

OBITUARY



J. R. Parmeter Jr. (1927–2010)

John Richard ‘Dick’ Parmeter Jr. was born on 16 September 1927 and grew up in The Dalles, Oregon. At the age of 17, he joined the U.S. Marines and was preparing for the invasion of Japan when the war ended. After the war, he attended Oregon State College and earned a B.S. degree in botany & plant pathology in 1951. He then went east to the University of Wisconsin, where he earned a PhD in plant pathology in 1955.

Parmeter’s dissertation was entitled ‘Oak wilt development in bur oaks’ and was completed under the direction of A. J. Riker and J. E. Kuntz. From 1955 to 57, he worked for the U.S.D.A. Forest Service at the Lake States Experiment Station in Wisconsin.

In 1957, he was hired as assistant professor of Plant Pathology at UC Berkeley, where he stayed until retirement, sharing a large laboratory with Fields Cobb on the first floor of Giannini Hall. Dick became a world’s authority on the root pathogen *Rhizoctonia solani*, but he devoted much of his career to forest pathology, including the dwarf mistletoes of pines and firs, air pollution effects on pines, bark beetle–pathogen interactions, and root diseases.

His passion for and skill at fishing and Hearts were legendary, as was his wit. He had many professional interests, among which were the effects of smoke on fungi and the role of root pathogens in shaping the structure, composition and dynamics of forests in Yosemite Valley. His PhD students included Bob Scharpf, Stu Whitney, Paul Miller, Richard S. Smith, Doug Piirto, Johann Bruhn, Jim Worrall, Devon Zagory and Mark Schultz.

Many of the ideas and lessons that Parmeter taught were conveyed outside the classroom, while fishing, over the campfire, or during a game of Hearts. Dick and his colleague Fields Cobb had small offices on either side of a large laboratory, and the graduate students would do their work – reading, writing, experimenting or just chatting – in the space between. It was there that conversations between the students, Dick and Fields would often start. They were usually a raucous variant of the Socratic method. This was what made the Cobb and Parmeter laboratory so special.

The discussions that developed could go in many directions, sometimes silly, at others deadly serious, and always memorable. One point that Dick emphasized was that the pathogens we studied were agents of change that shaped forest ecosystems. This was an issue of such importance to him that in oral exams he would sometimes frustrate students by asking them to describe a forest without pathogens, insects or fire. Under the stress of the examination, the student might flounder answering, until he or she would remember these conversations, and how Dick had taught that a forest without disease or death would become an impenetrable biological desert.

Dick retired in 1991, and he and his wife Anita moved to Florence, Oregon shortly thereafter. Dick said once that he chose Florence because of the moderate climate and because he felt the bounty of the ocean would be insurance against economic collapse or other disaster. Dick and Anita travelled extensively to see their children and to visit colleagues in the United States

and Europe. In 2008, Dick's and Fields Cobb's former graduate students organized a reunion and tribute to both professors in Post Falls, ID. It was a well-attended and resounding success.

Dick died on October 27th in Oregon at the age of 83. He is survived by his wife Anita and his children.

Detlev Vogler and Robert Scharpf
USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station,
Institute of Forest Genetics, 2480 Carson Road, Placerville, CA 95667-5107, USA,
Formerly of: USDA Forest Service, Pacific Southwest Research Station,
Placerville, CA 95667-5107, USA
Email: dvogler@fs.fed.us; qtzhill@wildblue.net