

LYMAN BENSON BIOGRAPHY

Chuck Staples, CSSA Historian

Benson, Dr Lyman David (1909–1993)—botanist, teacher and taxonomist, specializing on cacti of the United States of America and Canada.



Born on a pear farm near Kelseyville north of San Francisco, California on 4 May 1909, Lyman Benson became a botanist, a teacher at the university level and a taxonomist with extensive work on Cactaceae.

Lyman attended Stanford University in California in the fall of 1926. He started out studying journalism, but soon switched to botany. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa with an AB degree in botany in 1930. Lyman received his MA degree in 1931 and PhD degree in 1939, both in botany, from Stanford University. While at the university he specialized in plant taxonomy and geographical distribution of plants. Dr Benson was hired as an instructor in botany and as an assistant botanist in the Agricultural Experiment Station at the University of Arizona in Tucson from 1938 to 1940 moving up to assistant professor of botany at the university from 1940 to 1944. He was hired as an associate professor at Pomona College in Claremont, California from 1944 until his advancement to full professor in 1949—retiring in 1974. He was also chairman of the botany department and director of the herbarium at the college 1944–1973.

Under Professor Benson’s guidance Edward [Ted] Frederick Anderson (1932-2001) and David Leo Walkington (1930-1993) received their PhD degrees in botany at Claremont Graduate University in 1961 and 1966, respectively. The Claremont Graduate University was founded in 1925 at the same time that the undergraduate Claremont Colleges were founded—starting out with Pomona College (founded in 1887) and adding four more colleges founded during subsequent years.

Dr Benson was a speaker at numerous cactus and succulent plant societies and at CSSA conventions that included color slides of trips throughout North America, Europe and Africa. His slide show “Color in the Southwestern Deserts” was popular to many outside groups as well. He was on the Executive Board of CSSA 1949-1953, Vice President 1954-1955 and President 1956-1957—Board of Directors at various times from 1958 to 1982.

Dr Benson received the CSSA Fellow award in 1945 for his publication of *Cacti of Arizona* in 1940 and other publications on desert plants. He was the co-author of *The Trees and Shrubs of the Southwestern Deserts* in 1954 and author of *The Native Cacti of California* in 1969 and the monumental (1044 pages) *The Cacti of the United States and Canada* in 1982 with illustrations by Rachel Lucretia Breazeale Hamilton (1908–1986), himself and others. The 2001 book *The Cactus Family* by Ted Anderson was dedicated to Lyman Benson.

Dr Benson received the prestigious Cactus d’Or award from the International Organization for Succulent Plant Studies (IOS) in 1984—presented by Princess Caroline in Monaco, daughter of Princess Grace (actress Grace Kelly before becoming a Princess). Friend Ted Anderson accepted the award for Lyman and brought it back to him in California from Monaco.

The genus *Lymanbensonia* was named in Dr Lyman Benson’s honor in 1984 by Myron William Kimmach (1922-). The latest is that the genus *Lymanbensonia* has been included as part of an infrageneric group under the genus *Pfeiffera*. Species described by Lyman are: *Epithelantha bokei*, *Neolloydia (Sclerocactus) warnockii*, *Pediocactus bradyi*, *Pediocactus knowltonii* and *Sclerocactus wrightiae*, all in the 1960s and all named after people of the plant hobby.

Dr Lyman David Benson died on 12 July 1993 in Portola Valley, California after a long illness.

References:

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