

Memorial Minute for David Andrew Haskell, November 14, 2022, Faculty Meeting. Written and read by Stephen G. Tilley, Myra M. Sampson Professor of Biological Sciences, Emeritus.

When David Haskell, Professor of Biological Sciences, Emeritus died on February 3, 2022, the Department of Biological Sciences at Smith College lost one of its founding members and a kind, gentle, and sometimes surprising colleague. I realize that “kind and gentle” is a trite phrase, but there is no better one. I knew Dave for more than 50 of his 93 years and can’t recall him ever being mad at anyone, or anyone being mad at him.

Dave grew up exploring the woods and fields around Lakewood, Ohio, and gravitating toward the study of botany. He received his bachelor’s degree from The Ohio State University after a stint in the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps that included service in a gun turret on the U.S.S. Missouri. He received a medical discharge from naval service and went on to graduate work at Purdue University, where he received his MS and PhD and a postdoctoral fellowship in the Department of Botany and Plant Pathology. He left the Midwest in 1960 to join what was then the Department of Botany at Smith College and spent his career teaching courses in general botany and plant anatomy and conducting research on the microscopic anatomy of plants. His research on growth centers in silver maple embryos was supported by the National Science Foundation.

The fusion of Smith’s Botany, Zoology, and Microbiology and Public Health Departments brought together some strong personalities with strong views of what a Department of Biological Sciences should be. Having a colleague who was quiet, universally liked, and could keep his own views to himself must have helped that group find its footing. Dave’s enthusiasm for plant biology helped preserve the place of botany in the department’s curriculum.

One of the challenges faced by the new department was mounting a team-taught, introductory biology course. When I arrived at Smith in 1970, Dave was the course director, and I was assigned the lectures on ecology and evolution. Dave was the perfect person for that job, which required him to oversee a group of faculty with a variety of teaching styles. He never tried to micromanage the contents of our lectures, but he was capable of gentle persuasion and prodding to make sure the important material got covered. Under Dave's oversight our diverse styles and approaches to the study of biology became strengths rather than liabilities. Dave's own lectures in the course set a high bar for me. Like most zoologists, I'd struggled to grasp such botanical complexities as alternation of generations, sporophytes and gametophytes, heterospory and homospority, etc. I admired the ease and clarity with which Dave conveyed those tricky concepts. I also saw how effective a laid-back teaching style, patience, and accessibility could be and how they drew students, some of whom had probably never associated the term "anatomy" with plants, to Dave's upper-level courses. Dave and I also taught lab sections in the course, which gave me lots of excuses to wander into his office. Our discussions often strayed from lab exercises to departmental issues, about which I sometimes became inappropriately excited. Dave always had a calming effect on me, and he became the tenured faculty member that I felt safe venting to, who listened patiently but would let me know when I was crossing a line.

Dave's research involved the use of light microscopy, and he was a master technician in that area. He generously shared his huge collection of microscope slides, technical skills, and fine Zeiss microscope with his colleagues. He set another high bar by maintaining an office and research lab that lacked any sign of clutter or disorganization. All his research and teaching materials were neatly organized and kept in appropriate containers. I wasn't surprised when,

shortly after their invention, Pringles potato snacks appeared in the lab space that Dave assigned to his lunch. Pringles are all exactly the same size and shape, can be neatly stacked, and the stack slides into a nifty tubular container. They exude order and organization and were perfect for Dave. I don't think I ever saw him actually eating them.

Dave had the sort of quiet, even personality that could sooth you into thinking that he was easy to know; then he'd do something that made you wonder whether you really knew him at all. His colleagues were surprised when he bought a motorcycle, though perhaps less surprised when he wrecked it, seriously fracturing a leg. When he went to visit his daughter, Heather, who was teaching in Beijing, he took the train, from Moscow. Well into a research career spent studying plant tissues in the laboratory, Dave unexpectedly became a field botanist. Equipped with a camera, tent, canoe, and rifle to deal with polar bears, he undertook (and survived) several trips to Alaska and the Northwest Territories, returning with Kodachrome slides of the gorgeous little ground-hugging plants that adorn the arctic. He shared those pictures with his colleagues at Sigma Xi luncheon talks but I don't recall him saying much about how he got to those places. We never heard about what he did with the canoe, or the rifle. His talks were just about the plants, and he kept the rest, like so many other things in his life, to himself.

Dave visited the college infrequently after he retired in 1990, and it's sad that so many of my younger colleagues never had a chance to meet him. Dave and Judy did attend my retirement dinner and I was thrilled to see them after far too many years. Dave and I hugged each other but we talked only briefly. There are so many things that we could have talked about, that night and over those fifty years. I could have asked him about Alaska and Canada, and what it's like to be on a train crossing Siberia and on a battleship when it fired its main battery. Our hug still reminded me of how much I'd always liked him. Writing this has reminded me that I miss him.