Howard Crum (1922–2002)

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Howard Alvin Crum died at home early in the morning of April 30, 2002 from complications of stomach cancer. His family was by his side. For most of Howard’s life he endured poor health. At times it seemed as if there was no disease or medical condition known to Western medicine that did not plague Howard. Despite the parade of conditions that both recently and for years marched through his body, Howard’s spirit was never dampened. He always was able to make fun of his medical problems and had a ready smile for everyone. For those who knew him best, Howard preserved to the end his own inimitable sense of humor that was quick, gentle, and memorable. Just a couple of days prior to Howard’s death, he and Lewis Anderson had a telephone conversation. At the time, Howard’s voice was very weak, leading his friend to announce “I can’t hear what you’re saying.” To this Howard, with his humor still intact, responded “You never did listen to me anyway.”

Howard Crum’s life was celebrated in an article that Lewis Anderson wrote on the occasion of Howard’s 70th birthday (Anderson, L. E. 1992. A tribute to Howard Crum. Contributions from the University of Michigan Herbarium 18: 3–38). Therefore, we will not try to repeat all the information that was there, and readers are referred to that article for more detail than provided here.

Howard was born in Mishawaka, Indiana on July 14, 1922. After high school he followed his aunt and older brothers to Western Michigan Teacher’s College (now Western Michigan University) in Kalamazoo. World War II, however, interrupted Howard’s education, and he volunteered for the U.S. Army Air Force. From 1942 to 1945, Howard served as a cryptographer (could this have influenced his subsequent entry into cryptogamy?) in North Africa and the Middle East. He often talked about the region with affection, and when in 1980/81 he was able to go back to consult with the Libyan Secretariat of Agriculture on the lichenological component of biblical manna, he went with great enthusiasm.

After military service, Howard returned to Western Michigan, changing his major from German Language and Literature to Botany, and received his B.S. in 1947. In the fall of 1947, he began graduate school at the University of Michigan, in part influenced by a summer course (Plant Systematics, not Bryology) he had taken a year earlier at the University of Michigan Biological Station with William Campbell Steere. The summer prior to beginning in Ann Arbor, Howard returned to the UM Biological Station where he enrolled in Margaret Fulford’s bryology course, the first time she had offered it there. Although Howard initially had indicated an interest in studying plant pathology, he found it was not possible at Michigan and, in time, he began working with Bill Steere. His time at the University of Michigan molded Howard into one of bryology’s most promising young scholars. His facility with Latin (from high school training) and with German (from his undergraduate major) allowed him easy access to the older literature. Also during his graduate days Howard had his only field experience in the tropics, traveling to Mexico for his dissertation research. Although Howard’s field time was less than that of many of his contemporaries, he nevertheless had a personal knowledge of mosses, gathered from innumerable hours at the microscope. From his earliest days in bryology, Howard found that no specimen, even the rankest of weeds, failed to offer some lesson. The thousands upon thousands of specimens he examined during his career gave him a breadth of knowledge extraordinarily rare both during his prime and in recent years when specialization has become the standard. His intimate knowledge of bryological literature, coupled with an amazing memory, also served him well. It was common for one of his graduate students to bring him a specimen he had never seen from some exotic place in the world, but with only a brief glance under the microscope he would invariably suggest that the plant be compared to a drawing in some old (usually German) bryological work.

Howard finished his Ph.D. in 1951 under the supervision of Harley H. Bartlett because the previ-