

Elizabeth Emerson Atwater (1812-1878)

Elizabeth Emerson Atwater was born to a wealthy family in Norwich, Vermont, August 8, 1812 and died in Buffalo, New York, April 11, 1878. At her request, most of her personal journals were destroyed when she passed away. However, many of her letters remain and, more importantly, her many and varied scientific collections survive in the various institutions of deposition. It is from these records of her life's activities that we can understand who Mrs. Atwater was.

At the age of 16, Elizabeth and a friend were sent off together to a boarding school in Troy, New York. It was noted in her obituary that girls were not often afforded such educational opportunities at that time and that Elizabeth made the most of it.

In July of 1839, Elizabeth married Samuel T. Atwater of Buffalo, New York and moved there to be with him. They were included among the high society of New York and were frequently invited to "splendid parties at private houses, assemblies, military balls, etc." but, Elizabeth recorded that she "found no comfort in parties, no good in habitual attendance of them, and so refrained from attendance. Really it is at the sacrifice of every amiable feeling to make one's toilet at nine o'clock in the evening and proceed to a fashionable party. The necessity of conforming to fashion, which is so fickle and arbitrary, is almost unbearable, and yet one cannot be independent of it, if they mingle in society at all; it is a sorry state of things."

She and "T", as she called her husband, preferred each other's company to the parties and spent many happy times together. Later Elizabeth concluded, "I have never been a society woman. My whole nature has revolted at it, but I have realized great enjoyment with nature, with dear friends, and in my pursuits."

Despite the fact that she was not a society woman, Elizabeth was a very personable individual and had friends throughout the world who became enthusiastic participants in her enjoyment of nature and other pursuits. She regularly received packages from exotic locales like New Zealand, Italy, and Cuba. So, although she never traveled outside of the U.S., Elizabeth's collections include objects from around the globe.

In 1856, Elizabeth and "T" moved to Chicago. It was said that "Here, perhaps, more than anywhere else, she sowed and reaped the richest harvests of her useful life." Although Mrs. Atwater was "delicate, always hovering on the borders of invalidism" she did considerable good in this city. She was one of the founders for the Home of the Aged in Chicago and was one of their most active contributors. She always had time for her "old lady" friends.

She was also an extremely active member of the new Humane Society. She "seemed to know every horse in Chicago and took pity on every dumb animal in need of an advocate." One person remarked that she can "never think of Mrs. Atwater, but I see before me, as I saw more than once, that slender body leaning far out a high window, as she begged the man in the yard below to cease beating his horse." Elizabeth, herself, stated, "So you see I have few idle moments—not enough for my physical welfare. In a city like Chicago one can never fold their hands in idleness without violating the injunction to 'love your neighbor as yourself.'"

She was also involved with the Chicago Historical Society and the Chicago Academy of Sciences, where she sent many of her scientific specimens. Once she lamented, "Before the Chicago conflagration of 1871, I was the possessor of one of the best individual collections in the whole Northwest—consisting of minerals, fossils, rare Italian Marbles of exceeding beauty, precious stones, curiosities, etc., etc. All were absorbed in the devouring element, save a few boxes placed beyond the limit of the fire. My choicest specimens, at the solicitation of our lamented secretary, Dr. William Stimpson, were temporarily deposited at the Chicago Academy of Sciences—all were lost. I have had but little heart in the work since that terrible night."

The loss of her collections left her despondent, but her passion was quickly rekindled when Elizabeth visited California in 1873. There she made some of her most important collections. She was astounded by the variety and beauty of the California landscape. She wrote to a friend about a rail trip she took during this time, saying, "took no dinner, but took the time when passengers were eating to secure lovely wild flowers on a plain beyond the track. At suppertime repeated the performance. Some scarlet larkspurs I saw nearly distracted me; I had never even heard of them before." In all, Elizabeth collected over 2000 specimens during this trip, several of which were new to science.

She wrote her former teacher regarding her most favorite new specimen. "I forward for your acceptance this little specimen. I believe you will feel an especial interest in it, from its having been found by your former pupil. I gathered it with other plants at the foot of Yosemite Falls, in the Yosemite Valley, California, on June 24, 1873. It being an infertile specimen, I hesitated relative to pressing it. Attaching no particular value to it—it being not in fruit—yet greatly interested in its appearance, I did not send it with other plants to friends for whom in my travels I am in the habit of collecting, but chanced to include one in a small parcel to my friend, Dr. Charles Mohr, a German gentleman, resident in Mobile, Alabama, and a fine botanist. He noticed it as new to himself, and immediately forwarded the tuft to Dr. Karl Muller, the distinguished Bryologist in Germany. I quote from Dr. Mohr's letter in reference to it: 'Dr. Muller describes that fine brown moss, of which you had sent me an infertile specimen, as a new species, naming it in honor of its enthusiastic discoverer, *Bryum atwateriae*. It is nearly allied to *B. alpinum* of Europe. It was reported in the Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical club,' New York, August, 1874."

Although Mrs. Atwater loved botany best, she also made contributions to conchology, mineralogy, and paleontology. Her obituary records, "At the time of her decease she had thirty boxes filled with botanical and other scientific specimens. These she requested her husband to give to the Chicago Academy of Sciences," along with her entire cabinet of minerals and shells. These remain with the Academy today.

Compiled by Steve Sullivan, Collections Manager, Chicago Academy of Sciences. (Prior to 1/2008)