

Katherine D. Rill

by Dr. Neil Harriman, UW-Oshkosh Biology Dept.

Obituary: Katherine Dorney Rill, 4 August 1925- 7 May 2007. Katherine was born and raised in Milwaukee, the daughter of John and Abigail Dorney. Her father was an attorney. Katherine studied Botany at UW-Madison, including a Plant Taxonomy class with Norman C. Fassett; she graduated with a BS/ Education degree in 1947, and took a job teaching Biology in Clintonville High School (Waupaca County). She married Russell A. Rill, then an engineer at FWD Corporation, in 1950. Their son Jeffrey and daughter Teresa were born in Clintonville. Russell and their two children, Jeffrey and Teresa, survive her.

The Rill family moved to Oshkosh in the summer of 1971; when Russell found a much better position with Oshkosh Truck. That is when Kay decided to journey a few blocks from her new home on Bowen Street to the UW-Oshkosh campus. She came into the herbarium and introduced herself. That began a relationship that continues even to this day.

She enrolled in the Master's program, and decided to compile a vascular flora of Winnebago County for her thesis. She collected vigorously, sometimes with me, sometimes with her friends. The degree was awarded 4 June 1977. She continued to add to her catalog, and published her work as "A vascular flora of Winnebago County, Wisconsin," *Trans. Wisc. Academy* 71(2): 155-180. 1983. It is altogether fitting that she arranged to have some of the page charges covered by an award from the Norman C. Fassett Memorial Fund.

It is a measure of how thoroughly and carefully she worked, that we have discovered no more than half a dozen native species in the county since she finished, and perhaps an equal number of weedy elements. Katherine was a strong believer in education, and for that reason she wanted common names in her paper, as well as scientific names. She had some go-arounds with the editor, but she prevailed.

Katherine was employed for several summers by Wisconsin DNR to survey areas that might be preserved as State Scientific Areas. One of these was Shaky Lake in Outagamie County; another was a series of prairies

along an old railroad grade in Winnebago County, officially "Oshkosh-Larsen Trail Prairies." I think these and other sites are lasting monuments to her memory.



Katherine began her personal herbarium while she was still in high school, modelled on what her mother had done as a young woman in Oxford County, Maine. By October of 2004, that collection had grown to some 8500 sheets, including her mother's specimens. The entire collection was donated to OSH, and it has now been incorporated into the general herbarium, with the duplicates widely distributed. The specimens are mostly from Wisconsin (especially Waupaca and Forest Counties, where the family owned properties), but also from across Canada, Minnesota, Arizona, Florida, and North Carolina. She regularly loaned specimens to researchers working on the Preliminary Reports on the Flora of Wisconsin, with the result that her herbarium is enriched by their annotations.

While Katherine was working on her Master's thesis, I told her about the Buckstaff Herbarium, then housed in specially-built cabinets in the Oshkosh Public Museum. The specimens were identified with a serial number, and the specimen data were listed separately in bound record books. In 1972, Katherine approached the then-director Ralph Kouny, and got his permission to move the entire collection to herbarium OSH. She then transferred all the data from the books onto the specimens, in her most careful schoolteacher's handwriting, and identified them, before they were incorporated into OSH. Each of the specimens is labelled to indicate what was done, typical of Katherine's methodical approach.

Her specimens are consulted almost daily; her spirit lives on, and we are all richer for having known her.