

# John Clayton Gifford: An Appreciation

By HENRY TROETSCHER, JR.

To many Dr. Gifford's chief claim to fame was his ability to tell a story; a very valid claim to those who heard him; any kind of a story, be it a broken down joke that expired before the Doctor's birth, or a sparkling tale of early Miami, or even of events that most people spoke of with reverence but he told with unhidden contempt.

To this writer, one of a younger generation, who had never met the man until his last years, there seemed to be in Dr. Gifford's telling of a tale an indication of an older generation that had possessed more spirit than the present one. His skeptical attitude created by his scientific background or perhaps by reasons previous to that training was ever present.

He would sit with his pipe clenched in his mouth, usually holding the bowl, as he talked, the words and smoke drifting from his mouth. Whether the story be one of domestic affairs, our troubles with Russia (Dr. Gifford did not care for Russia at all. Even in the days of American friendship for the Soviet he violently protested against the Soviet. It seems that he had bought several thousand dollars worth of Russian Imperial war bonds during the first World War only to have them repudiated within the next few months. These bonds were found in his deposit box after his death.), or of his life he spoke in what we called his "classroom voice." A strong natural voice, shaped by years of classroom lecturing and thousands of luncheon club engagements it never once faltered. Try to interrupt. Impossible. The voice had a purpose and knew where it was going. A Florida hurricane. And as fascinating and as interesting as one. And, incidentally, as destructive to young egos who foolishly stepped in the way.

And then usually there would be a loud, booming laugh as if what he had said had been a surprise to even himself. The listener might say a few words and again the Doctor would be away with his reminiscences and tales.

No person could claim that he stuck to a subject. His books as well as his vocal achievements were rambling, disjointed works that often left the reader or listener who had been trained or hoaxed into believing that organization was king in writing or speaking agog, impatient, or frankly mar-

velling. He had tremendous ability at shifting subjects, but even more at holding the interest of his audience.

His writing and speaking were akin to the house in which he lived and to the man himself. Mere rules meant nothing. Late in 1946 he showed members of the family a review of his latest book, *Living By the Land*. The review was from one of the scholarly botanical journals and though it praised the spirit of the work was critical of its style. "I just can't understand it," were his words, "they like what you write but they're mad because you didn't write it exactly like they wanted you to." Dr. Gifford was not in the habit of doing things exactly as "they" wanted him to.

Yet his rambling was like that of a river; it may cover half a continent, crisscrossing every which way, turn around and come back again, but eventually it reaches the sea. Spotted throughout Dr. Gifford's writings are a few great ideas. He had an intense interest in South Florida and the Caribbean area. His writings are filled with ideas as to how this area could best be developed. Another main thread was his Tropical Homestead. And a third, and perhaps the greatest, was the soil and soil products. "Remember this," he would say, "everything comes from the soil. You lose it and all your machines aren't worth anything."

These ideas were his work. It would be a fair appraisal to say that all of his written work could be compressed in one small book, simply outlines of his major ideas.

But such a book would interest no one except perhaps scholars. This writer once asked him why he didn't use outlines in his classroom lectures and draw up complete outlines before he started to put together a book. "I know what I want to say," he answered, "I've said it enough before. And I'll tell you, you just can't get most people to understand what you're talking about unless you tell them again and again. Now you know that nobody will read a book if every chapter is word for word the same as the last one. But lots of people will read it and enjoy it if you tell them some stories along the way and just keep slipping in what you really want to say."

Dr. Gifford himself had done a lot of rambling during his 79 years of life and like his books he always managed to slip back to the subject no matter how far he had wandered. He was born in 1870, the son of Emily Gifford and Daniel Gifford, a sea captain. He often mentioned that his two earliest memories had been of ships and forests. Much of his early life had been spent on his father's ship, but every possible moment was spent in the woods around Mays Landing, New Jersey, the place of his birth.

Much of his spare time during his school years was spent on the ship and by the age of twelve he had done more sailing than most do in their lifetime. He graduated from the public school in the village. While a student there he had discovered a new variety of oak tree, *Quercus Giffordii*. He often said later that he had seen but two or three of them all of his life and that he was sure the tree was not actually a distinct variety. But, as he pointed out, he thought that it was when he found it and his feeling was backed by scientific authority of the times.

He next attended Swarthmore College from which he received a B. S. degree in 1890. He often told the story of his entrance into Swarthmore. It seemed that his youth and the size of the small public school from which he had graduated had effectively kept him from entering the college that year. Finally, however, the college authorities decided that they would allow him to take a special test in identification of plants. If he passed he would be allowed to enter. The botany professor to whom he was directed took a leaf specimen from their collection and asked him the scientific name of the plant. Dr. Gifford answered immediately and even pointed out its habitat. The same scene was repeated three times. Finally he said to the professor, "I don't know if this test is quite fair, for, you see, I gathered these plants that you showed me." And, sure enough, he had in his hunts around Mays Landing. He had given them to the local minister who was collecting for the professor now conducting the examination.

He was admitted and made a student assistant to the professor.

At Swarthmore where he taught Economic Botany in 1894, he developed the belief in Quakerism which he held till his death. His early religious training had been in the Presbyterian faith, but the Society of Friends with its quiet inward faith had greater appeal.

He did not believe in miracles. The writer remembers well his story of how one time when his sister was visiting him, she expressed a desire for fish for dinner. At the same moment a small fish dropped outside the window near which she sat. As he explained it, "They all said it was just like a miracle. But I'll tell you that fish dropped from the mouth of a bird that caught the fish in the bay down there. If she'd sit there for another fifty years and keep saying that she'd like to have fish for dinner, not another fish would drop. And if that's anything like they call miracles, then there isn't any such thing." And that was that, no miracles.

After Swarthmore the rambling began again. At his Mother's insistence he attended the University of Michigan and Johns Hopkins in search of a

medical degree. (And incidentally studied some architecture at the University of Michigan.)

One of his favorite stories (and one must remember that these are Gifford stories from the doctor's mouth and may contain some if not much poetry. Flavoring sharpens the listener's interest. Dr. Gifford knew that rule well and religiously practiced it,) was of his break from a medical career.

During one summer toward the end of his medical studies, he was studying in Tulane University and working in the hospital there. "Now they had a carbuncle and boil ward there at the hospital, and that's where they put me. I must have fixed 500 of the things, and was beginning to feel that if the practice of medicine was like this, I didn't want it. I never had really cared to practice medicine anyway. Well, one night I left the hospital early and went down to the docks and walked around wondering what to do. Who should I see but an old sea captain, one of my Father's best friends. I told him all of my troubles and he said that he was leaving for South America in the morning, and if I wanted to go he'd find a place for me on his ship. I told him I couldn't, that I'd gotten too far along on my medical degree, but I wanted to go.

"Well, come the next morning, I was on board his ship and never studied medicine again, for when I came back after six months I decided to go to Germany to get my degree in forestry." And then came the laugh, the smoke from the pipe, and the twinkle in his eyes.

In the 1890's there were no universities in the United States that offered the work in forestry that he desired, and like many others in search of graduate work in their fields he turned to Germany. In 1899 he was awarded the D. Oec. degree (Doctor of Economics) by Munich University.

Munich, Dr. Gifford would explain, was a predominantly Catholic city and many resented Americans because of their participation in the Spanish-American war opposed to Catholic Spain. Thus, when he came forward for his oral exam prior to the awarding of the degree, he was bombarded with questions that had little bearing on the subject matter of his degree but had great emphasis on the foreign policy of the United States. Soon, however, everyone was appeased and with much handshaking and celebration he was awarded the freedom of the city for a week, an honor customarily bestowed on successful candidates. He often remarked that that week was a glorious memory. The Germans respected the higher degree and opened their stores, heart, and beer mugs to the successful candidates.

Upon his return to the United States he was appointed Assistant Professor of Economic Forestry at Cornell University. The forestry school there, authorized by a state act of March 26, 1898, was the first of its kind in the United States.

While in service at Cornell he suggested the degree of Forest Engineer which is now used in Italy, Spain, and Canada.

Perhaps his first important published paper was a geological survey of New Jersey, published in 1896 while he was engaged in public service work there. Shortly thereafter he founded the *New Jersey Forester* which was purchased by the American Forestry Association in 1898 to be used as its official organ. Dr. Gifford was retained as editor and the magazine published as *The Forester*.

He had first come to Florida in 1892. Just two years after his graduation from Swarthmore he had voyaged to the Bahamas in an effort to find a site for a tropical forestry laboratory. This trip had carried him from Tampa, and thence by steamship toward Nassau. When the boat passed offshore of Miami, the captain remarked that there was good water there and that he thought the village would grow.

In 1902 he stopped at Peacock's Inn in Coconut Grove. He wrote at this time of Indians loafing around the porches of homes. By this time he had decided to settle here and insured his residence by a purchase of a home in 1905.

Coconut Grove is dotted with houses that he built. The one in which he lived most of his years at 2937 S. W. 27th Avenue is a good illustration of what he thought a house should be in this sub-tropical climate.

Basic to his theory was the notion that homes of a given area should reflect the resources of the area, this to be accomplished by a judicious use of the available products of the region in the construction of the home. Thus Dr. Gifford's homes were constructed primarily of coral rock and Dade County pine.

From 1905 until 1931 Dr. Gifford was in one way or another involved in the purchase and sale of real estate. This activity was not by far the only one in which he was engaged during these years. As a matter of fact, he later claimed that he was retired when he moved to Florida and had hoped just to work around a little on tropical forestry. He became interested in real estate, however, especially as the problem of Everglades drainage became an issue in South Florida. During this early period he wrote many

articles, some later collected in book form, urging the immediate drainage of the Everglades. He spoke of American Venices springing up on the canals which would be arteries leading to a super rich farmland in the heart of the Everglades. The sum total of these writings is that he believed that drainage of the Everglades would be an act similar to the Dutch's building of dams to reclaim lost land from the sea.

In later years he infrequently referred to these writings. He then said that the Everglades should have been drained by a plan he ascribed to Napoleon Broward; the canals should have followed the natural drainage flow and carried the water out into the Gulf of Mexico.

His dealings in real estate were for the most part of a private nature. He was associated with various companies usually in the capacity of an adviser. Among these were the Sunshine Real Estate Company and the Everglades Land Sales Company. Later he was included in the Elliott Key Lime Company and the Triangle Corporation.

He gave his time willingly to the writing of real estate promotional literature, for he was firmly convinced that everyone should live in Florida. He was directly influential in bringing some ninety settlers to Florida.

Of his private real estate dealings he said that he followed but one rule: buy a piece of land, split it in half, and then hold off selling until you can get back your original investment from one of the halves. This formula seems to have worked successfully for him.

On the birth certificate of Emily Jane, his second daughter, born in 1925, Dr. Gifford's occupation was listed by the attending physician as "Capitalist." Unquestionably he was a man of considerable wealth at that time. He at one time told this writer that he had had a fortune of over one million dollars, not in paper holdings but in cash. He said that he went to the wisest investment men he could find and was told to invest in two items: small first mortgages on good property and bank stock. This he did. But with the real estate collapse in South Florida the mortgages were practically valueless and shortly banks were failing quickly.

He was Vice-President of both the Miami Bank and Trust Company and the Morris Plan Bank. The collapse of the latter was a source of great sorrow to Dr. Gifford. In later years he spoke but little of the incident and once mentioned that this had been his biggest failure.

Dean Russell Rasco of the University of Miami Law School, tells that he had done legal work for Dr. Gifford in connection with the collapse, and that they had always been warm friends. One day, coming across the dean

in his office, Dr. Gifford had said, "How's the old shyster these days?" Rasco, answering in the same vein, had inquired, "How's the old broken down banker?" Dr. Gifford became very angry about the exchange. His reaction reached the Dean by means of a letter in which Dr. Gifford made it clear that he felt Rasco had not spoken with proper respect. Rasco telephoned him immediately and smoothed his feelings.

Dr. Gifford was a director of the Coconut Grove Exchange Bank until his death.

In 1923 he married Martha Wilson. At this time he had extensive real estate holdings throughout South and Central Florida, and for the next few years the couple spent their time in Stuart, Orlando, De Soto City and Miami. Two girls were born within the next few years. Dr. Gifford's first marriage to Edith Wright had been childless.

Before his marriage in 1923 he had worn a beard, knee boots, and generally affected a colorful manner of dress. As was to be expected marriage ended this whim. Except for such clothes (he looks quite dapper in old photographs), he did not ever purchase personal articles that ran to great expense. Clothes during his last years meant nothing to him; they were either purchased for him by his wife or ordered from a mail order catalogue. Perhaps his prize possessions were his pipes. To even these he paid little attention, and all of his grandchildren have to some extent been reared on dirty pipestems.

When questioned by this writer on his attitude toward losing such a fortune, he replied, "Well, I don't have as many worries without it. And I don't really need much. We've got the house here and I've got my job at the University."

Dr. Gifford had taught evening classes for the University before 1931, but it was in that year that he accepted a post as Professor of Tropical Forestry. He taught from that chair until his death.

He was easily one of the most popular teachers at the school. And why not? Not more than four or five people failed his courses during his full tenure. But many people looking for an easy mark usually found to their surprise that they were enjoying the course, and often before the end of the semester, Dr. Gifford would have made more converts to his ideas.

He lectured not to the class but to the window. Frequently when he had made a point he would turn from the window and laugh. The University officials, because of the magnitude of his voice, aimed out the window as it was, usually found it expedient to put his classes as far as possible from

any others. In spite of such precautions occasionally an instructor would complain that his class was learning Tropical Forestry rather than the mathematics it should have been listening to.

Visitors were frequent. He told the story of how one day, he glanced at the class and noticed that an older man was sitting reading a newspaper. This Dr. Gifford could not tolerate. Students could miss class as often as they wished but once there were expected to listen. "Get out, get out. Young man, I'm telling you that they need men in the outdoors. Go there, don't come to this classroom." The fellow left attempting to sputter an explanation that was lost in a gale of laughter as the class began to laugh. When he asked why, they answered that the fellow now departed was not a member of the class but a mere visitor. "Well, let it be understood that even visitors shouldn't read newspapers in classrooms."

One of his courses became required for students who wished to teach in secondary schools. It was with these students that he made his most lasting impression on South Florida. During the last years of his life literally hundreds of his former students would stop by his home. Many of them are now teaching and making the ideas acquired by them from him known to a new generation.

As a scientist Dr. Gifford was an enigma. This writer has heard one highly noted scientist comment that if Dr. Gifford had backed his theories with more experimentation he would unquestionably have been one of the century's greatest scientists.

The statement indicates a concise analysis. Perhaps because he was a forester and often close to nature in its more poetic phases, he carried to his science a spirit that seemingly rebelled at the close, hard, often boring work of experiment, experiment, experiment. In fact, he often made fun of appropriations made for research and considered such conduct a waste of time. Ironically enough, he constantly experimented in an offhand manner with the plants that grew in his yard.

Actually in this writer's opinion Dr. Gifford served his science best by the role he had assumed. He made articulate for many people the whole vast potential, scientific or otherwise, of this Caribbean area. In these days of public relations men under each lamppost, we know the importance of getting the problem or answer before the public. This he did—though he may have added a little *Giffordia* along the way.

Strangely enough, in spite of all his platform lecturing wherein he performed the function of teaching the public about South Florida, he belonged



to but few of the clubs or societies he addressed. He was, however, president of the Florida Botanical Garden and Arboretum Association in 1934 and of the Historical Association of South Florida in 1942. The honor that he most prized was election as a fellow in the Society of American Foresters.

During these years his life achieved a routine. He normally was teaching an hour or two a day, usually in the late morning, had one to five invitations a week to speak, and spent the rest of his time writing or sitting in the large living room entertaining guests. His children were growing to maturity and having children of their own.

The side of the man I like most to remember is his relations with children. Though sometimes as stubborn as a mule when dealing with older folk, he was completely generous and forgiving with a child. His daughters tell of one time that a visitor was bewildered by the scene of complete chaos that existed as he spoke to Dr. Gifford. The children were beating with a hammer on an antique chair, shouting and occasionally engaging in free-for-all. "Dr. Gifford," he said, "do you see what they are doing to that chair?" Dr. Gifford smiled, withdrew his pipe, and answered, "Well, they're only children."

In July, 1946, he made a misstep from a lecture platform at the end of one of his classes and fell and broke his hip. This injury was soon healed but caused him to declare that with all the time he was spending in hospital beds because of the hip injury, he did not believe he would ever have any other work done on him.

The hip injury, though it healed perfectly, effectively cut him out of speaking and social engagements. Now in response to invitations to speak he would declare that he hadn't been feeling well since the hip injury.

He continued to instruct his classes, however, until the early part of May, 1949, at which time he was taken to the hospital because of a kidney ailment. Complications developed and he died on June 25, 1949, two weeks after he had been returned from the hospital.

Interment was at Elliott's Key on land he had known and loved for many years.

That fall the University of Miami established the Gifford Arboretum in his honor, commemorating his long devoted service to the university and to the cause of forestry.

An editorial in the Miami Herald on the occasion of his death paid tribute to his services and summed up the nature and importance of his life work:

“Not only this community, but all Florida as well, has lost one of its most distinguished citizens in the death of Dr. John C. Gifford.

. . . Dr. Gifford was a giant of a man. The years made no appreciable inroads on his seemingly inexhaustible store of energy. His booming voice . . . never ceased to tell the story of the forest, man’s abuse of them, and the need for conserving the trees that a bountiful nature has given us in our scheme of using. . . . He has left a notable impression on its (Miami’s) structure and its progress.”

*American Forests* in its August, 1949, issue noted his passing as follows:

“The nation lost an eminent citizen and the world one of its most distinguished foresters in the death on June 25 of Dr. John C. Gifford . . . internationally known forester, scholar and scientist. . . .

“Closely associated at the turn of the century with Dr. B. E. Fernow, Dr. J. T. Rothrock, Gifford Pinchot and other far-sighted men in pioneering the forest conservation movement in this country, Dr. Gifford has left a notable impression on its progress.

. . . recognized as an outstanding authority on tropical forestry . . . (his) work with tropical forests and fruits brought him worldwide recognition. . . . But of even greater satisfaction to him, it resulted in closer educational and social association between the peoples of the American tropics.”

Mr. F. Page Wilson, a long-time resident of the community, in a letter dated October 20, 1949, suggests that since Dr. Gifford’s death much had been said about his use of trees and conservation, etc., but that the broader aspects of his teaching had been ignored. He suggests that his interpretation of the Bay Biscayne-Keys-Caribbean country, his pointing out of the many subtle differences of this area, and their relationship to human living were his chief teachings.

Mr. Wilson suggests that if a short inclusive name be selected for Dr. Gifford that it might well be “This region’s great interpreter.” This writer tends to agree. One of the main threads running through his books is a constant attempt to get the residents of the area to recognize the differences in this area as compared to the Northern climes from whence they came.

In the *Tropical Subsistence Homestead*, published by the Colonial Press, Clinton, Mass., 1934, he says:

“There is one thing certain, that the settler from the north in order to succeed must leave his northern notions up north where they belong and adopt a system fitted to the place, the plant and the people. The natives have been at it in their special land hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years

before America was ever discovered. Much that we have was given us by the Indian. I once saw a high school student in the West Indies struggling through a bulletin on how to preserve fruits for winter use. I have seen them wondering about planting in the fall or spring. . . . On the other hand I have seen northerners dig cellars under their houses for cool storage, put steep roofs on their houses as if to shed snow, in short try out everything in the catalog just as though their neighbors had never tried it before. When northern experts unfamiliar with the tropics prescribe confidentially for tropical conditions it is well to be beware."

In his *Living by the Land*, Glade House, Coral Gables, 1945, he indicated the result of a failure to make the necessary adjustments to this or any other newly used area:

"Lands, plants, and people must work together, wherever they are; else disaster comes soon or late. The simple unsophisticated native may be untutored in book-learning but he can show the new settler a thing or two about living by the land."

In a conversation shortly before his death, Dr. Gifford remarked: "About the silliest thing you ever see in these parts is someone from the north who is determined to plant the same trees in his yard here that he had in New Jersey. I knew a fellow one time who brought seed and sprouts from the north and sat up nights with them for over a year before he realized that they just weren't going to work. I could have told him all of the time." (He used to say that nobody would ever catch him sitting up nights with plants. If they couldn't grow without that kind of attention they weren't worth growing.)

The aim of his pleading for adjustments to the area to be settled was the creation of a more abundant life, which to him meant a return to the farm which varied, of course, from area to area, but in all regions meant a strong, basic economic unit that would serve as a wall against future economic unrest.

Dr. Gifford conceived conservation to be a series of subjects touching all facets of human affairs. He argued that a man's concept of any one phase of conservation was usually determined by his point of view and his occupation. There was nothing new in conservation, it was age old, usually practiced by a nation after it was too late. A mere saving or hoarding of things was not conservation. Basically it was an intelligent use of all of a nation's resources. Only through this use would a nation learn the importance of the subject and appreciate its necessity.

His life was in many respects a projection of this intelligent use theory. His thoughts as applied to the conservation of forests and other natural resources were equally applied to the facts of day by day living. To him intelligent use meant more than the mere replenishment of forests.

In *Living by the Land*, page 24, he wrote:

“Movement back to the land is altogether a practical scheme, since despite our growth in population we still have sufficient space for the purpose. In places where good agricultural land is scarce and population dense, homes and sustenance can be won from forest lands so rugged that they are classed by some agriculturists as marginal. . . . Often it is the man who is marginal, and not the land.”

*Living by the Land* was his last published book and contains in full scope the man and his ideas. The book contains all of the technical faults that were an almost essential part of his writing. To read it, however, is a warm experience, for the reader knows not when he will suddenly, perhaps in the midst of a description of a tree, be faced with a sentence or paragraph of great writing.

Included in his writings you will come across such words as these: “Conservation is a kind of philosophy of living . . . not so much a study of any thing in itself as it is a study of man’s relation to things.”

“Most primitive peoples kill to live and not live to kill.”

“A covey of quail is often of more value to the community than the man who kills them.”

“Real experts are usually men who have not lost their sense of relativity.”

“A weed is merely a plant out of place.”

“The smartest man in the world is helpless without opportunity.”

And thus the man, John C. Gifford. The only tangible things left behind are some books, all out of print, and the number constantly dwindling as attics are cleaned; numerous magazine articles, all but disappeared; and certain trees.

The trees; the *ficus altissima*, the lofty fig, brought here by him in 1902, now lines our streets. He brought the coral tree from Jamaica, the bay rum, *Thespesia grandiflora*, from the West Indies, the cajeput brought in 1906 from Australia, tender barked and beautiful. Here certainly are memorials that shall not dwindle though forgotten be their origin.

But even more important is the intangible heritage, the thoughts, the ideas and impressions many, perhaps almost all, not original with the man as he

easily admitted, but this articulate man for many years in front of the garden clubs, luncheon clubs, historical society meetings and, most important, college classrooms, gave meaning to these ideas. So that now there is not a part of this wide Florida landscape that does not contain at least one man who has learned from him and remembered.

Perhaps there is a Dr. Gifford among them.

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