

Aux Fous: crazy about lichens

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In February 2011, *Acarospora janae* (“Jana’s Cobblestone Lichen”) was named by Kerry Knudsen of the University of California at Riverside. This new lichen, which appears as a small tan crust with brown dots on sunny rocks, is represented by only three specimens. One, collected in 2009 by Gary Perlmutter on a flatrock in Turnipseed Preserve in Wake County, is in the UNC Herbarium. The other two specimens, collected in Las Vegas, New Mexico, in the 1920s by Brother Arsène, are in the Farlow Herbarium of Harvard University.

Many questions come to mind. Who is “Jana” and how did she get a species named in her honor? What accounts for this lichen’s odd range, spanning 1500 miles and 80 years between collections? Who was Brother Arsène, where is Las Vegas, New Mexico, and what do the words on his specimen label (at right), “aux fous,” mean?

“The species is named in honor of my colleague, frequent coauthor and fiancé, Jana Kocourková,” says Kerry Knudsen. Clearly, to have a species named in your honor, it’s best to have a biologist crazy about you!

The lichen’s crazy distribution is probably a result of the sporadic nature of lichen exploration: there just aren’t that many people studying these small, often overlooked life-forms. Jana’s Cobblestone Lichen probably grows elsewhere, but North Carolina and New Mexico are the only places it’s been found to date.

Arsène Gustave Joseph Brouard was born in France in 1867. “As a student [in a Christian Brothers’ School in Limoges], Arsène’s lively nature was more than once the cause of disciplinary action. On one occasion, when the [teacher] was late for class, Arsène took over. When the [teacher] walked in and saw his troublesome student in this disguise, he suggested that maybe [Arsène] should consider joining the Brothers. Arsène responded, ‘You will never live to see me take such a crazy step.’” He took vows in the Christian Brothers in 1898, adopted the name Brother Geofroy Arsène, and was assigned to teach college in Mexico. “When World War I broke out, Mexico expelled all foreigners, and Arsène was sent to teach in Maryland, then Louisiana,” says Dr. Shirley Tucker, who has catalogued Arsène’s

lichens from Louisiana. “Each place Arsène worked, he diligently collected flowering plants, mosses, lichens and fungi. These were sent back to France for sale to institutions and collectors, and it was evidently a good source of revenue for his Order.” In 1926 Brother Arsène moved to Las Vegas, San Miguel County, in the northeastern part of New Mexico and taught at the Christian Brothers’ college until he died in 1938.

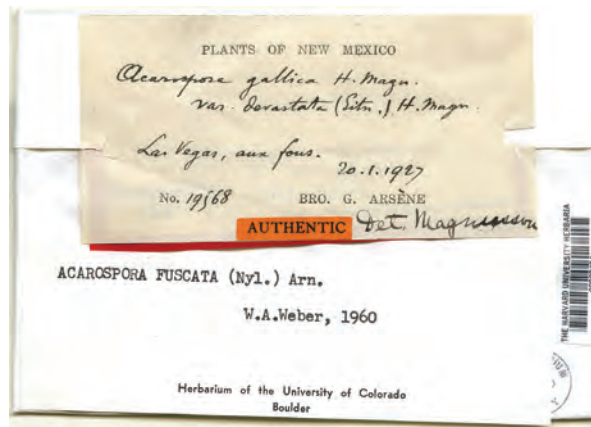
To what does “aux fous” (literally, “from the madmen”) on Arsène’s specimen label refer? We first theorized that the phrase referred to a geological feature—perhaps rock outcrops or cliffs known as “the madmen?”—along the north-south escarpment

5 miles west of Las Vegas. However, delving into Las Vegas history reveals a more likely location: the grounds of the local mental hospital.

“In 1891, Mary Teats, national superintendent of jail and prison reform for the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, visited Las Vegas and found four insane persons incarcerated in the jail, one of whom had been there for eighteen years without care or attention,” writes historian Malcolm Ebright. “It was partly the appalling treatment methods for people with mental illness discovered in Las Vegas that led to the building of the State Hospital

there. The New Mexico State Hospital, originally known as the New Mexico Insane Asylum and currently called the New Mexico Behavioral Health Institute at Las Vegas, was created in 1889 by the same legislative bill that established the University of New Mexico. . . . During the early 1900s several tracts of land were purchased to increase the size of the state hospital [to include a] farm.” Today, the Institute houses about 160 patients on 300 acres of land.

It seems that the adjective “crazy” is bound to *Acarospora janae*: a crazy distribution spanning a continent, Arsène’s “crazy step” to become a Christian Brother, and finally the holotype specimen may have been collected on the grounds of an insane asylum! Perhaps Herbarium Staff & Associates should undertake “A Wild & Crazy Road Trip” to New Mexico to see if Jana’s Cobblestone Lichen still grows “aux fous” in Las Vegas, or anyplace else along the way. ▣



Label of Brother Arsène’s lichen collected in 1927. Originally classified as *Acarospora gallica* var. *devastata*, this specimen is one of only three now recognized as *Acarospora janae*. Image courtesy of the Farlow Herbarium.