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In Memoriam: John Teague Self (1906-1995)

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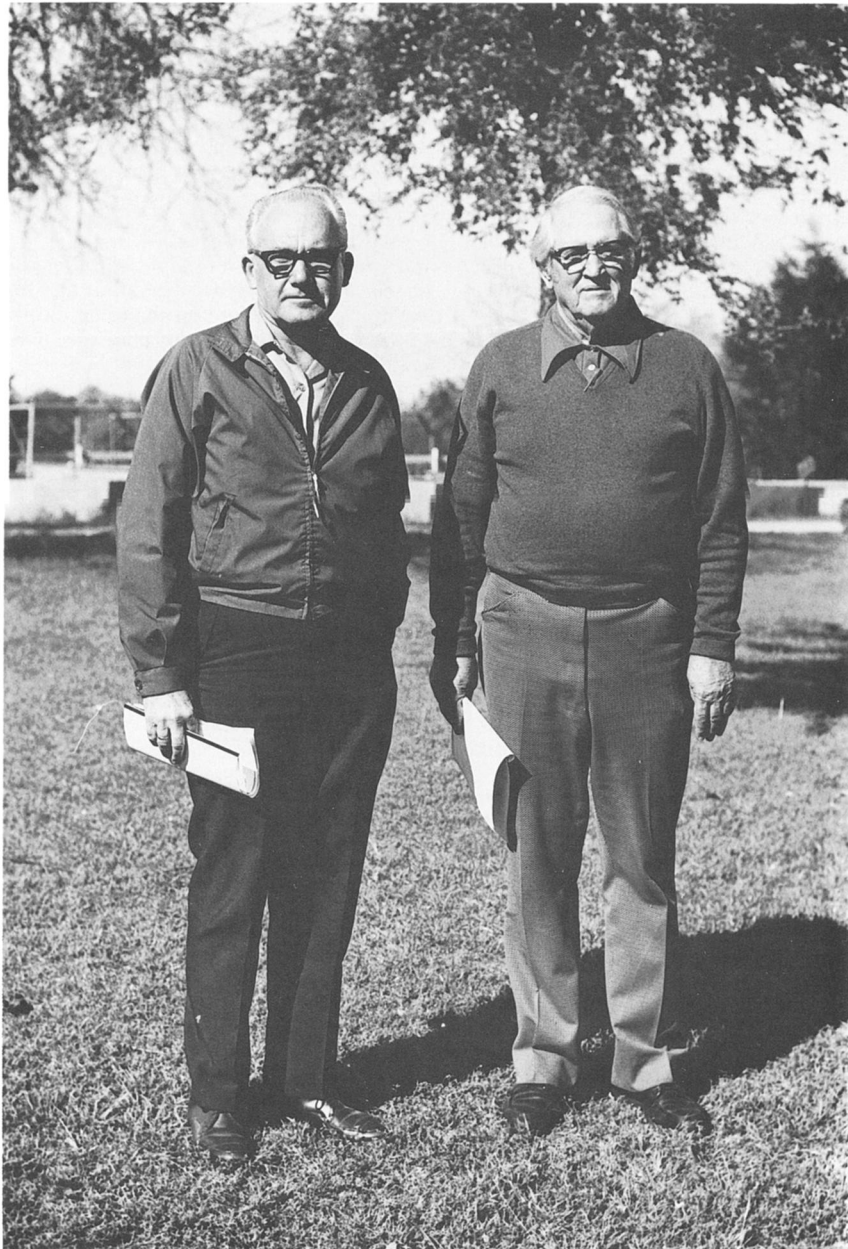
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IN MEMORIAM

JOHN TEAGUE SELF (1906–1995)

Mary Lou Pritchard, Curator Emeritus of the Harold W. Manter Laboratory of Parasitology at the University of Nebraska State Museum, visited Dr. John Teague Self a few months before his death last October. While she was there, she tape recorded an interview in which Dr. Self

recalled the highlights of his life and career. Mary Lou later played the tape for us at parasitology seminar, held at the University of Nebraska State Museum where Dr. Self had deposited a large collection of helminths and endowed a visiting speaker series. Although I'd heard the



Robert E. Kuntz (left) and J. Teague Self.

stories, and the philosophies a million times, they never lost their power. Sitting in the Manter Lab listening to J. T. Self's authoritative voice with its tones and inflections that seemed to cut through all trivialities, I again thanked whatever combination of chance and fate led me to this man's laboratory for graduate work. From his humble beginnings in the hot Spurr, Texas cotton fields, to his college days at Baylor, his marriage to his beloved Ida, and finally to his distinguished career as a teacher and scientist at the University of Oklahoma, J. T. Self's life served as a model of how to conduct our business: never give up, never give in, learn whole organism biology first and best because that's where the great functional questions can be found, treat those you depend on with respect, surround yourself with good students and work hard to help them succeed, and never forget that we all are human beings with wives, children, and homes. He considered this last lesson the most important. No matter how the conversation started, he always ended up reminding us of Ida's dignity, her patience with him, and her contributions to his life and career. Sitting there, listening to the tape, I knew it was coming, and it eventually did: he reminded all of us how truly fortunate he had been in life, and that Ida ranked first among those great fortunes.

J. T. Self found a way to adopt his students, both intellectually and socially, and in so doing developed a teaching style that is apparent primarily in retrospect. He passed along a rich oral history of academic life, liberally spiced with tales of struggle, brazenness, and humanity, and typically related the early intellectual lives of famous parasitologists. How many times, we wondered at the time, did we have to listen to his stories of former graduate students? But eventually these stories became homilies. By the time Dr. Self received the highest honor the University of Oklahoma could bestow on one of its senior faculty members, namely the title of Research Professor, we'd come to await these lessons at every social gathering. I never tired of hearing about Self's first graduate student, Robert E. Kuntz, when he was an undergraduate. And as recently as this month I sat in a meeting listening to my fellow faculty members discuss potential graduate students, thinking "this bunch would have tossed Bob Kuntz out the window in the first round." But back when he welcomed his first graduate student into his lab, J. T. Self saw in that student only those human traits that ensured success, namely an undying and at times uncontrollable fascination with parasites coupled with the very human traits of hard work, discipline, objectivity, and willingness to join in the adventure we called parasitology. Bob Kuntz had missed an important class because he'd been out collecting. Self thought this behavior on the part of his student was exactly what we should look for in students, and of course J.T.S. was right!

Dr. Self expected breadth and respected the power that derived from it. At his command, we all took biochemistry, ornithology, comparative physiology, the history of science, then put the faculty members who taught those subjects on our committees. Under his direction we consumed everything the University of Oklahoma had to offer and granted everyone citizenship in the intellectual realm. He talked serious politics,

academic and otherwise; as a consequence, very little came as a surprise when we encountered those same situations in our own positions. He listened to Vivaldi, watched the stock market, appreciated the individual struggle of varsity wrestlers toiling away far below the glory of a national championship football machine, and played golf. (Like a fool I ventured out on the golf course with him one day; in retrospect I realize it was just another lesson in not underestimating J. T. Self.) My wife Karen was his secretary for 4 years, and while she came home spouting those tongue-twisting pentastome generic names, he absorbed her conversation about painting and sculpture and then reminded me of how important it was. He'd become a world authority on pentastomes, starting this work because nobody else had done the research to satisfy his curiosity and later continuing it because he saw in them a universe filled with intriguing problems and beautiful animals. But it was the pentastome lesson that eventually stuck: Study something no one else believes is very important and you're likely to find difficult problems. The tone of his voice always betrayed his judgment—problem seekers are more interesting scientists than problem solvers, and the more difficult the problems, the more rewarded the scientist who finds them.

The details of J. T. Self's scientific career have been published in a number of places, including a volume of the *Proceedings of the Oklahoma Academy of Sciences* (1975, 55: 94–174). I contributed a paper to that memorial volume, and the paper was, appropriately, co-authored by a number of students. The paper included some very simple, but quite creative, experiments done by undergraduates, two of whom went on to become very well known and successful professional scientists. Not long after the publication of this issue, my department chair at the time made a very sarcastic remark to me about not paying for the reprints had he known the paper was in that journal. Now I use that incident in the same way J.T.S. would have used it, and I am completely convinced that if Dr. Self could hear the story, he'd chuckle, appreciate the irony, but then top it with one of his own, reminding me that I still had a lot to learn about the business in which he'd achieved such respect.

John Janovy, Jr.

An Editor's Prerogative

As Dr. Self was my major professor, as well as John's, I was going to add something at this point in the *Journal*. But I think John has said it so eloquently, that I need not say anything.

Gerald W. Esch

Editor, *Journal of Parasitology*

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