

Angus Gholson A legend in his time

By Winnie L. Smith

Eminent botanists of this country and from as far away as the Soviet Union and Switzerland have visited Lake Seminole's resource manager, Angus Gholson, in his "little herbarium" at his home on Bolivar Street in Chattahoochee, Fla. He's never happier than when he's "botanizing" with someone who shares his interest in the vascular plants native to his area or helping a graduate student with research.

It all started out on a small scale. Gholson mounted specimens of the wild flowering plants and ferns he gathered in his rounds of the counties adjacent to the Apalachicola River and at Lake Seminole. He kept them in the beautiful old two-story house where he grew up and where he and his wife, Eloise, and his dog, Pet, live. (At least Pet lives there when she isn't serving as top dog on the job at the Resource Manager's Office at Lake Seminole.)

As his fascination with this avocation grew, so did his collection. Gholson converted an old "car house" into an herbarium and equipped it with cabinets to hold mounted specimens, his homemade drying oven, work areas and his library. Today there are 15,000 specimens preserved, 10,650 which he personally collected. The others are duplicates sent by other collectors — he has quite an exchange going on with botanists who are also interested in wild plants.

If you're wondering what fascination these plants that look like just so many weeds to the uninitiated hold for Gholson, here's what he has to say:

"I told you in the beginning I like it. I like the outdoors and plants. My people always have been interested in these things. Lake Seminole and the Apalachicola area are unique. The only rivers that come into Florida that have their origin outside the coastal plain flow through here. Back in times when the earth was being formed and the glaciers were receding, probably these bluffs were out from under the sea about the time the foothills of the Appalachians got out from beneath the sea. So, there's a connection both in space and time between these two areas.

"You can find lots of plants along these bluffs that you don't find anywhere else until you get up there (the Appalachians)."

Gholson points out that because the area is unique it has been studied by lots of botanists, including Asa Gray from Harvard in the early to mid-1800's and John Torrey.

The area has certainly held him in its spell — he left it long enough to get a degree in forestry from the University of Florida and to begin work on a graduate degree. By then he had a family, and an offer from St. Joe Paper Company was too good to refuse. Then he worked for the state awhile before joining the Corps of Engineers when clearing began for Lake Seminole.

"I've never regretted it."

He progressed from assistant manager to manager when the project became operational, so he has seen the many changes that have come since 1952. He considers the aquatic plant problem on the lake one of the most significant. Eurasian watermilfoil and hydrilla cover 15,000 acres of the 40,000 acre lake, fouling outboard motor props and blocking sunlight from native aquatic plants.

Visitation has increased gradually over the years to above three million a year. Gholson says a lot of people use the area. They are agrarian people familiar with the outdoors and he thinks they use it better than urban visitors.

Lake Seminole is an interesting archeology site because of the rivers which were the original means for the Indians to move from one area to another. They also offered an avenue for slaves to escape and move down river to get with renegades. There was a lot of riverboat traffic when cotton moved down river to Apalachicola. So, there are a number of sites that were located before the lake was impounded and that are now protected.



Angus Gholson, "botanizing" in his herbarium.

Gholson says the project was authorized for navigation first, and for hydropower. In the overall development of the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers system the idea was to use the water up and down the system as economically as possible. The Corps of Engineers also had the prerogative to include recreation as one of the purposes of construction. Even though it's not a stated purpose of the project, it's a big thing now.

The project is unique as a "run of the river" in that what comes into the lake has to go out — there's no flood control.

The job of resource manager has become more complicated, Gholson says. "We have a strongly stated responsibility to manage the resources so they will be available to people now and later on." To him that means to preserve the habitat for the wild animal and plant life. "It's been our philosophy to do our dead level best to keep it as natural as possible. We hesitate even to cut a dead tree unless it threatens other life, realizing there is life in that dead tree.

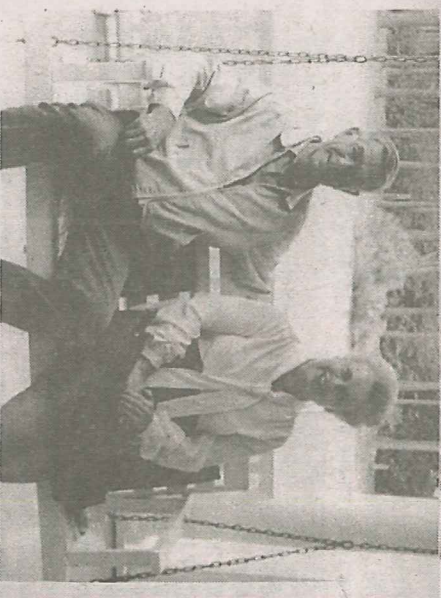
"As we interface with ecologists and environmentalists, we are showing them that the Corps has interests in common with theirs."

As for his avocation, Gholson looks around his herbarium at stacks of specimens dried between newspaper and corrugated cardboard. "I want to finish this work. I have a lot of catching up to do. I'd like to get everything in order by collecting time next spring. You know, they won't come to you — you've got to go to them. I won't know everything I get, I'll run into problems, but something I find might be something new.

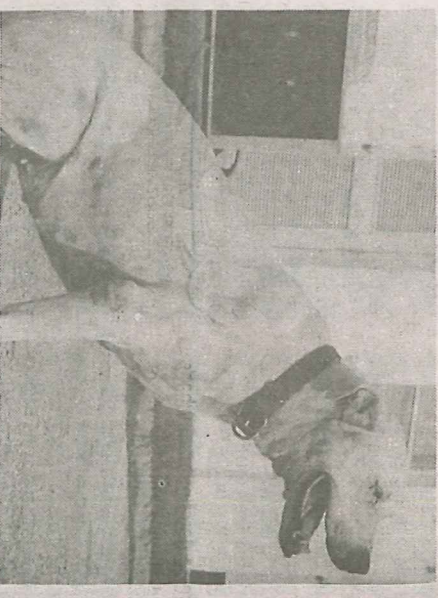
"It's something you can do in any kind of weather (the preparation and cataloging and teaching and exchanging information and specimens). You learn a lot when you teach. Nothing in nature is an absolute. There is the dynamics of change in genetic makeup, and genetic diversity is very important to solving world hunger."

In that respect, Gholson recently received a request from EPSCOT for information on the apios americana, a legume with tubular root that actually has more food value than the potato. Gholson says it was used in Ireland during the great famine.

Then, Gholson muses, "A little herbarium like this is something of a record of the knowledge we have of the things we associate with while we're here. Every plant is doing something even if it's



Angus and Eloise Gholson enjoy their spacious home just five minutes from the job.



Pet, the head dog at the Lake Seminole Resource Manager's Office.

a weed. If we can do a complete collection of all vascular (flowering) plants it will serve as a record — a time capsule — even if it aids only in identification. It gives you a name for everything. Everyone needs a name. Even if it's for control purposes.

"It's of some value as a record (in fact, one university has contacted Gholson with an interest in acquiring his collection), and when I get it all down on paper I may be able to compile a checklist and maybe get it published. It would cover the land areas around Lake Seminole and counties adjacent to the Apalachicola River including these bluffs."

And from the man who'll never have time to be bored, even when he retires, here's final bit of botanizing philosophy, "A weed is a plant that grows where you don't want it."

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