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Obituary: Wilmer Webster Tanner, 1909–2011

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OBITUARY: WILMER WEBSTER TANNER, 1909–2011



Wilmer W. Tanner in British Columbia, summer 1998

On 28 October 2011, two months short of his 102nd birthday, Dr. Wilmer W. Tanner passed away, leaving a lifetime of accomplishments. His most enduring achievement was his marriage to Helen Brown on 4 January 1935, which resulted in a family consisting of Lynn, David, and Mary Ann. Helen died in 1995, following 60 years of marriage. At age 90, Wilmer, always an optimist, married again, to Otella Tyndal Devey, who died in 1999. Wilmer was a caring person, who showed consideration and kindness throughout his life to each of his wives and to his 3 children, 10 grandchildren, and 24 great-grandchildren. Wilmer considered his posterity to be his greatest legacy. He was proud of them! Wilmer's career success came about in large part because of the sacrifices and hard work of Helen and the children.

Wilmer was born 17 December 1909 in Fairview, Utah, the fourth of five children. His

parents were John Myron and Lois Ann Tanner, descendants of early Utah pioneers, who resided on a ranch in the open and meadow-bottomed valley at Indianola in Sanpete County. They had 5 children: Vasco, Ray, Laura, Wilmer, and Jean.

Wilmer attended public schools in Sanpete County, Utah. Following graduation from high school, he served as a missionary between 1929 and 1932 for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Netherlands, where he learned Dutch by immersion, there being no language training prior to the mission. Upon his return to Utah, he attended Brigham Young University (BYU), where he earned a B.A. degree in 1936, and an M.S. degree in 1937. His earliest publications dealing with snakes date from 1939 and give indication of a life-long interest in herpetology. Economic conditions of the time were difficult. Helen

worked at a laundry in Provo for \$7.00 per week to aid in keeping the family economically viable. Wilmer, meantime, had completed requirements necessary to become a biology teacher and was eventually employed by the Provo School District. Among his students was one Joseph Richard (Dick) Murdock, who would ultimately serve as an assistant director of the Monte L. Bean Life Science Museum. How Wilmer survived live-wire students such as Dick Murdock and his close friend Tom Purvance is open to consideration. “They didn’t fool me!” Wilmer said of the boys’ shenanigans. “I knew what they were up to!” And he smiled!

Work began on a Ph.D., but exigencies of the time, mainly World War II, intervened. In 1946, he began studies with Edward Harrison Taylor at the University of Kansas. And in 1948, Wilmer completed his dissertation on comparative anatomy of salamanders of Mexico and Central Mexico.

Vasco M. Tanner, the eldest child of John and Lois Tanner, was some 17 years older than Wilmer and served as a role model for him. Vasco earned a Ph.D. from Stanford University and joined the faculty at BYU in the early 1920s, where he founded the zoological natural history collections and the Department of Zoology and Entomology. Vasco was the one person always available, Saturdays included, in his campus office on the west side of the second floor of the Brimhall Building. He kept track of his former students, followed their careers, and found employment for many of them as opportunities surfaced through his connections.

Wilmer officially joined the BYU zoology faculty in 1950, but he was teaching summer school at the university in 1949 when one of his students and life-long associates, Stanley L. Welsh, completed a genetics class taught by him. The faculty he joined was championed by an awesome trio: Wilmer’s larger-than-life brother Vasco, D Elden Beck, and C. Lynn Hayward. Among them, they taught a bevy of courses that covered the entire breadth of zoology, an assignment whose difficulty increased vastly with the postwar arrival of thousands of young men, who desired an education and a chance to get on with their lives. Wilmer was soon joined by numerous newly minted Ph.D.s—including Steven L. Wood and Dorald M. Allred—as the University transitioned from a teacher-preparation institution

to a bonafide teaching and research institution. These new faculty members worked along with the amazing trio to build research collections and to teach literally tens of thousands of students who entered to learn and went forth to serve as productive individuals. The faculty also devoted time to numerous graduate students, who became important teachers and researchers at various institutions across the country and beyond. Vasco developed an insect collection to be envied (curated later by Wood) and an ichthyological collection; Hayward built representative collections of birds and mammals; Beck (and later Allred) added greatly to the collections of ticks and fleas; and Wilmer assembled a sizeable collection of amphibians and reptiles. Not one of these dedicated professionals ever had the collection of zoological specimens formally listed as part of their job descriptions! They built the collections in addition to their assignments as classroom instructors, committee members, and student advisors. Their devotion and lasting legacies to the University, the community at large, their students, and their families speak volumes (including hundreds of published papers in their respective disciplines). One wonders how they achieved balance in their lives, but they did!

Wilmer’s name appeared sometime during the 1970s in a sensational news article with a title that read, “Brigham Young University Professor Missing in Mexico.” Wilmer was on a collecting trip to Barranca del Cobre, a deep gorge in northwestern Mexico, and the party had not returned at the specified time. A search was undertaken and there was much to-do, but according to Wilmer, the group was never in danger and all were completely unaware that they had been reported missing. Everything came out well, except for short-lasting orders from the Dean of Biology and Agriculture that all personnel had to check with him prior to leaving campus—an edict ignored at first and later discarded as unnecessary.

By the 1970s, it became apparent that the invertebrate/vertebrate collections, then housed with the Department of Zoology and Entomology, and the herbarium, then under direction of the Department of Botany, required a centralized location apart from their departments. Rationale for a change in administration of the collections involved their perpetuity, with history of departmental collections being degraded

and sometimes destroyed by nonresearch related activities. Around 1970, Dr. Kent H. McKnight, professor of botany, was given the task of exploring development of a collections related facility separate from the departments. Upon his removal to the eastern United States, Dr. Wilmer Tanner was chosen as his successor. He selected Dr. Stephen L. Wood, then curator of insects and related groups, and Dr. Stanley L. Welsh, then curator of the herbarium, as committee members. They worked together to outline goals and procedures for establishment of a separate entity to initially oversee and ultimately house the collections.

The committee was already functioning under established guidelines when a letter arrived at the BYU Development Office where Helen, Wilmer's wife, was working as a secretary. That letter was from a person in Seattle who desired to divest himself (actually at his wife's insistence) of his collection of trophy animals. The letter was shunted aside! No one would wish to receive such a collection of "stuffed animals," they decided. Helen retrieved the letter, which was otherwise headed for the discard file, and with permission asked to show it to her husband. Wilmer saw at once an opportunity! "Could this be the very opening we have been hoping for that will allow segregation of the animal and plant collections in a separate facility?" Again with permission, Wilmer contacted the letter's author, Monte L. Bean, whose wife, Birdie, had been the prime mover in getting him to release his collection of animals from a life-long passion for hunting. Soon Wilmer, Helen, Monte, and Birdie, were together in person; and shortly thereafter the collection of trophy mounts arrived and was displayed temporarily in a portion of the main reading room of the [Heber J.] Grant Library, its collections having been moved to a new facility. The east end of the reading room housed the herbarium, which had been moved from the third floor of the Brimhall Building some time earlier. Now, there were 2 parts to the puzzle in place. What was required was a building large enough and sufficiently modern to house the collections of arthropods, reptiles/amphibians, birds, and mammals. Wilmer and Monte, and members of the committee, worked together to define what would be required. Monte listened and agreed. Also working with the committee were Physical Plant Vice President Fred Schwendiman and

Ephraim Hatch. Plans were drawn up and presented to Monte and Birdie; and construction began in the mid-1970s. Money for construction, some \$3.5 million, was donated by Monte L. Bean and his wife, who also established an endowment fund for the museum. The Monte L. Bean Life Science Museum was occupied in fall 1977 and officially opened in spring 1978. It now houses research collections of arthropods, mollusks, fish, birds, mammals, reptiles/amphibians, vascular plants, and nonvascular cryptogams, as well as a massive inventory of trophy animals from throughout the world. The individual specimens in the museum now number in the millions. Monte, in a meeting with the committee in the physical plant offices, looked at Wilmer and stated, "I know that you have sufficient room for the trophy animals, but do you have sufficient room for the natural history collections?" He then stated that the trophy mounts were ephemeral and could and should be discarded ultimately, but the natural history collections were the most important.

Without Helen's interception of Monte's letter, there is a very real possibility there would be no life science museum at BYU, or if so, a much smaller one relegated to a transient existence in older buildings.

Wilmer served as the first director of the museum, with Dorald Allred and Dick Murdock as assistant directors. Forced by law to retire at age 65, Wilmer continued to visit the museum almost daily to follow its growth and development. He served for decades on a fundraising committee for the museum, and traveled to California and other places to meet with potential or actual donors. He thought always of the museum! Wilmer continued to actively write for publication until the time of his death. Three days prior to his passing, he contacted the present museum director, Dr. Larry L. St. Clair, about meeting to talk about future publications, and some of his work will indeed be published posthumously. His body wore out, but his mind never did!

He will be greatly missed by all who knew him.

Wilmer was a member of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Herpetologist's League (Editor of *Herpetologica*, 1960–1967; Secretary-Treasurer, *ex officio*, 1960; Vice President,

1968–1969; President, 1970–1971; Executive Council, 1972–1977).

The following list of publications speaks volumes for the scientific legacy of Wilmer W. Tanner.

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