

## **Kentucky Coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioica*) – Narrated by Jonathan Damery**

My name is Jonathan Damery, and I am the Editor of *Arnoldia*, the quarterly magazine of the Arboretum.

I first came to the Arboretum as an intern in 2009, and I came back the next year working in the duration department. There was a grant-funded project to go through all of the historical plant records, and to put all of that information into the Arboretum's plant database. The database is the place where we record information about where the plants were collected, if they were wild-collected, if they came from a particular town, or which side of the road it came from. It gets very particular in some cases. But when the Arboretum first... when this database was first developed here, in the 1980s, only information about the living plants was put into the database.

So there's this giant trove of material about these plants that had grown at the Arboretum, that we could only access through a sort of archival paper format. So they're these sort of library card files, these index cards with the information on it, and you'd have to go through, look up a particular plant by its species name, and you'd find the information that way. So we wanted to put all of it into the database. So yeah, I spent about, it was an 18-month project, a lot of time just flipping through cards, entering in the information. But the amazing thing is that through the process, or now that that process is done, we can search for a particular collector even, and find out all of the plants that they ever sent to the Arboretum, and where they were collecting. We can find out information about how many times the Arboretum has tried growing a particular plant, in some cases plants that might not grow very well here. And it's important to know how many times those attempts have been made. So, it's a really cool project.

Along the way, I became really fascinated by these names that I kept on seeing. They would reappear, a card here, a card there, and I began wondering, "Who are these individuals?" And the amazing thing too is that my project was one form of archival digitization of putting this historical information into a digital format. But there was simultaneously all of this information from journals, from old magazines that were being digitized as well.

So, I actually could say, "Who is this person?" And I could go online, and search for that person, and find these articles from 1905, from 1895, and actually figure out who they were. And so, I began to discover, especially in North America, that there was this amazing network of collectors who were sending plant material to the Arboretum. There were doctors—which might not be too surprising given that a lot of doctors had to study botany in their training—and lawyers. But then at the same time, there were people who were, there was a telegraph operator in Northwestern Illinois, there was a schoolteacher in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a school superintendent in Allenton, Missouri, outside of St. Louis. So just this amazing sort of cross-section of men and women who were sort of, some of them were wealthy, some of them were not, but all of them were united by this shared interest in plants.

I think the story of these avocational plant collectors is so important, because it shows that in the 1870s, much like today, there is this real value to people who are just keenly interested in the world around them, who are observing, who are taking notes, who are asking questions. And that's something that isn't necessarily done by only professionals. It's something that anyone can

do. We can all go out into our backyards, into the nature preserves near us, into the urban wilds, and make meaningful observations, and contribute to important science.