
January 1996

Florida's Pioneer Naturalist, the Life of Charles Torrey Simpson by Elizabeth Ogren Rothra

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Recommended Citation

Jansen, Deborah (1996) "Florida's Pioneer Naturalist, the Life of Charles Torrey Simpson by Elizabeth Ogren Rothra," *Florida Field Naturalist*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/ffn/vol24/iss4/7>

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REVIEW

Fla. Field Nat. 24(4):113, 1996.

Florida's Pioneer Naturalist, The Life of Charles Torrey Simpson.—Elizabeth Ogren Rothra. 1995. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. 240 p. ISBN 0-8130-1374-7. \$49.95 cloth.—Charles Torrey Simpson is best known as a specialist in mollusks, and as one of the first naturalists of south Florida. His writings on wild Florida, on landscaping with tropical plants, on the diminishing Liguus tree snail, and on the need to preserve south Florida's uniqueness have ranked him with the noted nature writers, John Muir and John Burroughs.

The reader of a naturalist's writings, especially one as productive as Simpson, cannot help but wonder how this life-long curiosity and drive began, and what obstacles and sacrifices were overcome to pursue it. This book is the first comprehensive biography of Simpson that goes behind the man as author and into his formative years. It is a sequential accounting from his birth in 1846 to his death in 1932.

Ms. Rothra follows Simpson from his childhood discoveries in Illinois, to his first ill-fated stay in Florida, and back to the Midwest where his longing for Florida continued. Simpson was never wealthy in a material sense, probably due to his unwillingness to give up his quest to understand the natural world. At every opportunity, he traveled, he collected and he catalogued.

It is evident that mollusks intrigued him from the beginning, so in 1890 his position as museum aide at the Smithsonian was truly a dream-come-true. He could support his family doing what he loved. This position took him on adventures in the company of those he admired. When he retired from the museum at the age of 56, he himself expected to spend his last years quietly, not to become one of Florida's best known naturalists and one of the first advocates for the establishment of Everglades National Park.

This biography is well documented both through the numerous quotes from Simpson's letters, articles, and books interspersed throughout the narrative, and by the Notes and Bibliography sections. The thirty-four photographs dotted throughout the book assist the reader's imagination in picturing the characters and places described.

Simpson's character, from his humbleness in his lack of formal education to his defense of his classification system of the mollusks, is developed as the book progresses. His independent spirit and determination is unfaltering. Although Simpson spoke little of his personal life in his own writings, Ms. Rothra revealed what she could find of his private life, including his friends, family and his loss of privacy for the sake of educating the public to appreciate the natural world.

My encounter with Simpson's name has only been through his Liguus tree snail work, but through this book I have come to know his other accomplishments. For those acquainted with Simpson as a botanist, this book will diversify their appreciation also.

Agency and private individuals involved in the South Florida Restoration initiative will find this book timely. Here is a man who first saw a truly untouched south Florida, and then witnessed its earliest degradations. He fought vehemently to preserve the places he loved. Had only a portion of the money and effort invested today, eight decades later, been available to support Simpson's foresight, south Florida would have remained natural. Though the apparent losses are disheartening, this book is also a motivation to continue restoration efforts.—**Deborah Jansen**, Big Cypress National Preserve, Box 110, Ochopee, Florida 34141.