William Dean Reese: A Tribute

RONALD A. PURSELL
Department of Biology, 208 Mueller Laboratory, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA 16802-5301, U.S.A. e-mail: rap10@psu.edu

PAUL L. REDF ERR
Biology Department, Box 148, Southwest Missouri State University, Springfield, MO 70504-0095, U.S.A. e-mail: plr26g@smsu.edu

William Dean Reese, ‘Bill’ to family members and his many friends, was born in Baltimore, Maryland on 10 September 1928 and died on 4 February 2002 in Lafayette, Louisiana, age 73, after a short battle with cancer.

Bill was an eclectic person, those who did not know him well would be surprised at the range of his interests and skills. His early years were spent on a dairy farm in Maryland, and as a result he always considered himself a ‘farm boy at heart.’ A dairy farm is relentlessly demanding, the cows must be milked twice a day, 365 days each year. Moreover, there are the plowing, planting, cultivating, cutting, and harvesting that must be done in season. Bill’s early farm experiences were remarkable since the farm did not have a tractor until his high school years; all plowing, cultivating, cutting, and hauling had to be done by harnessed horses, and the corn shocked by hand. A working farmer possesses good mechanical and carpenter skills, can handle a wide range of tools, is capable of fixing things, and can build nearly everything up to and including a barn. Bill possessed and used these skills as evidenced by the large number of out-buildings around his house which he planned and built mostly by himself in his spare time as a University Professor. Perhaps as a result of his farming experiences Bill had a practical approach to life and an unquenchable appreciation for nature. This practical outlook never left him, late in life, responding to a comment on the innumerable out-buildings around his house, he said, “You never can have too much land under cover.” Bill strived to pass this view on to his children and grandchildren. Realizing they would never experience the joys of farm life that he had experienced, he recorded memories of his farm years, and had them privately published in 1997 (Lone Hickory. Reminiscences from the Reese Farm at Gwynnbroom, Maryland, 1930s–1940s. Lafayette, LA, 100 pages, with corrections made in 1998).

In 1945 Bill enrolled at the University of Maryland, but his undergraduate studies were interrupted by two tours of duty in the United States Army. As a member of the Signal Corps, 1946–1948, he was stationed in the Philippines, and between 1950–1951 he worked as a cook at Fort Hood in Texas. Perhaps it was this latter experience that instilled in him his love of cooking (and eating!) good food. Bill was graduated from the University of Maryland in 1953 with a B.S. in Botany. During one of his biological science laboratories Bill observed the release of living antherozoids from moss antheridia, and it was this experience that first piqued his interest in bryology. This observation also led to his second bryological publication (‘On observing bryophytic antherozoids’). In the Fall of 1953 Bill began graduate studies at Florida State University under Dr. Ruth Schornherst Breen (M.S. in Botany in 1955; Ph.D. in Botany in 1957).

Upon graduation, Bill was offered and accepted an appointment as Assistant Professor of Biology at The University of Southwestern Louisiana (now The University of Louisiana at Lafayette). He remained at this University throughout his 30-yr professional career, advancing to Associate Professor (1962) and Professor (1966). Bill was an outstanding teacher who served as primary advisor to 11 graduate students (Charles Allen, Wayne Guerke, Ray Jones, John Joyce, Chad Lacombe, Monte Manuel, Alan Neuman, Karl Vincent, Debra Waters, and Andrew Westling) and in 1970 was named University of Southwest Louisiana Foundation Distinguished Professor. On his retirement in 1987, the University appointed him Edwin L. Stephens Honor Professor Emeritus. During his tenure Bill served the University and Biology Department as an able administrator: Chairman of the Biology Department (1974–1977), and Department Head (1981–1986). While Bill was Department Head, an existing Doctoral Program was abruptly ended by a statewide committee. However, mainly on the promise offered by Bill’s leadership during the review, the committee allowed for the submission of a new program proposal. Bill jumped to the task and soon a new doctoral program was approved, thus establishing the firm footing that the Biology Department and University enjoy today.