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An Inordinate Fondness for Things that Sting

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That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time (John Stuart Mill)

This festschrift is in honor of an outstanding hymenopterist, Roy R. Snelling (1934–2008). Trager (2008) has provided a fine tribute to Roy's character and contributions. Roy was familiar to many of us not only for his publications but in his role as the keeper of the Hymenoptera collections at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History (LACM). In this introduction we give a brief biography and argue that this career so highly productive and important to generations of students could not readily happen in today's science.

Roy was born in 1934 in Turlock, California, USA, a small farming town in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley. In the 1930s Turlock was cited by *Ripley's Believe It or Not* as having the most churches per capita in the country. Since Roy was constitutionally froward, perhaps this explains his fervent atheism and vocal disapproval of religion. Somehow during those formative years in Turlock he developed an interest in insects. By the time he was 18 he was corresponding with J. C. Bequaert and R. M. Bohart and published his first paper, on mixed-species aggregations of *Polistes* queens.

His CV lists as his first job that of "Field Entomologist" with an agricultural company in Mexicali, Mexico, from 1953–1954. During this time his next four publications appear, and already he is showing both a solid focus on aculeates and a catholic approach within this group; two papers are on vespids, one is on a tiphiid, and the other is on an anthophorid. Around this time he attended a year and a half at Modesto Junior College, at which point he ended his formal higher education. One of the most notable hymenopterists of our time was self educated, without a college degree.

He underwent two years of military service from 1957–1959, at Fort Benning, Georgia. It is unclear whether he enlisted or was drafted, but he never spoke kindly of his time in Georgia. Even so, his time there was not entirely bereft of entomology; he later published a paper on a ripiphorid host from Georgia. He returned to California and obtained work in entomology as a Survey Entomologist and then Technician for the Bureau of Entomology, California Department of Agriculture. His time in the military and then with the California Department of Agriculture marked a five-year hiatus in his publication record. In 1962 he published another bee paper, around the time that he was offered two positions, one as a Curatorial Assistant at the LACM and a similar position at the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Hawaii. The Bishop Museum job was considered more prestigious and was certainly in a more glamorous locale, but against his mentors' advice Roy chose the LACM. He preferred California for biotic and probably for cultural reasons. The rest of his career was at the LACM, where he consistently published taxonomy until his death in 2008, becoming a world authority on ants and bees.

Roy was married twice, with two sons and a daughter from his first marriage. His second wife, Ruth Ann DeNicola, participated in his scientific work by providing

Fig. 1. Roy in the ant aisle of the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History, November 2008. Photo by J.T. Longino.

illustrations for a number of his publications, most notably his revision of *Myrmecocystus*. By the 1980's he was a bachelor again and remained so for the rest of his life. Roy is also survived by a brother. His son Gordon (one of the authors) also developed an interest in myrmecology, working on New World army ants and managing the myrmecology newsletter *Notes from Underground*.

Roy's mother was Cherokee. He deeply identified with his Native American heritage, which was a great source of pleasure and pride. He surrounded himself with early photos of Native Americans and numerous cultural emblems and liked to learn about indigenous groups wherever he traveled. He also incorporated indigenous names into many of the taxa he described, yielding such tongue-twisters to the anglocentric as *Myrmecocystus nequazcatl*, *Centris xochipillii*, and *Cephalotes kukulcan*. And he liked to look the part of an aboriginal son of the continent. Roy was an imposing man, often with a stern countenance, and he wore his hair in long braids. Many anecdotes revolve around first meetings, when the man who got off the plane or walked through the door caused jaws to drop and certainly did not match notions of what an ant taxonomist named Snelling would look like.

The dynamics at LACM were interesting. Roy began as a Curatorial Assistant, an entry-level civil service job, and remained at that level for 23 years. He became Collection Manager for his last six years before retirement. After retirement in 1993, right up until his death, he continued to work regularly at the museum. During his career at LACM he aggressively acquired collections, established an enviable publi-

cation record, and built an international reputation that helped put LACM entomology on the map. It is not clear whether his limited advancement at the museum was due to his lack of a PhD, personal choice, poor interactions with administrators, or some combination of these. He certainly had strong opinions and populist leanings. The security personnel and the cleaning staff all knew Roy and always exchanged friendly greetings, but relations with administrators were uniformly frosty. Still, administrations come and go, and Roy always outlasted them. Ultimately, Roy's choices must be seen as shrewd; by eschewing traditional notions of career advancement he was able to focus almost entirely on research, doing the work he loved.

Ants were not Roy's first love, and he only began paying attention to them as part of his work with the Department of Agriculture. His first ant publication was on the fire ants of the United States, motivated by the need to differentiate the imported fire ant from the native species. Even after this his work on ants was sparse for a long time, so that during the 1960s he published mostly on bees. It is clear, however, that his collecting and curating of ants was accelerating during this time. William Steel Creighton became an important mentor and colleague. When Creighton died in 1973, Roy arranged to acquire his collection for the LACM, as he would later do with the collections of William F. Buren and George & Jeanette Wheeler.

Roy's scientific publication list (see below) comprises 171 contributions. In these, he described 13 genus-group taxa and 20 species of bees, one genus and 78 species of ants, and one genus and four species-group taxa of social wasps, among others. His interests were eclectic, and he also published on Evaniidae, Tiphiidae, Eurytomidae, Pompilidae, Bethylidae, and even a behavioral note on a thomisid spider.

The "always question authority" attitude that is central to the scientific worldview was strong in Roy and extended to all aspects of his life. He despised fraud and sophistry and exposed it whenever possible. Chris Starr provided the following anecdote regarding one of Roy's favorite targets, Carlos Castaneda. Castaneda was an "anthropologist" who became famous in the late 1960s by describing training he supposedly received from a Yaqui shaman, Don Juan Matús. The Yaqui are a Native American people from the Sonoran region and a group with whom Roy was quite familiar. Even before Castaneda came generally to be regarded a fake (and Don Juan as a fictional character), Roy demonstrated this to his own satisfaction at one of Castaneda's public lectures. Rising in the question period, Roy asked "What is your name?" in Yaqui. Castaneda had no idea what he had said. Roy's reasoning: Castaneda cannot speak Yaqui; no Yaqui medicine man would stoop to speaking Spanish; therefore Castaneda had no way of communicating with Don Juan, and Don Juan did not exist. QED. For this and other reasons, Roy's conclusion is now generally accepted among anthropologists.

Roy was a natural historian, a collector, and an *identifier*. For many ecologists from the 1970s onward he was the "go to" guy for ant identifications. It is quite an irony that Roy, in so many ways a maverick, was also a great collaborator. He played particularly important roles in the work of Murray Blum and Tappey Jones (chemical ecology), Doyle McKey (ant-plant associations) and Dinah Davidson (ant community ecology, ant-plant associations). In an era when systematics was beginning to rise from the ashes, professional taxonomists began (and continue) to bristle at any hint of being "ecologists' handmaidens." This was a healthy development for systematics and one cannot denigrate systematists for focusing on revisionary work, but Roy's unique position allowed him to play a very important role. He encouraged countless young students of ants by being willing to identify samples that arrived in a hodge-

podge of screwcap vials, babyfood jars, and cardboard boxes, all filled with little bits of paper with pencil-scrawled code numbers from ecological studies. Where an average taxonomist would have responded very politely "Your work sounds really interesting; I really wish I could help you, but I just have so many other obligations right now...," Roy, after some harsh words for ecologists and their crummy samples, would say "Yeah, send 'em to me." On the other hand, he had no patience with medical doctors and others who thought he should identify their material gratis, even though they could well afford to pay.

One result of Roy's willingness to identify samples was that he greatly increased the strength and geographic coverage of the LACM ant collection. Another, perhaps more important, result was that he acted as a bridge between ecology and taxonomy. He introduced many ecologists to the importance and the techniques of taxonomy by turning their disorderly boxes of vials into ranks of properly mounted, labeled, and identified specimens in a leading museum collection. He opened their eyes to the wonderful diversity and form that underpinned their hypotheses. Students were sometimes chagrined to find that their "species A" was actually a genus with many species in the ecological community they were studying. Other times they were intrigued and fascinated by that diversity. Some even crossed the bridge that Roy formed, finding that there was an exciting sphere of academic activity and inquiry on the other side.

One of us (JTL) was one of those ecologists whose proclivities drew him across the bridge, leading to an extended period of work with Roy in the mid 1980s. LACM was awarded an NSF collections-improvement grant, primarily to integrate the Buren collection and Daniel H. Janzen's massive collection of Central America acacia ants. At the time, Longino was an under-employed tropical biologist based at

Fig. 2. Roy interacting with local kids on a collecting trip to Kenya, February 2000. Photographer unknown.

the University of California, Santa Barbara. He took a half-time position with the LACM for two years, commuting from Santa Barbara and working two (long) days a week in the museum. During that time he became intimately familiar with Roy's routine: 7 a.m., arrive, boil water in a scale-incrusted coffee pot, make execrable instant coffee, get to work; 10 a.m., coffee and a donut at the museum coffee shop downstairs (you could set your watch by the "Well, young fellah, time for a coffee break"); continue to feed the starlings donut crumbs and chat about museum politics, while the driven acolyte was eager to get back upstairs to work; after another period of work, lunch (Roy usually had something sausagey); 3 p.m., another coffee break; 4 p.m., depart for his Long Beach apartment. During this time Roy drove an MG. One of the more exhiliarating experiences was to drive with Roy to his apartment, screaming down LA freeways, inches above the pavement, open top, engine roaring, braids flying, darting through canyons of semi-truck trailers.

Roy's position at the LACM allowed a highly talented, self-educated taxonomist to make major contributions to science, to mentor and encourage students of nature, and to attract students to biological systematics. Roy was not compelled to turn his work space into a chemistry lab for DNA sequencing, to become the world expert on a single monophyletic taxon, or

to emphasize statistical analysis of macroecological patterns. He had the liberty to remain a generalized collector and identifier, and as a result was able to benefit a broad range of scientists. How many similar positions are available today?

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