

Can Botanists Be Bought?

Professor Joseph W. Blankinship: “Professional Witness”

by Jim Habeck

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While researching the early years of University of Montana’s Professor of Biology, Dr. Morton J. Elrod, I came across some interesting information about another early-day Professor of Botany from Montana State University, Dr. Joseph W. Blankinship. Both of these professors were active field biologists during the turn of the 20th Century. They knew one another, and both knew of biology field work the other was engaged in.

When he first arrived at Missoula in 1897 Professor Elrod taught both botany and zoology; he is well known as the founder of UM’s Flathead Lake Biological Station in 1899, and was active in starting Glacier Park’s first Naturalist Guide Program. Professor Blankinship was more narrowly focused in the plant sciences. One of the most historically important publications dealing with Montana botany was written by Blankinship, *A century of botanical exploration in Montana, 1805-1905: collectors, herbaria and biologiography*. This was published in the first issue of the “Montana Agricultural College Science Studies Series: Botany,” November 1904.

I discovered that in the spring of 1908, Morton Elrod’s name had been deleted from the faculty list of professors elected for rehire for the fall term of 1908. He had been fired by the Montana Board of Education! Further research led me to discover that his dismissal was related to his having given courtroom testimony about cropland damage caused by the Washoe Copper Smelter fumes. Deer Lodge Valley farmers and ranchers had sued the copper company, based in Butte, for losses they suffered from the poisonous, toxic fumes that drifted over their fields and pastures. Morton Elrod had visited and examined the impacted

areas during the summers of 1905 and 1906, and photographed the damage. I don't know exactly what Elrod's testimony was, but it was enough to anger the copper company, who managed to get Elrod dismissed from his job at UM.

Dr. Donald MacMillan, a University of Montana history graduate student and student of K. Ross Toole, wrote a 400-page PhD dissertation on this smelter fume court case. And it is on page 154 of this thesis that Dr. Blankinship's name surfaces. He had been recruited by the Anaconda Copper Company to testify in this court case. His "assignment" was to rebut the evidence provided by other scientists hired by the farmers, including Elrod, that the smelter gas fumigations had, and were, causing lethal damage to crop and native range plants, and injury to farm animals. And he gladly did so. Dr. MacMillan wrote, quoting State Attorney General George Wickersham from a 1911 letter, "One of the most pathetic representatives of academia and professionalism to testify in the Bliss case was a puffed-up, self-important professor from the Agricultural College of Bozeman. Professor Joseph Blankinship testified for the Amalgamated. Thereafter he became 'a well-known professional witness' appearing constantly for various smelter companies whenever they were sued for damage resulting from fume emissions. Professor Blankinship conceived of himself as a scientist ahead of his time. He had discovered the disease responsible for the damage to vegetation in the Deer Lodge Valley: The 'drying up disease' he termed it." And that was his testimony!

Admittedly all plant biologists aren't perfect, never have and never will be, but Professor Blankinship seemed to have erred on the side of extreme imperfection. There was no tenure system in place on Montana campuses, and Elrod was placed on the hit list for removal for his actions, along with a UM Professor of Chemistry who also researched the fume problems. However, in the summer of 1908 a massive out-pouring of support for Morton Elrod was generated by alumni and campus students who presented signed petitions to Governor Norris and UM President Duniway for Elrod's reinstatement. It worked! Elrod remained on the

job, but the records I've examined don't show that Elrod ever spoke publicly again about the toxic smelter fumes. So really, the copper company won, since truth was silenced. I have no information on how Professor Blankinship's reputation survived into the future. Perhaps some newsletter readers can fill me in.