



## IN MEMORIAM



### **Ralph Peter Eckerlin, Ph.D. 10 February 1938–9 February 2024**

Ralph Eckerlin died in Annandale, Virginia, following an extended illness, 1 day before his 86th birthday, leaving a legacy of excellence in teaching and research in the biological sciences, notably in the field of general parasitology. He was perhaps the last of his kind, being uniquely well versed in both endo- and ectoparasitology, and in many other biological disciplines. Although natural history and morphological and taxonomic analyses dominated his career, he also embraced broader-impact topics in his later years, collaborating on studies that addressed collections management protocols, parasite inventories, and the ecological and epidemiological roles of parasites in ecosystems.

Born in New York City to German immigrant parents, as a boy Ralph explored the then-wooded areas of New York and observed and collected a variety of local animals. He was the first in his family to attend college, graduating with a B.A. in Biological Sciences from Rutgers University in 1960, an M.S. in Zoology from the University of Miami in 1962, and a Ph.D. in Parasitology and Zoology from the University of Connecticut in 1975. Soon after completing his terminal degree, Ralph was awarded a National Institutes of Health training grant to study Chagas' disease in Costa Rica.

Ralph met his first wife, Joyce Koepper Eckerlin, when he was studying for his B.A. at Rutgers, and the family lived in New Jersey while Ralph worked for a pharmaceutical company after completing his M.S. degree. Tragically, Joyce died of breast cancer in 1968, less than 10 years into their marriage, leaving Ralph a single parent raising 2 young daughters. These events delayed his academic pursuits towards his Ph.D. degree. Happily, Ralph found love again, and in 1979, he married Mary Peay Eckerlin; they remained together for the rest of Ralph's life.

Ralph enjoyed a varied professional career in biology, starting as a part-time laboratory assistant and then a laboratory technician at Rutgers University (1958–1960), a graduate Research Assistant at the University of Miami (1960–1962), a Research Biologist in the Parasitology Department at American Cyanamid (1962–1969), and a Graduate Teaching Assistant, Research Biologist, then Instructor at the University of Connecticut (1966–1971). At American Cyanamid, he was a team leader for studies on chemotherapy protocols for combatting amebiasis and trichomoniasis and for *in vitro* and *in vivo* testing of parasiticides. He was awarded an educational fellowship from American Cyanamid to attend the University of Connecticut

(1967–1969). In 1971, Ralph was appointed as a Professor of Biology at Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC), where he taught a variety of biological courses, including general biology, human anatomy and physiology, health science, and invertebrate zoology. He retired from NOVA in 2012, but retained office and research space there for several years, and was granted Emeritus status. Ralph was also a visiting Professor of Tropical Medicine and Parasitology at the Central American Health Sciences University in Belize City, Belize (1997–1998) and taught his favorite topic, Parasitology, at George Washington University, Washington DC (1980–2004). Following retirement, Ralph also worked at the National Museum of Natural History (Smithsonian Institution) as a Research Collaborator.

Ralph was a long-term active member of many professional societies, including the American Society of Parasitology (Resolutions Committee, 1994; Business Advisory Committee, 1994–1999; In Memoriam Committee Chair, 2001–2002), the Helminthological Society of Washington (various appointments including President in 1986, Editor of the *Journal of the Helminthological Society of Washington* from 1988–1993, elected life member in 2018), the Entomological Society of Washington (various appointments including President in 1996), the American Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, the Tropical Medicine Society of Washington DC (now defunct; various appointments including President in 1983), the Virginia Academy of Science (various appointments including President in 2012), the Virginia Association for Biological Education (now defunct; various appointments including President in 1995), the Virginia Natural History Society (various appointments including President from 2011 to 2012), the Washington Biologists' Field Club (various appointments including President from 2017 to 2021), and the West Virginia Entomological Society. Ralph attended as many of the annual meetings of the American Society of Parasitologists that he could, often driving long distances so he could more easily combine fieldwork with the meetings.

Ralph was a dedicated teacher and typically taught several courses in the same semester at NVCC. He told me once that he occasionally taught 24 contact hours in a single semester. He received several teaching awards and, in 2009, he was honored as the most outstanding faculty member in the state of Virginia. Ralph taught and mentored countless students who would go on to professional positions in many aspects of biology, especially parasitology, as well as medical practitioners and others. With teaching and societal presidencies occupying so much of his time, it is testament to his dedication and expertise that he also authored more than 70 peer-reviewed papers during his lifetime. It is equally remarkable to note the breadth of topics collectively included in these papers. The large variety of taxonomic groups covered ranges from protozoans, annelids, nematodes, cestodes, trematodes, pentastomes, cimicid bugs, parasitic lice, epifaunistic beetles, fleas, ticks, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Ralph also coauthored a laboratory manual, *The Biology Experience*, which was published through several editions starting in 1978.

For many years, Ralph organized annual mammal and parasite collecting trips to various countries in Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico, taking other researchers and students with him for training and hands-on experience. Each trip involved camping in (mostly) montane habitats for several weeks, setting traps for small mammals until dusk, waking early to check the traps, and then spending the rest of each day collecting, storing, and labeling mammal and parasite specimens to facilitate further study. I have hundreds of vials of sucking lice

(Anoplura) collected during these trips that will form the basis of a taxonomic, faunistic, and biogeographical analysis of this group of ectoparasites in Central America. In recognition of his research in Central America, 2 species from that region bear Ralph's name as eponyms, the flea *Jellisonia eckerlini* Hastriter, and “Ralph's broad clawed shrew,” *Cryptotis eckerlini* Goodman.

Ralph's first paper (Eckerlin and Leigh, 1962), which addressed the biology and geographical distribution of a microcoeliid trematode, and 1 of his last papers (Eckerlin and Durden, 2023), which described a new species of flea, were published in the *Journal of Parasitology*, as were many of his publications between those dates. Ralph was a well-respected taxonomist, especially of helminths and fleas, and he was always happy to make his identification skills available to students, researchers, and various agencies. In the 1980s and 1990s, several of us, including Ralph, myself, Dr. Richard (Rich) Robbins, and Ralph's faculty colleague at NVCC, Dr. Harry Painter (1921–2001) (Eckerlin, 2001), enthusiastically discussed fleas and other ectoparasites with the legendary Robert Traub (1916–1996) (Robbins and Eckerlin, 1997) at his home in Bethesda, Maryland, which was filled with slide-mounted flea specimens and other treasures from around the world, or at his office in the Smithsonian Institution's Museum Support Center in Suitland, Maryland. Ralph shared Robert Traub's positive and amicable response to science and other scientists, always willing to assist others, especially in their scholarly pursuits. Ralph continued his studies on fleas until his final weeks, notably co-authoring with Robert (Bob) Lewis (1929–2017) (Eckerlin, 2017), a much needed monograph on the fleas of North America that will be published posthumously by the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. Ralph was also a keen mammalogist, authoring several papers on mammals and, notably, celebrating Groundhog Day each year with a party that featured a stuffed groundhog called Punxsutawney Ralph.

Ralph had a sharp wit and a fun and always friendly personality. He was especially proud of his family. He is survived by his wife of almost 45 years, Mary, his daughters Laura and Linda, and their families including his grandsons Kevin and Connor. We have lost a remarkable person and a phenomenal parasitologist.

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