



12-31-1970

## Tribute to Dr. Vasco M. Tanner

Andrew H. Barnum

*Dixie College, St. George, Utah*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn>

### Recommended Citation

Barnum, Andrew H. (1970) "Tribute to Dr. Vasco M. Tanner," *Great Basin Naturalist*: Vol. 30 : No. 4 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/gbn/vol30/iss4/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Western North American Naturalist Publications at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Basin Naturalist by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## TRIBUTE TO DR. VASCO M. TANNER

Andrew H. Barnum<sup>1</sup>

One individual stands out in the education of any student. One instructor consistently plays the important role in influence and encouragement. That person in my life is Dr. Vasco M. Tanner, one of the great naturalists.

My personal recollections of Dr. Tanner extend nearly a quarter of a century. My life is more meaningful because of our associations.

My early impressions as an undergraduate student in entomology are filled with memories of his contagious smile, of the regimentation of his laboratory classes, of the high quality of work he insisted upon. Recollections focus the exactness of laboratory exercises, including carefully executed drawings. Only ink drawings received full credit. He had to do it for David Starr Jordan and we had to do it for Dr. Tanner. More than one outstanding scientific illustrator had a beginning and encouragement in Dr. Tanner's classes.

The students referred to him endearingly as "the wooly lamb" because of his curly hair and robust size.

His knowledge and his association with the world's great scientists made the history and literature classes live. As a book collector, Dr. Tanner had access to the important early publications, and in each history or literature class he would present to the students armloads of books with the admonition and advice, "Now I want you to become acquainted with all of these"; but at the close of the class period he would quickly gather up all the books, transport them to his office before they could become soiled, and lock them in a cabinet, secure for the next class.

He was very helpful to both graduate and undergraduate, always liberal with supplies for collecting. However, before dispensing the ethyl alcohol he would invariably add a little formaldehyde, always with the explanation that it made a better preservative. All along we knew he was just preventing us from adding our own ingredients for a different purpose!

Only the privileged graduate student had the opportunity of accompanying Dr. Tanner on field trips, and no one has really known him who didn't spend a week or two in the field, where the education in natural history was continuous over twenty-four-hour periods of exposure. It didn't matter whether we were treating the water with rotenone to collect fish (an occasional trout that didn't survive invariably wound up in the frying pan at night), rock-rolling in search of reptiles, or wading the streams for amphibians. We always collected insects. Frequently, too, we listened to more western history than natural history. Dr. Tanner was an avid first-edition book collector, and the student would often spend more time

<sup>1</sup>Dixie College, St. George, Utah.

waiting in the carryall for him to search for old books than he did in the field.

One eventful trip through the western states carried us into St. George where for many hours we relived his early teaching experiences at Dixie College. We walked the environments where he did his early collecting as a young biology instructor. (Dr. Tanner was instrumental in starting a natural history museum at Dixie College, where many of the specimens he collected can still be found. Several bird skins as well as other vertebrates, and many of the insects are still on deposit.) We became acquainted with the areas where he courted his sweetheart Annie Atkin, now Mrs. Tanner. He was especially fond of Water Cress Springs (now a part of the Dixie Red Hills Golf Course), as were the countless courters before and after him.

The evening we camped at the Nevada Warm Springs to try to obtain some of the native warm water daces, he was surprised to find no signs of the fish. While he was busy cooking dinner, I continued to investigate the waters where there was no sign of life, not even aquatic invertebrates. Before returning to camp I resolved that the waters had been poisoned, eradicating all animals. "Oh, no, that's not possible," he responded. Early the next morning Dr. Tanner arose, stretched, and made a pronouncement: He had been thinking all night. He had decided that these waters had been poisoned. Major professors are fallible, too!

No one could spend two decades in a close association with Vasco M. Tanner without gaining an appreciation of nature. Here is truly one of the great naturalists. Unfortunately, higher educational institutions are not now training naturalists, and they may soon be forgotten, lost because of specialization.

My tribute is written of a great naturalist, educator, and friend. I sincerely hope I have communicated memories for the countless graduate students who look longingly at their associations with one of their great instructors. We will always remember the "little wooly lamb."