

While Claude Barr's neighbors in southwestern South Dakota knew him as a hard-working rancher, scientists around the world recognized the self-taught botanist for his discoveries of Great Plains flora.

Claude A. Barr was born in Arkansas on 27 August 1887, but his family soon moved to Saint Louis, Missouri, where he graduated from high school. While selling stereoscopes during a 1909 break from his studies at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, Barr heard of free land in western South Dakota and with his father filed on homesteads near Smithwick in Fall River County. Five years later, Barr turned down a Harvard scholarship to return to South Dakota and help his parents survive drought in the state's hottest and driest county.

Back on the ranch, Barr became enchanted with the plants he discovered thriving in the harsh environment, and he began collecting specimens and harvesting seed to nurture in his garden at home. Acting on an impulse, he photographed a pasque flower he had transplanted and submitted the picture along with an article to *House and Garden* magazine, which published it in 1932. The article led to requests for plants from across the country, and in 1935, Barr started a nursery business, growing and distributing native perennials, shrubs, and cacti from what he had begun to call his "Prairie Gem Ranch."

When Barr discovered that no comprehensive guide to the region's flora existed, he determined to write one. In 1963, he sold his cattle and much of his land in order to travel the Great Plains from Canada to Mexico, collecting, identifying, and, in cases, discovering plants that no one knew existed. Some, like Barr's milkvetch (*Astragalus barrii*), were named for him. In 1982, just weeks before his death on 21 July, he completed his lifework, *Jewels of the Plains: Wild Flowers of the Great Plains, Grasslands and Hills* (University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

The author of more than one hundred articles, Barr was also a member of the South Dakota Horticultural Society and an officer in the South Dakota Farm Bureau and the National Rock Garden Society. Today, many of the rare plants Barr grew or found on the plains of western South Dakota are preserved in botanical gardens around the world.

by Kay Cheever

Dakota Images



Claude A. Barr

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