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Stephen Lory Williams (1948-2018), In Memoriam

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In Memoriam

Stephen Lory Williams (1948-2018)



The science of the preservation of natural history collections lost one of its champions with the passing of Stephen L. Williams after a brief illness on July 31, 2018, in Waco, Texas. Steve was born on June 30, 1948, to Angela (Peters) and Jacob L. Williams in Midland, Texas. He married Kathleen Dobbs on August 7, 1971, in Lubbock, Texas. To this marriage were born two children—Sarah Williams Kaiser (husband Allen) and Jason L. Williams (wife Angel)—and 8 grandchildren. He was an Eagle Scout (1964), gaining skills that he used throughout his life.

After graduation from Midland High School in 1966, Steve pursued his higher education at Texas Tech University where he received a B.S. in zoology in 1971 and an M.S. in zoology in 1973, with a thesis studying movements of pocket gophers in the Davis Mountains of Texas. He was in the first group of students to enter the new Museum Science Program at Texas Tech University and was in the first graduating class in 1975. As part of his course of study, he took the first course offered in North America that focused on the management of scientific collections. While working in his fourth professional position, Steve decided to extend his knowledge, pursuing and receiving his Ph.D. in museum conservation from Göteborg University, Göteborg, Sweden, October 23, 1999. His dissertation topic was “Destructive Preservation: A Review of the Effect of Standard Preservation Practices on the Future Use of Natural History Collections.” Always trying to improve his skills, Steve also took continuing education courses in public personnel management and supervisory management.

Steve held four professional appointments throughout his career in management of museum collections, as well as teaching these skills to others. After receiving his museum science degree, he was appointed Collection Data Analyst in the Museum of Texas Tech University (1975-1976). When he moved

to Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh in 1976, he was hired as Collection Manager in the Section of Mammals. He was one of the first people to hold this title in a natural science collection in the United States. He remained at the Carnegie Museum until 1990. Suzanne McLaren remembered, “Steve and I shared an office for more than a decade. He was an incredibly hard worker, no matter what kind of work he undertook. He was a terrific office-mate—I could tell so many stories! The year I turned 30, he hid 10, full-sized Reese’s Peanutbutter Cups all over the office. I just kept finding them, day after day. Steve was a genuinely nice person.”

His move in 1990 returned him to Texas Tech University, taking up positions as Collection Manager in the Museum, and Adjunct Professor in the Museum Science Program. His final professional move was made in 1995 to the Department of Museum Studies at the Strecker Museum now known as the Mayborn Museum Complex at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where he took positions as Assistant Professor and Collections Manager. Steve retired from Baylor in 2007.

Steve’s contributions to the formal education of graduate students began in 1990 at Texas Tech, where he taught courses in Collection Computerization, Tanning Procedures for Mammal Collections, Preventive Conservation, and Collection Management (Science Collections). At Baylor University he taught undergraduate and graduate student courses in Introduction to the Management and Care of Collections, Applied Principles of Collection Care, Modern Management of Collections, Professional Development, Preventive Conservation, and Museum Policy Theory. At Texas Tech he chaired the Master’s committees of two students: Laura Branstetter and Andrea Veatch. Later at Baylor, he chaired the Master’s committees for 14 students: Insoo Kim, Jennifer Karr, Kate EmHart, Rene Pierce, Melissa Cunningham, Allison Brooks, Michael Bradle, Jennifer Holt, Leslee Eliot, Joseph Ettle, April Lemoine, Carrie Wieners, Meghan Beverung, and Margaret Malone. One of his former students, Mark Browning, said, “I was sad to hear of Dr. Steve’s passing (as we lovingly called him). He was so professional as a teacher and scientist, but so patient with us. Always willing to help us. One of my greatest joys was to have had several classes with him. A great visionary to see what the museum profession could be.”

Steve’s impact on the training of museum professionals may have been even greater in informal educational situations where he worked with interns and volunteers, as two examples well illustrate. Catharine Hawks, Conservator, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, recalled at the time of Steve’s death, “It is easy to forget all that he did for collection conservation. Steve managed to wrangle a major museum agency into funding the first US pre-program conservation internship in natural history conservation. I was



lucky enough to end up as that intern and became hooked on the challenges it presented and the enthusiasm Steve showed for extending conservation into a new arena. He, along with Joan Gardner and Carolyn Rose were outstanding mentors and strong co-conspirators in establishing the natural sciences as a legitimate conservation discipline in the US. Steve developed numerous projects with me and later with other interns to investigate the best methods to care for specimens in natural history collections, and eventually pursued his doctorate in conservation. It was, for him, a natural extension of his work in collection management.” Carolyn Leckie, Natural History Conservator, Canadian Museum of Nature, reminisced, “By recruiting me into the emerging field of natural history conservation, Steve changed the trajectory of my professional career, enabling me to combine my personal love of museums and nature. But he did so much more for a young Canadian, transplanted to the Carnegie Museum [of Natural History] for an IMLS grant. There were the lessons of vision, drive and work ethic; matched with an equal amount of kindness, humor, and commitment to family. Steve’s vision and drive is reflected in the fact that, 25 years into my career, I still routinely refer back to key preservation studies Steve and Cathy [Hawks] did. Steve’s work ethic was also incredible, any job, no matter how academically rigorous or how humble was to be done right.”

Steve was present at the birth of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, serving as one of the seven founding members who met at the Buffalo Museum of Science on November 6, 1985. He was one of three members of the original Election Committee. Steve went on to hold the offices of Council Member (1987-1988), President-Elect (1988-1990), President (1990-1992), and Past-President (1992-1994). In 1999, Steve received the SPNHC President’s Award for exceptional service to the organization. Marcy Revelez, Collections Manager of the Biorepository, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, recalled about Steve, “When I traveled to my first SPNHC meeting and met him as a young professional, I felt like I was meeting the Father of Collections Management—and maybe he was. I still remember stalking him and wanting to talk to him and learn as much as I could about his history and contributions—what a privilege. He was always encouraging and supportive. I always thought that if you are a collections manager in mammalogy, there isn’t much that you do that didn’t originate from him.”

Steve also provided professional service in other organizations related to the management of collections and professional training. He served on three committees for the American Society of Mammalogists: Information Retrieval Committee (1976-1979; 1990-1993), Membership Committee (Chair, 1980-1986), and Systematic Collections Com-

mittee (1986-1994). Steve served on the Board of Heritage Preservation beginning in 2001. He sat on the ICOM International Committee for the Training of Professionals (ICTOP), developing an international curriculum for museum training (1997-1998). He also served on the World Council for Collection Resources task force for the creation of an international umbrella organization to serve the needs of natural science collections.

Steve was a man of many talents, some of which were widely known, but some were unknown except by his closest friends and associates. His penmanship was a thing of beauty, which was a great skill for someone who started his career handwriting museum catalogues and specimen labels. He was an excellent technical artist. He created many of the maps and specimen drawings that illustrated his scientific papers. Steve liked to work with his hands, which led him to invent objects to help his research or his collection work. His Master’s thesis research involved live-trapping pocket gophers. However, no existing traps were efficient enough for significant results, so he and his academic advisor invented an effective trap. The result was the Baker-Williams live pocket gopher trap, which is still used widely today.

Steve was an active researcher and writer, authoring 134 publications. Early in his career his publications primarily concerned mammals, much of it based on extensive field work in such locales as Cameroon (ten weeks), French Guiana (two weeks), India (four weeks), Lesser Antilles (four weeks), Mexico (seven trips totaling five months), Papua New Guinea (five weeks), Suriname (four trips totaling seven months), Thailand (six weeks), United States (28 states), and Yugoslavia (six weeks). This work resulted in about 50 of his total publications. Foreshadowing Steve’s later shift to work in management and preventive conservation, in 1977 he coauthored “A guide to the management of Recent mammal collections,” which brought together for the first time the techniques and materials used in the management of these collections.

A somewhat serendipitous decision to send a contingent of six staff members from Carnegie Museum of Natural History to the Royal Ontario Museum to attend the Second Workshop on Care and Maintenance of Natural History Collections in May of 1985, would lead to a significant change in the focus of Steve’s career. The Workshop, organized by Janet Waddington and David Rudkin, provided a venue in which common problems in natural history collections and interesting solutions were shared over the course of two days. At the close of the meeting, participants voted to find a way to hold a meeting of this sort on a regular basis. Steve left Toronto with a determination to follow up with key individuals from the Workshop. He also contacted other museum profession-



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als whom he thought would be important to carrying this idea forward. Steve's shared enthusiasm resulted in a November 1985 meeting in Buffalo, New York, between Canadian and U.S. museum representatives that resulted in the organization of the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC).

Although it does not seem so long ago, it should be noted that at that time, the only conservators found in natural history museums were associated with Anthropology collections. No one was yet trained to work specifically with natural history specimens. Agents of deterioration and the concept of preventive conservation were unknown to most people who worked in natural history collections. Yet, many large natural history museums were nearing, or already past, their centennial year and held specimens and objects at least that old. The timing for the establishment of SPNHC could not have been better.

Steve had a particular talent for focusing on foundational concepts. When he was working with early computerization of collections, he tackled the subject of documentation standards for mammal collections. When natural history collection care or preventive conservation was in its infancy, Steve was among those individuals who focused on fundamentals, from writing policy to developing 'best practices' to be shared by all collection professionals. He sought advice and interaction with scientists from the Canadian Conservation Institute and what was then known as the Conservation Analytical Laboratory at the Smithsonian, building an entirely new network of contacts. Steve tirelessly worked on experiments that he set up at Carnegie Museum of Natural History. For example, using his creative skills he built an apparatus that fit inside a museum cabinet to test the effects of heat on insect larvae. He documented not only the amount of heat required to kill the larvae, but how that heat affected his test specimens with many, many data points. This is one of dozens and dozens of experiments he undertook. As simple as the experiments seem now, in those days we had no data to help determine what should be "best practices." Steve was not alone in these efforts, but he was tireless in his efforts and he motivated others. He also worked very hard to ensure that SPNHC was increasingly inclusive, beyond the borders of Canada and the U.S. He also focused on the future of the Society, beyond his own contributions. In the early years, Steve spent a great deal of time working on membership, helping to set up committees that functioned well and cultivating new leadership. Then, he stepped back and let the organization flourish. The timing was perfect for him to begin to teach and cultivate a new generation of collection care professionals.

Steve was a man of many talents. He might be surprised to read just how many of those talents were noticed and valued so deeply by others. A careful review of his bibliography will

show that he did not completely walk away from working on mammals, but after 1986 a large number of the 83 remaining publications that he completed after the organization of SPNHC did focus on collection care and preservation. Yet, so much of what he focused upon in the "second half" of his career was informed by what he had observed about mammal preparation, care of mammal specimens, and mammal research during his earlier days. At the same time, his retirement in 2007 and the completion of his last publication in 2011 point to something very special that was always there, throughout his work. That was Steve's family – his wife Kathy, daughter Sarah and son Jason and the grandchildren that followed were a precious part of his busy life.

[A complete bibliography of the published works of Stephen L. Williams](#) can be found on the SPNHC website.

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