



## IN MEMORIAM

William Robert Romig  
Professor of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics  
Los Angeles  
1926 — 2002

William Robert Romig, past chairman of the Department of Microbiology and Molecular Genetics, UCLA, died of complications of emphysema on March 11, 2002. Bob is survived by his wife of 43 years, Mary, their two sons, Claude and Stuart, and two grandchildren. He was a member of the ASM for over 50 years, and was very active in the local as well as the National Society.

Bob was born in Hope, Arkansas, March 4, 1926. He attended school in Clinton Oklahoma, graduating valedictorian from Clinton High School. He received a bachelor's degree in education from Southern Oklahoma State University in 1948. He taught three years in public schools in Oklahoma teaching mainly mathematics, but also general science, biology, journalism, and assorted other courses. He held lifetime teaching certificates in mathematics, chemistry, and biology.

While on a visit to Los Angeles in 1948, he took a night course in bacteriology at the University of Southern California from Professor Sydney Rittenberg. As a result, he became interested in the subject and subsequently enrolled at the University of Oklahoma working for a master's degree in bacteriology under the tutelage of Professor Howard Larsh. During the summers, Bob worked at the Communicable Disease Center (now called the Centers for Disease Control). His first scientific paper was presented at a meeting of the Oklahoma Academy of Science on the results of work on the respiration of *Histoplasma capsulatum*. Bob was encouraged to continue his education, and he enrolled at the University of Texas, Austin, in 1954. His dissertation research was performed in the laboratory of Professor Orville Wyss, a well-known and highly respected bacterial physiologist. He received a Ph.D. degree in August 1957. At that time, University positions were not widely advertised as they are today, but rather were obtained mainly because your mentor had an influential friend who had a job opening in his department. Professor and Chairman Anthony Salle of UCLA called Wyss asking him if he had a young man who could teach bacterial genetics, a subject that had never been taught at UCLA, and which was gaining importance in the field. Bob got the job as instructor of bacteriology and started teaching in the Bacteriology Department, UCLA, in September 1957. He had no research experience in bacterial genetics and had taken only one course in general genetics. He learned bacterial genetics the hard way, and became an outstanding teacher and practitioner of the subject. Bob developed the first course in virology in the College of Letters and Sciences, UCLA, co-teaching with Jack Stevens, and later with Arnie Berk. Bob had the uncanny ability of presenting complex concepts and data in a clear, stimulating, and understandable way. No doubt, his previous experience teaching in grade schools greatly contributed to his excellence as an instructor. In 1965 he received the coveted Distinguished Teaching Award from the Academic Senate at UCLA for outstanding instruction.

Rather than continuing to do research in bacterial physiology when he arrived at UCLA, Bob focused his research efforts on studies on the structure and genetics of bacterial viruses, mechanisms of genetic exchange in bacteria, and later on the genetic bases of virulence, primarily using *Vibrio cholerae* as model system. One of Bob's very early research contributions, and one that brought him considerable prominence among bacterial geneticists, was the demonstration that highly purified *Bacillus subtilis* phage SP01 DNA, when introduced into competent *B. subtilis* cells, gave rise to a burst of phage progeny — the phenomenon of transfection. This work supported and extended the recently published experiments of Hershey and Chase.

Bob and his graduate student Fred Eiserling, now Dean of Life Science at UCLA, published a series of classic papers describing in beautiful detail the structure of several bacteriophages. These papers became models for the study of bacterial virus structure.

In the 1970s the Romig laboratory focused primarily on *Vibrio cholerae* genetics. Using methods his group developed for performing insertion mutagenesis, and polarized chromosomal transfer, he reported the first extensive genetic linkage maps for this organism. During this period Bob also reported the genetic characterization of cholera toxin regulatory mutations and the biochemical analysis of the toxin. This work was performed by John Mekalanos, then a graduate student Bob shared with John Collier at UCLA. Mekalanos (currently chairman of microbiology at Harvard Medical School) recalls the many early conversations he had with Bob about the important role that bacterial genetics would likely play in understanding bacterial pathogenicity. Several other Romig associates during this period, including Stephen Johnson, Charlotte Parker, Robert Goldman, and Katie Richardson went on to successful research careers studying pathogenic microbes primarily utilizing genetic tools gleaned in the Romig lab.

Bob was internationally respected for his many contributions to diverse areas in the field of bacterial genetics. His breadth of knowledge was truly remarkable, and he gave freely of his time and experience. In all the areas he studied, his publications left lasting impressions.

Bob, with his students and post-docs, published about 100 scientific papers in various journals. About 25 Ph.D. students trained in his laboratory. These students obtained jobs mainly in academic institutions including UCLA, Harvard Medical School, and Rochester Medical School among others. Bob was a superb graduate advisor — dedicated, compassionate, freely giving of his time and extensive knowledge, and above all, of his wisdom on the strategies of experimentation. He was gentle with criticisms, and always free with praise for a good experiment or an innovative thought.

Bob served UCLA and the scientific community well. He was a consultant to NASA, working on the Biosatellite Project that preceded the moon landings. He supervised and helped design microbiological experiments for the orbiting satellite. He was appointed to the Committee Advisory to Fort Detrick, Maryland, and frequently visited there for consultations with bacterial geneticists at that facility. He served as editor of the *Journal of Bacteriology*, and on review boards of *Virology* and *Journal of Molecular Biology*. He was appointed to grant review Study Sections of the NIH, Veteran's Administration, NSF and Department of Defense. At the University, Bob was a tireless servant to many diverse committees. As he occasionally said, "some of these services were interesting, and some were even useful, but all took much more time than I would prefer." In 1968 he was appointed as chairman of the department. He was a very effective chair, witnessed by the fact that he was asked to serve in that capacity two more times. He was a person of high principles, fair and wise in his decisions.

Bob was a voracious reader. From popular thrillers to serious works of literature, he read them all, and loved to discuss the ideas gleaned from the books. He also loved art and was a lifelong member of the LA County Museum of Art and others in the Southern California area. But his greatest love was classical music — opera and anything by Mozart. He and Mary, who shared his enthusiasm, attended virtually every opera concert performed in the area, and were annual visitors to the Mozart Festival held in San Luis Obispo, California.

Bob was a wonderful colleague and friend. He could be frequently seen chatting in the hallways, giving advice and help to all who asked, be they faculty or students. He was a gentle man, always with a smile and warm disposition, never complaining, even towards the end when his quality of life was less than desirable. He is best characterized as a Prince of a Man who will be sorely missed by those of us who had the good fortune to know him. So long Bob.

Ralph Martinez