



Clarence "Smitty" Smith Jr.

December 19, 1927 - February 10, 2015

Dr. Clarence Lavett Smith, Jr. (Smitty) passed away on February 10, 2015 in Fort Collins, Colorado at the age of 87 after a year-long illness. He is survived by his wife of 60+ years Marjorie A. (Maple) Smith of Fort Collins, son Robert Lavett Smith of San Francisco, daughter Laura S. Bales, son-in-law James E. Bales, and grandchildren Brian E. Bales, Michael J. Bales, and Sarah A. Bales, all of Fort Collins. He was preceded in death by his daughter-in-law Patricia E. (Lewis) Smith of San Francisco. In accordance with his wishes, no viewing or service was held before cremation. His ashes will be buried at a later date in Hamburg, New York.

Smitty grew up in Hamburg, NY, the only child of Clarence Lavett Smith and Mildred L. (Gaeckle) Smith. The family lived in town but owned a nearby farm where Smitty worked throughout his childhood. He was active in Boy Scouts, attaining the rank of Eagle Scout and serving as a scout leader. He graduated from Hamburg High School, received his BS degree from Cornell University, MS degree from Tulane University, and Ph D from The University of Michigan. He served in the Army Medical Corps at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. and the Tropical Medical Research Laboratory in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Smitty's career was in the field of Ichthyology. He was a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (1962 to 1997) and also taught at numerous universities, including Ohio State, Michigan, Oklahoma,

Alabama, Hawaii, Guam, City College NY, CW Post, and other universities in the New York area. In addition to his 35 years at the American Museum he spent a total of 18 summers over five decades at Ohio State's F.T. Stone Lab on an island in western Lake Erie. Most of his summers were spent teaching at biological stations. He also did research at marine laboratories in several tropical locations, especially at the American Museum's Lerner Marine Laboratory in the Bahamas and the Smithsonian's Research Station on Carrie Bow Cay, Belize. He specialized in the study of coral reef fishes, especially in the Caribbean and Pacific, and of the freshwater fishes of New York State and the lower Great Lakes. He also studied fossil fishes and did extensive work on larval fishes. His research took him to coral reefs around the world and he participated in several research expeditions including the one that discovered the cannons abandoned by Captain Cook on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia. Smitty did scuba diving for his marine research and lived in several of the early underwater habitats, such as the Tektite Program and Hydrolab, submerged on coral reefs and studying the behavioral ecology of the reef's fishes. At the museum he was involved in the discovery that the primitive living-fossil Coelecanth does not lay eggs as was previously supposed but, surprisingly, bears its young alive.

Smitty's adventures while at the American Museum were not restricted to research and study. He and his wife hosted more than 20 of the museum's natural history themed tours and cruises, some to remote areas of the world, where he lectured on the fish of the region. On these cruises he also led snorkeling excursions on tropical coral reefs throughout the Caribbean, French Polynesia, Indonesia, and other parts of the world.

Smitty wrote more than one hundred scientific books and papers pertaining to fish. He was a skilled artist and drew many of his own scientific illustrations. After his retirement he also wrote several ichthyology-themed mystery novels, which he never published. He was a member of numerous scientific societies, natural history organizations, New York Explorer's Club, as well as

organizations for the study and conservation of the Hudson River. He was also involved in several community education and conservation activities, including serving on the boards of the Closter Nature Center in Closter, New Jersey, the Museum of the Hudson Highlands in Cornwall, New York, Hudsonia Ltd. in Annandale, New York, and the Western Museum of Mining and Industry in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the home of Marge and Smitty after he retired. He received numerous awards for his many professional achievements and contributions.

Smitty lived a very full and productive life and loved his work. He delighted in sharing his knowledge with his students, both at the undergraduate level and the many graduate students whom he trained. He was always eager to learn and had vast knowledge of a wide range of subjects. He enjoyed extensive travel worldwide, usually in the company of his wife, and making furniture or gadgets in his woodworking shop at home. He was an avid reader with inexhaustible curiosity about everything and this led him to develop many diverse skills from blacksmithing to boat building and sailing. His other non-career interests included photography, geology, navigation, astronomy, mathematics, wildflower identification, bird watching, hiking, tent camping, fly fishing, sketching, attempting to learn to play piano, and travel. The latter included driving throughout the country and twice to Alaska to explore almost every road there that could be driven, even above the Arctic Circle.

Smitty had a happy life and a relatively peaceful death, and leaves his family with wonderful memories. He had many friends including co-workers, fellow scientists, former students, neighbors, and friends from as long ago as high school and college. He was loved and admired by many, and that is a fitting tribute to a remarkable man.

Tribute Wall



“ Clarence "Smitty" Smith Jr.

October 25, 2022 at 06:14 PM



“ To a man that truly changed my life, I can never forget your wisdom, humor, ethic, and passion for living. I am very lucky to have met you, and was always thrilled to hear from you through the years. I will share your fish stories for as long as I'm around. Thank you Smitty.

Jeffrey Niehaus - February 24, 2015 at 08:14 PM



“ Dear Marge,
We were so saddened to hear of Smitty's passing. I remember meeting and talking with him one day when walking around Brookwood. It was obvious that he had such an interesting and impressive background. I wish I could have learned more about his life.
He will be greatly missed. We will miss you not being in Brookwood as well, but are thankful you are able to live near your daughter.
With love and condolences.
Al & Carol Armstrong

Carol Armstrong - February 23, 2015 at 12:08 PM

“ Smitty was my mentor.

I met him when he was "hooked into" (his words, not mine) teaching Ichthyology I and Ichthyology II (four credits each) for C.W. Post. Actually, I was the one that was hooked because he became the cornerstone of my environmental fisheries career on the Hudson River and surrounding waters. Instead of him traveling out to C.W. Post every week, he insisted on us coming down to the Museum in NYC for every class. Seeing what went on behind the scenes down there sold me on my career.

Smitty was brilliant, a true gentleman, had an infectious laugh and was very easy to talk to. He loved his work and teaching his students. Very few of us are as lucky as he was to do a job every day that we love so much.

I have never seen anyone get so excited about a fish. There are a couple of memories that I can share about this that is truly indicative of who Smitty was.

One time I brought him a fish that was puzzling to me. It looked like a spotfin mojarra, but body depth to total length ratio was indicating another gerreid. Smitty was beside himself with excitement. He had his suspicions, but needed to use an x-ray machine to be sure. After the x-ray, he confirmed that the vertebral column of the fish was malformed and the total length was actually much shorter than it should have been. So, I was correct in my first impression that it was a spotfin mojarra.

Another memory was the time when I got two 'left-eye' winter flounder in bottom trawls in the lower Hudson within a month or so. As any marine taxonomist worth his salt knows, winter flounder are 'right-eye' flounder. So, I brought them down to Smitty for confirmation. We both had a good laugh about these two mixed-up fish. He was especially pleased when I gave him one for his collection.

The passing of C. Laveet Smith Jr. (Smitty) ends an era for me. By the end of this year (my 42nd in the field) I will be retiring and I hope to find the happiness in my later years that Smitty found in Colorado with his family.

Paul A. Moccio - February 23, 2015 at 09:05 AM

AN

“ *Smitty's laugh is a fond memory for me. He was always so kind, and interesting to talk to. After reading his obituary I now understand why! The Brookwood neighborhood was better for having the Smiths as wonderful neighbors. My thoughts and prayers go to Marge and her family. Blessings to you all.*
Ann DeVere

Ann - February 20, 2015 at 08:58 AM

NA

“ *So sad when we heard about Smitty passing. The last time I saw him he was walking along Woodmen as he did many times! I saw Smitty and Marge walking by my house and always enjoyed talking to them. He will be missed by many and myself and George. (my Son}. Time and fond memories will heal your sadness, Marge."Rest in peace Smitty"*
Love Nancy

Nancy Ansted - February 18, 2015 at 03:52 PM

PA

“ *What a grand man! I enjoyed chatting with Smitty and Marge so many times as I walked around the block and encountered them on their strolls. They were a wonderful welcome. Shinook really took to Smitty. Funny how Smitty always called him "Snowball." Wow - so sorry about this loss. I wish I had taken the time to know him better. Deep sympathy to you, Marge. xxoo Patty, your neighbor at 6933 Heatherwood Dr.*

Pattie - February 18, 2015 at 02:37 PM

CM

“ *Chrissy McCollom lit a candle in memory of Clarence "Smitty" Smith Jr.*



Chrissy McCollom - February 12, 2015 at 12:40 PM