

Ernest August Mengersen (1945 – 2009)

The Entomological fraternity and Olds College lost a revered member and an outstanding teacher when Ernest Mengersen passed away on 20 July 2009 at the age of 64 in the Linden Nursing Home.

Ernest was born 18 June 1945 in Yellowknife, formerly Northwest Territories, to August F. and Johanna (Poetzsch) Mengersen. He had a sister Rose Marie. The family moved to Duncan in 1946 and later to Campbell River, British Columbia. Ernest spoke only German until he enrolled in Grade 1. Ernest took his elementary and secondary education in Campbell River. He received a Grade 13 diploma at Concordia College in Edmonton in 1964. He then returned to Campbell River and worked in a paper mill for two years. He attended Concordia Teacher's College in Seward, Nebraska, from 1966 to 1970 earning a BS Ed degree. While there, Ernest met and then married Karen June Petersen on 10 August 1966, in Whittier, California. Ernest then took graduate studies at Oregon State University in Corvallis, majoring in Entomology and minoring in Zoology. He left his graduate studies to teach Grades 7 and 8 at St. John's Lutheran School in Stony Plain, Alberta from 1972 to 1973. He then took on a job as dairy herdsman in the Stony Plain area and, at the same time, attended the University of Alberta where he earned a BSc Ag degree in June 1974. Ernest was a crop inspector for the Plant Products Division of Canada Agriculture from 1974 to 1976. In September 1976 he took a contract position at Olds College to teach a wide range of Agriculture courses from Botany to Entomology. He became a permanent staff member in September 1977. He began the Master of Pest Management program at Simon Fraser University from September 1989 to August 1990 but health problems prevented him from graduating. Ernest had severe angina in 1992 that required two angioplasties. Heart problems kept recurring and these eventually resulted in his leaving Olds College in February 2004.

When Ernest arrived at Olds College, there was a collection of around 10 000 insects, put together by Buck Godwin and Buck's students. When Ernest left the College, the collection had approximately 55 000 specimens. Most of the additions were made by Ernest, but many were made by his students, especially through insect collections that they made as part of the entomology classes that they took from Ernest. This collection is regarded to have the best representation of short grass prairie ecozone Lepidoptera in western Canada.

Hugh Philip and Ernest Mengersen were the authors of the widely used book, *Insect Pests of the Prairies*, which was published in 1989 by the University of Alberta, Faculty of Education. In the June 1989 Entomological Societies of Canada and Alberta publication, *Entomologists of Alberta*, authored by Paul Riegert, Riegert recognized "Ernest Mengersen for his yeoman effort to contact all living Alberta entomologists and obtain biographical details".

Greg Pohl of the Canadian Forest Service, made the following comments after learning of Ernest's passing: "I will miss his infectious enthusiasm for all things entomological – his interest and frequent visits to Edmonton in the 1990s were vital in building the community that is the Alberta Lepidopterist's Guild. I have fond memories of his visits to the Forestry collection with many a drawer of interesting specimens he'd collected, and a half-day full of visiting and excited chatter over the insect collection. Usually it was Lepidoptera he brought, but sometimes it was beetles or wasps, as he collected widely across many groups. He has certainly left his mark on the entomological community in Alberta, and he will be missed."

Ernest was the local organizer for the inaugural meeting of the Alberta Lepidopterist's Guild held at Olds College on 16 October 1999. Ernest was one of the founding members of the Guild. He was also the local organizer for the North American Lepidopterist's Society Conference held 27 July 2003, at Olds College. In an interview at that time he made the following comments. "Studying insects goes hand-in-hand with studying horticulture, because there are three times as many insects

as there are species of plants. For every insect feeding on a plant there are many more insects feeding on that insect, so it's vital to understand the huge diversity and its impact. The insect world is a reflection of history, economics, science and our stewardship of the land. They are very important messengers of what might be coming next in our environment. We live in a fragile environment and every living thing, large or small, has an important role in the ecosystem. No one knows how far we can alter the environment with climatic change before we start to notice habitat changes, for example. But the insects are one of the first things to give clues to those answers."

Ernest loved teaching and was equally loved by his many students. He once commented: "When you walk into a classroom, it has to be the most exciting time of your life". He required his students to put together insect collections for his courses in agricultural, landscape and turf entomology and to identify the insects. As a result, many students developed a real love for, and a long-time interest in insects. He also did his best to keep in touch with his students. A typical comment by one of his former students is the following by Rob Hughes: "Ernest was my favorite teacher at Olds College. I always looked forward to, and couldn't wait to get to his entomology classes." Ernest loved his students and they were second in line to his insects. A typical absent-minded teacher, Ernest mentioned that, when he had his first session with a new class he would appoint one student to watch where he put down his glasses so that that student could tell him where to look if he couldn't find them at the end of the lecture.



Ernest proudly displays his 'Moth Mobile'

Ernest kept the records for the Olds College weather station. He volunteered for a number of years with the Mountain View 4-H Dairy Club, and with Special Olympics Bowling. He served on the board of Horizon School when his son, Mark, was attending. After leaving the College, Ernest purchased a Dodge truck which he had painted with a variety of moth images and which he called the "Moth Mobile". The above image shows Ernest proudly standing beside the new vehicle. Sadly, declining health prevented him from using the vehicle the way he had hoped.

Ernest was predeceased by his parents. He is survived by his wife, Karen; sons Michael, Matthew and Mark, daughter Sarah, son-in-law Joe Shandera, their children Kieren and Talon; sister Rose Marie Fleming, step-brother Tedd Bobb, and their families. Sarah and Joe Shandera had a daughter, Isla Rain that was born on 10 August 2009. A Memorial Service was held at the Olds Church of the Nazarene on Saturday, 25 July.

This article could not have been written without the extensive input provided by Ernest's wife Karen. This help is gratefully acknowledged.

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