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Richard L. Hoffman (1927–2012) – Obituary

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Richard L. Hoffman passed away Sunday morning, 10 June 2012, at the age of 84 in Roanoke, Virginia. For many years, he established himself as the leading authority of the world's millipede fauna. He was an ardent millipede taxonomist, remaining very active to the present. Simultaneously, he devoted much of his life to the study and documentation of the natural history of his native state Virginia and the Appalachians.

Richard L. Hoffman was born on 25 September 1927 in Clifton Forge, Virginia, a small city in the mountains. His father worked as a machinist at the railroad company there. His paternal grandparents emigrated from the coal-mining region of the Ruhr basin in Germany in the late 1800s. His mother was born in Virginia in a farming family. Very early on, at an age of about ten years, Richard explored the countryside and mountains near his home, becoming a knowledgeable young naturalist. After High School, he enrolled in biology at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, later earned a master's degree in entomology from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and subsequently obtained his Ph.D. degree in zoology at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia. In 1960, after a short grant project at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution in Washington, he taught as a professor of biology at Radford University, Virginia, for nearly 29 years. Richard Hoffmann supported the concept of a Virginia Museum of Natural History in Martinsville for many years prior to its existence. In January 1989 he became the museum's curator of recent invertebrates, a post he held for 20 years, up until his retirement in 2009. In celebration of his 80th birthday and his career achievements, a symposium was held at the Virginia Museum of Natural History (VMNH) in September 2007 and a festschrift was produced: "A Lifetime of Contributions to Myriapodology and the Natural History of Virginia".

Beginning in 1944, Richard Hoffman published more than 500 scientific papers and books, mostly on millipedes but also on amphibians, reptiles, worms, molluscs, arachnids and insects. He also published more than 50 popular articles on a variety of natural history topics.

Up until 2008, Hoffman described 397 millipede species (or subspecies) and 201 millipede genera in 360 scientific publications (SHEAR 2009). Major publications such as the "Classification of the Diplopoda" (1980), the "Synopsis of Living Organisms" (1982) or the "Checklist of the Millipedes of North and Middle America" (1999) and the "Monograph of the Gomphodesmidae, a Family of African Polydesmoid Millipedes" (2005) are invaluable resources for taxonomic and systematic research on millipedes. The latter was edited by the Verlag des Naturhistorischen Museums Wien.

Richard Hoffman visited the NHM ten times between 1960 and 2004 to study the comprehensive type material of the Myriapoda collection. According to Hoffman the

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Fig. 1: Richard Hoffman at the conference in honor of his 80th birthday, September 2007

collection is one of the most important worldwide, due to the lifework of Carl Attems (1868–1952), who was active there for about 60 years.

In 2007, Richard Hoffman was appointed as a “Korrespondent des Naturhistorischen Museums Wien” in recognition of his scientific work and to express the museum’s gratitude for his help and expert advice in making the collection available for further scientific research, in solving taxonomic problems and in preparing type catalogues. We lost a great mentor and friend.

References

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Appendix. 12 October 2001, Richard L. Hoffman sent the following first draft of a statement about Carl Attems to us, primarily intended for the preface of his Gomphodesmid monograph. Here, this statement is published for the first time.

Carl August Theodor Michael Attems: An appreciation

In every aspect of learning or accomplishment, there are those whose experience and knowledge endows them with singular authority. Standing like the occasional peaks which soar above others of a mountain system, such persons are recognized and respected for the magnitude of their contributions, whether of word or deed. But accomplishment alone means little if it has not been transmuted into a tangible legacy – the judgement of posterity will be weighted by the degree to which the fruits of accomplishment are shared, and knowledge in particular must be incrementally passed from one generation to another.

The magnitude of Carl Attems' stature as *Altmeister* in the study of myriapods can be measured by the constancy with which he observed exactly that principle. Beyond the mere generation of new information, Attems' role was that of synthesizer and generalizer, incorporating his findings into the body of existing knowledge, and so making his wisdom available to colleagues and successors. Reflecting this sense of responsibility are the contents of the big monographs which flowed from his pen in a stately progression: the “System der Polydesmiden” in 1898–99, “Die Indoaustralischen Myriopoden” and “Afrikanische Spirostreptiden” of 1914, “The Myriopoda of South Africa”, 1928, all replete with lists, catalogs, keys, and summaries, in which the new species and genera found their proper place within established systems. But more than in any of his other works, the capstone of an illustrious lifetime of accomplishment is embodied in the great three-volume “Polydesmoidea” that appeared in “Das Tierreich” from 1937 to 1940.

For many persons a single life-altering event, episode, or experience may determine the entire subsequent course of a career. In 1948, a young student just beginning the study of Diplopoda and confronted with a turmoil of polyglot, inaccessible, and largely unorganized taxonomic literature, was in despair of ever mastering the subject when he encountered the “Polydesmoidea” on a library shelf, in its original paper covers and its pages still uncut. No Balboa ever gazed upon an unknown sea with as much amazement as the student when he opened the three great volumes and comprehended their contents. For this, by far the greatest of the orders of Diplopoda and doubtless the most formidable, was at once brought together, with all its known taxa organized, assigned to categories and made accessible with keys, descriptions, and illustrations. At once, the

“Polydesmoidea” set feet upon a pathway that was to be followed to this day. Eventually the student, now much older, acquired all of the writings of Attems, and bound uniformly in red, they occupy nearly a meter of shelf length in his library. For four decades they have been the beacons, the signposts, that charted a course through the forests of diplopod-lore. Almost daily, something written by the Count has proven to be a fountain of knowledge that yielded facts, insights, and understanding.

Every child learns the first critical lessons of life from its parents, and every scientist is forever in the debt of those in whose steps he follows and in whose shadow he learns and grows in wisdom. Perhaps the greatest single legacy bestowed on me by Graf Attems has been the importance of remembering the needs of the new and inexperienced, and so to pass on one's knowledge in a form that will ease and facilitate their own careers and contributions in research.

The cruel impartiality of timing prevented me from having met Count Attems in person; I came first to Vienna seven years after his death. My only contact with him was a single handwritten letter, and yet this fragile token serves as a symbol of generational continuity along a highway of shared interests. With the advantage of far greater research materials, I can never forget that I am able to see farther into the horizon of diplopod classification because I am standing atop the grand pyramid of Attemsian accomplishment.