

Orator Fuller Cook: His Itinerary

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As a result of my acquaintance with Drs. Velva Rudd, Donovan Correll and W. Andrew Archer, I feel I know a little about the almost mythological character, O. F. Cook. A myth he definitely is not, as I have inherited piles of notebooks, files, photographs, photostats and specimens, which have taken a considerable amount of stolen time to sort and assimilate over the past ten years. I know that Dr. Cook was a thinker—witness the range of titles and subjects in his bibliography. He pondered the philosophy of taxonomy, nomenclature, “kinetic evolution,” origins of agriculture, “biological evolution of language,” racial problems in America, eugenics and education, and he wrote copiously of both botany and zoology. I also know that he was a prolific notemaker because I have yet to sort out the piles of scratch sheets, upon which he rewrote and revised everything several times.

I first became aware of Cook's work while I was preparing my material for “A Study of *Pseudophoenix*” in 1958. Dr. Cook had described the genus *Cyclospathe* with a single species, *C. northropii* of the Bahamas, and several species in the genus *Pseudophoenix*, *P. saonae*, *P. linearis*, and *P. insignis*, all of which unfortunately had to be reduced to synonymy. Another species name which he placed on an herbarium sheet of an undescribed species was later published by Max Burret in synonymy, making it illegitimate so I could not use it; instead I named that species in honor of Dr. R. Bruce Ledin. Another undescribed species of a most unusual palm collected by Dr. Cook, and found among his collections at the U.S.

National Herbarium, was *Colpothrinax cookii*, named in his honor many years after its original discovery in Guatemala. Time and rules of nomenclature have been unkind to many of Cook's described species and genera. Dr. Cook strenuously objected to the requirement of Latin diagnoses, and attempted to make his point of view known but some of his species suffered as a result. An annotated list of his published palm names is in preparation.

In due course I plan to publish some notes regarding Dr. O. F. Cook's palm studies along with some of the photographs found among his papers. Many of the photographs (not necessarily taken by Cook) are of excellent quality, having been taken by means of a large cumbersome portrait or press camera. Some are from glass plates which I hope to reproduce.

An obituary was published by Harold F. Loomis in the *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences* (40: 173-175) in 1950. A few of the pertinent details of his life are taken from that article and presented herewith.

“Dr. Orator Fuller Cook, agriculturist, botanist, and zoologist, was born at Clyde, N.Y. on May 28, 1867. He died in his home at Lanham, Md. on April 23, 1949, following a short and supposedly minor illness. Cook was graduated from Syracuse University in 1890. . . . In 1930 the University honored him with the D.Sc. degree. From 1891 to 1898 Dr. Cook was employed as a special agent of the New York State Colonization Society and spent much of the time in Liberia.” In 1898 he joined the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in association with David Fairchild.

For several years he was in charge of seed and plant introduction and tropical agriculture investigations. Retirement came in 1937 at the age of 70, "but this did not mean cessation of work, for he continued to appear at his office with almost as great regularity as had been his wont." Note that most of his palm work appeared during this retirement period. "Few men of his time had wider interests or more profound knowledge of so many biological subjects, and these led to extensive travel."

"Dr. Cook was a tireless worker and a remarkably keen observer, never without a sheaf of small note paper on which observations and ideas were recorded, later

to be filed under their proper headings. Dr. Cook lived simply and with an unbounded love for the country. He disliked the restraint and artificiality of city life and shunned large crowds and social gatherings."

Cook's travels took him to Africa, the West Indies and Central and South America. For the record I attach a greatly condensed version of Archer's manuscript concerning Cook's Itinerary between 1892 and 1930. The Archer manuscript comprises some 71 pages of dates and specific places visited. It was not published but a copy is filed at the Smithsonian Institution.

Itinerary—O. F. Cook

(From a manuscript compiled by W. Andrew Archer, 17 November 1951)

1892	January-June	Liberia
1893-1894	November-March	West Africa and Liberia
1896-1897	April-May	Liberia
1899	November-December	Puerto Rico
1901	June-July	Puerto Rico
1902	March-May	Mexico and Central America
1903	April-May	Costa Rica
1904	April-July	Central America
1905	March-May	Central America and Mexico
1906	March-July	Central America, Cuba, and Mexico
1907	May-July	Guatemala
1910	May-July	Via boat (S. S. Venezia) to Italy, Palestine, and Egypt
1914	April-June	British Honduras and Guatemala
1915	March-August	Jamaica, Central America, and South America
1917	August-September	Haiti
1919	July-October	Hawaii, Japan, and China
1922	February-March	British Honduras
1923	March-July	Panama and Haiti
1924	August-September	Haiti
1925	March-April	Panama and Haiti
1925	December	Mexico
1926	March-June	Haiti, Colombia, and Panama
1927	June-September	Haiti
1930	February-April	Haiti and Panama