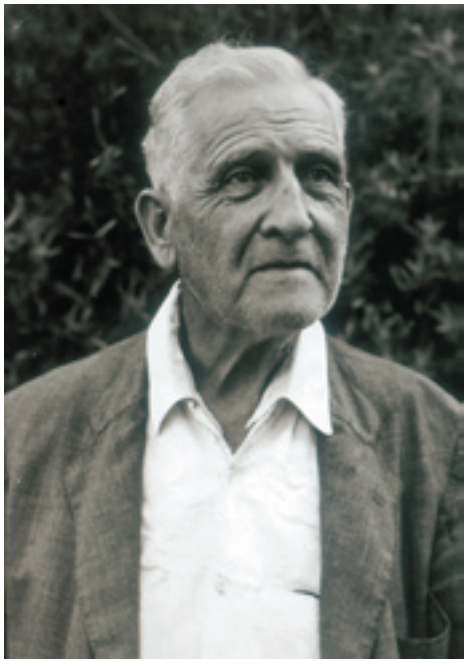

Figure 12: Murrill in the late 1930s

some financial and medical support from the Florida Social Welfare Board. He became very actively involved with local garden clubs, and organized a nature club that made weekly forays to several excellent collecting areas (Weber 1961). His work with the Girl Scouts, in which he was active while at the Botanical Garden, was revived and continued active for many years in Gainesville. He wrote a number of popular booklets which were dedicated to the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. In total, he published 118 popular and scientific papers during his final years in Florida. Throughout his career he collected more than 75,000 specimens and described approximately 1700 new species. More than 8,000 specimens were collected in Florida, in of which more than 700 were described as new species.

Murrill published 20 books, 500 scientific articles, and 800 popular articles. Many prominent agaricologists visited and consulted with Murrill while he was at the University of Florida. These included Rolf Singer, Lexemuel Ray Hesler, Gertrude Burlingham, Josiah Lowe, Alexander H. Smith, and others. The late Dr. Dan Roberts, professor of Plant Pathology, told of times when he was a student in the 50s, that when approaching Rolfs Hall to do work in the evenings, he would hear the heated debates between Singer and Murrill from blocks away. Dan recounts that at times their arguments became so intense that he felt they would come to blows. In 1954, the Mycological Society of America held its annual meeting at the University of Florida. Murrill was present in many of these sessions and especially delighted in looking over and helping with identification of specimens collected during the MSA forays.

Perhaps the last photograph was made of Dr. Murrill during the celebration of his 86th birthday (Fig. 13) when the Department of Botany honored him with a birthday party attended by the President of the University, the Provost of Agriculture, the Director of

Figure 13: Murrill at 86 years of age

the Experiment Station, and many of his friends.Murrill continued to describe new species up until his last publication in 1955, a new species of *Amanita* from Florida (Mycologia 47:427). Little did he imagine that a small white mushroom found in deep mulch around Gainesville, which he named *Amanita neglecta,* would be the last mushroom he would describe. As Weber (1961) recounts, "During the last years his applications became less regular, although his enthusiasm never diminished even up to the time of his last illness. Even then he reported of his own volition to the University Infirmary where he collapsed while the doctor was examining him". After a month's hospitalization, he died in Alachua General Hospital in Gainesville on Dec. 25, 1957. He was buried in the Evergreen Cemetary at 401 SE 21st Avenue (Fig. 14). His gravesite is near pines and sprawling live oak trees that will provide an abundance of mushrooms and bracket fungi with which, perhaps, his spirit can mingle throughout eternity.

As an international traveler, Murrill had made personal friends will the most prominent mycologists in the major museums and other institutions in Europe, South and Central America, and throughout the United States. While he had cultivated friendships with many people in Gainesville, without doubt his closest friend was Professor George F. Weber. George first spotted him at the tourist court, took him "under his wing," helped him get established at the University, and was able to secure funds for his survival. After Murrill's death, Weber would go to the cemetery every year around Christmas, the anniversary of his death, to see that his gravesite was clean and to provide flowers (Fig. 15).

Figure 15: George Weber tending Murrill's grave

Dr. William Alfonso Murrill chose to spend his retiring days in Gainesville and became an ever-present stimulus to the pursuit of the knowledge of the geographical distribution and host range of its the fungi, particularly the Basidiomycetes. He not only was a master mycologist but an ever patient teacher to whom many owed much in the way of confidence in him and his accomplishments. As Weber (1961) states, "so ended the life so richly endowed with information, humility, sincerity, joyfulness, and kindness."

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Figure 14: Murrill's gravestone