

In 1972 McPherson College 1922 alumnus Saylor John (S.J.) Neher (b.1891, d.1991) recorded himself on an audio cassette tape, which he later donated to McPherson College, along with his personal Herbarium. The S.J. Neher Herbarium collection was transferred to the Kansas State University Herbarium on 18 December 2023, where it can continue to be “preserved and utilized in scientific research.” (letter dated 2 January 2024 from Dr. Carolyn J. Ferguson, Professor and Curator of the Herbarium).

S.J.Neher’s cassette recording was digitized and converted into the ‘mp3’ file format. The following transcription of “NeherSJ19720518audio.mp3” was done by McPherson College Professor of Natural Science Dr. Jonathan Frye in April of 2024. The occasional parentheticals and the elapsed time indications between paragraphs were made during the transcription process.

0:00

May 18, 1972. I am S.J. Neher. Born January 11, 1891 on a farm, about one mile east of Leeton, Missouri, Johnson County. Since I have given my private herbarium of about 1800 species of native plants and accessories to the McPherson College City Museum, I thought it might be of interest that I gave a little background of some of the things that are connected with the Herbarium. I will give a brief statement of my formal education; and second my work in teaching; and third will be about the herbarium itself including its assembly, and being in my will for the past 15 years and why McPherson College Museum was chosen; and then fourth will be a short postlude.

1:32

I suppose you could say I was an average, normal child. I had to work for what I got. I was not considered a dunce, and yet I was not a genius. I attended the country school, first years of my life. I had to walk about a mile and a half, to old Hogan (Owen?) Valley school, north and east of us, and I walked every day except the very worst type of weather when my father would take me to school or come after me, if it was pouring down rain or extremely cold or the snow was very deep. And we did have some pretty good snows. I finished the eighth grade in the country school. That was about the year 1909 when I was 18 years old. I remember that we went to school, in the

country school, and most folks until they were around 18 to 20 and even 21, after 21 years of age. There was some mighty big boys in school there, some older girls I can remember, all grown oaks. Well, the grades were not just like they are now. We took the subjects that the teacher wanted to teach, and we had readers, first, reader, second reader, and when we'd get through with that, we'd take the third reader and so on. And it was about the time that I was what we might call the eighth grade; they were grading, beginning to grade, our school there. And we had to take a County examination to get our eighth grade certificate. And of course we had to have the subjects, and those were not all given in one year or two years, and so it spread over possibly a three year period. So sometimes I say I was in the eighth grade for three years.

4:14

Well, I took the County examination and got my certificate in the Spring of a 1909. You might also remember that our term was not nine months long. We had a short five months Winter term, and most of us boys, that were old enough to work on the farm, only went for five months. And in the Spring then there was a short two months term. That was for those, for the girls, and also for those that were not old enough to do farm work and so forth.

5:02

Well, the next year, I decided to go to Leeton, Missouri, High School, which was about a mile from home. Of course, I walked up the railroad track every day to that, and they were only offering the ninth grade in that high school. That's all I could get. So the following Spring, I made a decision. I wanted to go to, away to school someplace, so I could say I had more than the ninth grade education. So I finally decided to go to Mount Morris College, Mount Morris Illinois, and take some academy work there. Mount Morris is or was a Church of the Brethren school; and it is about 500 miles from home and about 100 miles west of Chicago; and I went up there on the train. For the first two weeks there, I was so homesick I just couldn't eat nor sleep. And every time I'd hear that train whistle starting toward Kansas City, tears would come in my eyes and I would just long to be on that train going home. But, as I got acquainted

for a couple of weeks, this gradually wore off and I began to like it, and I stayed with it the half year, and went home Christmas vacation, and liked it so well that I went back to finish, so to make a whole year of work there. While I was there I was in, taking one half years work in Zoology and a half years work in Botany; and among some other subjects I took several Bible subjects, the Acts under Professor Emmert, and there was one or two others there in that year and also the next year.

7:23

But when I went back home on the train, the following Spring, I could see hundreds and hundreds of flowers in bloom, I had never seen before in my life. I thought about a dozen or 15 was the limit of the different species of plants until I took that little course in Botany. And it was there that I began to get my eyes open and interest grew very rapidly in the nature study and I have pursued it ever since. I certainly got a lifetime of enjoyment from the studies of nature.

8:07

I also took a course in Expression. That Expression course was very similar, I presume, to our Public Speaking courses now, Dramatics and so on; and I liked that. And so I went back the second year, largely to finish that Expression course. And I did finish and got my pin and my diploma. I've been giving some of the readings and things that I learned there ever since. I might tell you about Pointer's Dyspeptic Goat sometime. (see <https://books.google.com/books?id=Bcc5VHNd6rkC> p89)

8:53

Well, my next schooling then was in the Fall of 1917. I decided to go to McPherson College. And there I finished the Academy that year, and took a few courses and college credit. So that I graduated from the Academy in 1918; the Spring of 1918 at the age of 27 years. And I wanted to go back so I went back for a freshman year in college never expecting to go anymore. And my whole course, whole educational course, was very hectic and hit-and-miss all the way through, because I could never see my way ahead from one year to the next, partly on account of finances, and partly

because I had no special encouragement to go. But I did go, I went the second year then, as a sophomore, and by that time I had decided I was going to try to finish college. And so I took the other two years. It was a hard pull. I was married, and my wife was... doing the cooking and helping us. And we started a family. Merlin was born there in McPherson College, 1921, the first child that was born in the new hospital, the new county hospital, at McPherson, Kansas.

10:55

And I finished; graduated in 1922 with a major in Biological Science and also had enough work for a major in Philosophy and Theology, and a minor in Industrial Arts.

11:24

I had planned all during the college work to enter the ministry and was preparing for it, too, along the way. But when I got through my degree, I was in debt, clear to my neck, and had scrimped and saved and borrowed and worked out all I could. I worked there at Peterson Modine's grocery store on Saturdays for quite some time. Clear, go there at noon and work until 11 o'clock at night. And also did some farm work outside of whatever I could do. And of course we got some help from home; that is, in the way of foods and money, borrowed money. And we were so hard up that we couldn't afford the tuition for my wife while she was there. So she could only take a very few courses. She took one or two in Music and Home Ec, but she had to get her college education after I was out and teaching. So she went back, I think it was, it was either nine or ten summers after that, and finished up her, for her degree in, the B.S. degree in Music and Home Ec.

12:52

The following year, I went a half year more because I decided I'd better teach a while to get some of these debts paid off, and so I had to take a few educational courses, and also took some more science; and got my B.S. degree then, enough credits for that; and that was the end of McPherson training there.

13:26

Then in 1929, I decided to get my Master's Degree and I was out teaching then and I decided that I'd like to have a Master's Degree. And it worked out and would come best in Botany and with Philosophy and Education, Philosophy and Theology, as a part of the educational credits. So I went three summers there and one seminar and had a wonderful time and in the Spring of (19)33 then I was I was granted my Master's Degree in Botany. And my thesis was on the laboratory equipment for the, laboratory equipment in Botany for the small high schools of Western Kansas.

14:38

Then as I was teaching years, some years later, I had to take some summer school work. I went to Warrensburg Teacher's College, Warrensburg, Missouri, in the Summer of (19)24, and took courses in Physics because I had to teach Physics the next year. And I took, I think, three courses, Radio and Light and Sound and Mechanics, those courses in Physics. Then later I took one summer at Pittsburg, Kansas, and one summer's work at Springfield, Missouri, Southwest Missouri State College. And in the meantime while I was teaching, I took the several correspondence courses and worked out a credit in Mathematics, that is enough for a major. So I could say actually that I had credits enough for about six majors. My total credits amounted to 220 hours. I think that's about the end of this side of the tape so you can turn the tape over now.

16:20

Now you can see that with this sort of hit-and-miss, lack of a plan in my educational work, and I could easily leave out something. There was two things that I left out. One was in 1913, I went to the Warrensburg Teacher's College for one year and one summer to get my Rural School Certificate.

16:45

And along about the summer of (19)22 I think, I'm not sure which summer it was, I attended school out at Palmer Lake, Colorado, under Dr. Nininger, as principal

of this extension school out there, and I took a double course in Taxonomic Botany and a course in Geology. And it was there that I found so much fun in God's flower garden, just acres and acres of hundreds of species of flowers in bloom. And I think I did get around 2 or 3 hundred of them. But I couldn't keep up with them, there was just so many species blooming. It was impossible to keep up, and I put in long days working at it.

17:46

Now let's see if I can remember my teaching experience. The first year that I ever taught school was in the Fall of 1913. I got a school out 12 miles east of Carthage (MO) about two miles south east of a little town of Villa. My uncle was a bachelor, Uncle Zach Neher, was a bachelor and he lived a quarter of a mile north of Villa and he wanted me to come down and batch with him one Winter and teach school. So I did. And I bought me a bicycle and I rode the bicycle, it was two miles every day all Winter, all Spring, to teach the school. It was a seven months school and I got the exorbitant sum of \$40 a month; \$280 for the year. And of course, that helped pay my groceries and my clothes and the expenses, and paid off some of my school debts, money that I'd borrowed from my Dad, and had money to spare. About all we had to eat that Winter was cornbread because that's about all we baked. But it was good. We made it out of sour cream and we ate cornbread for breakfast, dinner, and supper. And I didn't want any cornbread after that year for a little while, but it wasn't long until I liked it just as well as I ever did. Please pass the cornbread.

19:32

Then the next year I got promoted. There was a school up near my old home, near Leeton (MO), about five miles north west of town, The Gladden (?) School, that wanted me to come up there and they offered me \$5 a month raise, so I got \$45 a month that year. And then I stayed at home. We were married in 1914, 30th of December. We stayed in Grandpa and Grandma's old house. My grandmother had just died and the grandfather was living over the other side of the yard with my folks. So I

drove one horse and a cart (?), six miles north west facing that north wind all Winter, and ooh it was cold!

20:28

Well, let's see, then I didn't teach any more 'til I got through college and that was 1923. I taught my first year in high school at Durham, Kansas. And I was there then a second year in '24. I'll not relate all the places that I had taught. I was at Portis, Kansas for five years and there was very enjoyable work there. And it was while I was there, and I spent two summers surveying the County of Osborne for plants (see <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3625281> ). And my two boys and I would take the old Model A and we'd go out every day. And while I would be hunting wildflowers; they'd be running bugs and snakes and what not. And we had a great time. This was done in connection with Dr. Gates, at Manhattan. It was through him, that gave the inspiration to do this. And I gave them one specimen of everything that I collected and I kept another specimen. So most of my Herbarium is from Kansas, much of it from Missouri, and scattering parts of it from all over the United States and possibly a few from Canada and Mexico and maybe from some other foreign countries. I think that I got a few in trade in Manhattan, from Egypt or somewhere in the area.

22:15

Well, let's see I took my Master's degrees as I said I believe in 1929 to '33, in the Summers. While I was attending school there in the Summers I was also an Assistant in the Botany Department at Fort Hays State College, and I graded many of the papers and all of the plant collections from the other students for my professor, Dr. A.W. Barton. I might say that out of the 34 years that I taught, I think 21 years was taught in Kansas schools, and one year in Colorado, and the rest of them in Missouri.

23:13

And now about the Herbarium itself. I don't consider it any great thing. 1800 species is a very small drop in the bucket compared to 300,000 species that are available, but it does represent a large segment of my life since 1910, and I always

wanted it to go to some college if it was worthy of that or worthwhile, and I hope that some good use can be made of it.

23:55

I found pleasure in collecting plants. Along I always took a book with me, an old catalogue, or some papers or something, on every trip that went anywhere in a car. And when I was in the field working, I would carrying a killing bottle in my pocket, because occasionally one would find an insect that you had never seen before and never would see again. So we have to be prepared for those things. I made me a vasculum when I was in school, and I'll probably turn that over to the museums in a year or two. I still want to go to a few camps. And as I've gone to about two or three young peoples' camps every summer for the last 13 years, I have collected some plants, at each place, over various places over the state of Missouri. And when I was down in Texas, I took the book along, and collected some down there and some down in Mexico and so on.

25:15

When I took a long trip, I always put a box in the car with wet sacks in it so that I could bring back plants, collect all day and bring back plants, and even keep them for another day if necessary. Keep them moist, and they will not wilt down. The plant gets too wilted down why it's worthless because you can't straighten it out again very well.

25:43

There are plants of all sizes in this collection. I have the *Cannabis sativa*. I never heard it called marijuana until just a couple years ago, but I had collected it way back, about thirty or forty years ago. And one of the tiniest plants is *Zannichelliaceae Potamogeton angustifolium*, but I didn't get the *angustifolium*. I did get the *Potamogeton americanus*, I think you will find in this set. Now you take the *Salsola pestifer* and the *Tribulus terrestris*, they are both not very pleasant to handle, and they're quite common in Kansas, though we have neither of them in this area of Missouri.



26:44

I want to say that while I was in Hays Teacher's College there, Dr. Rydberg, a professional taxonomic botanist who has written a number of keys on the plants of this area (Dr. Per Axel Rydberg, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Per\\_Axel\\_Rydberg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Per_Axel_Rydberg) ), he was there and I asked him to check my Herbarium over and he did. So everything that I had mounted up to that time, let's see that was about 1932 possibly, and he made two or three corrections. One of them was quite amusing to me because I found a plant that looked to me like a thistle. It was thorny and leaves were thorny in the edges just like thistle, and all. And I put it in the Thistle Family. And it turned out to be that it was in the *Ammiaceae* (*Apiaceae*) or Carrot Family.

27:50

I believe that some good can come from this Herbarium. I hope that some college botany classes and some students will have interest enough in it that they will finish up this Herbarium. I intended to do a lot more work on it, to mount up everything that I had collected that wasn't mounted, and also to make a new labeling system, and make it more uniform and a little neater. But my eyes failed me about a year ago and I'm absolutely unable to do that; I can barely read at all. And that will be a good project, it seems to me, for some students that are interested in botany and plant life. I have a lot of duplicates, boxes of them, which I intended to do a lot of trading, but I put it off to long and didn't get much of that done. So these might be distributed to some students who are making their own Herbarium's collections, and I would hope that before many years it would be completed and be in much better shape and more presentable even than it is now. The reason I used notebooks was because it was so handy. I carried my little Herbarium with me as I taught from place to place until it became too burdensome, and then I finally made a cabinet, and left most of them at home. I just took two or three notebooks with me to show the students how to work it.

29:47

It was about 1930 and I was teaching at Portis (KS) that I worked out a point system in teaching biology that seemed to work very well and grew like wildfire.

Students would make points and they would make them in their own choice of fields or areas. I had about 13 different areas: all the way from drawings and reports and field works and collections and dissections and field trips, I gave credit for every field trip, and animals and things that we couldn't collect if we saw them; well there were so many points for the one that first saw them and points for the total number in the group that we saw, and various things like that. And we had our first, beginning the year I would let them vote on and I'd explain it to them, the system of points and let them vote on it, and I never did have any class to turn it down. We chose up on sides at the beginning of the year. We gave a name to each side and we run competition. The side that had the fewest number of points at the end of the year, that's about a week or ten days before school was out, was to give a feed to the winning side. And so there's a lot of fun in that competition. In the plants, I always made some special points for that. First flower in the Spring, first wildflower in the Spring that was brought in, would get a big number of points.

31:50

Well, my tape's nearly all, I must bring this to a close. I want to say that I love nature and I love flowers, and more especially the wild flowers. I hope that when my time comes to go to the great beyond, my casket will be adorned only with a small bouquet of wild flowers. My favorite scripture, "Man shall not live by bread alone." (Deuteronomy 8:3, Matthew 4:4) Another equal to it, "Study to show thyself approved, rightly dividing this great word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)