



## IN MEMORIAM

John Andrew Chemsak

Curator of the Essig Museum of Entomology

UC Berkeley

1932 – 2007

John Chemsak was born in 1932 in Ambridge, Pennsylvania, and spent four years of his early childhood living in Slovakia with his mother and grandparents, because they could not afford to live in Pennsylvania during the Depression. He, his mother, and his sister returned to the U.S. just ahead of World War II. He then learned to speak English and was educated in the Ambridge public schools. Although he claimed he had no prior interest in going to college, in the summer following high school, during recuperation for several weeks following an accident at a bakery where he worked, he reconsidered and entered Pennsylvania State University, where tuition was free to state residents. There a course in entomology given by Professor S. W. Frost, which he took as an elective, changed the course of his life, and he obtained the B.S. (1954) and M.S. (1956) in entomology.

John came to the University of California, Berkeley, after developing an interest in longhorn beetles (Cerambycidae) and corresponding with E. G. Linsley, who was then chair of the Department of Entomology and Parasitology and a specialist in systematics of cerambycids. During his graduate student years, John worked as a research assistant with Professor Linsley, and they completed revisions of the first five volumes of Linsley's monograph on North American species of longhorn beetles. John conducted his Ph.D. thesis research on the taxonomy and bionomics of the genus *Tetraopes*, filed in 1961 (published in 1963). He then spent five years working as a postdoctoral assistant research entomologist on National Science Foundation funding with Linsley, then dean of the College of Agriculture. During that time, they laid the foundation for the remaining five volumes of *The Cerambycidae of North America*, which were completed by Chemsak and published during the succeeding 30 years (1972-1997).

In 1967, Chemsak was reclassified as an associate specialist, and later specialist, with a 50 percent commitment to the California Insect Survey (CIS), a project in the Agricultural Experiment Station, a position he occupied for 32 years. He was a curator in the Essig Museum of Entomology and coprincipal investigator on the CIS project and carried out a highly productive research program on systematics of Cerambycidae, especially of Mexico and Central America. He produced about 175 publications, in which he and coauthors described about 570 species new to science and proposed 64 new genera and one new tribe. Paradoxically, in an era when biologists lament the loss of habitat and species worldwide, especially in the tropics, descriptive taxonomy has fallen out of favor, and few persons have done as much in the past 50 years to catalog and describe the extant neotropical fauna as did John Chemsak. He retired in 1994 but continued an active field and research program.

His entomological research was not confined to the museum. From 1957 to 2002, Chemsak made 50 expeditions to Mexico, Honduras, and Costa Rica in quest of longhorn beetles, collecting other insects extensively as well. He often led trips and communicated well in a campesino Spanish that he learned while camping for two months in Chiapas in 1957 and that served us well in rural areas. Ultimately, he worked in

all parts of Mexico except the Yucatan Peninsula. He also conducted fieldwork in French Guiana, Brazil, Hawaii, and Papua New Guinea, where he contracted malaria in 1994. Chemsak often traveled with current or retired faculty members. He escorted A. E. Michelbacher (who had been a student of E. O. Essig) and his wife, Martha, on 11 expeditions to Mexico and Costa Rica between 1964 and 1987, during which he cultivated Michelbacher's alliance to the museum. This friendship ultimately led to a substantial bequest by Michelbacher to the University of California, earmarked for support of the Essig Museum of Entomology.

In addition, John carried out extensive field research in California and the southwestern U.S., often with students, who were drawn to him not only for his knowledge of beetles and other insects, but also by his friendly and unpretentious character. From 1968 to 1982, he helped plan, organized logistics, and served as cook for annual "Spring Trips," student- faculty insect survey ventures to various parts of California. Numerous students were indelibly impressed by this immersion in field recognition of insects and their habitats, and whether in the field or museum, they found John to be easygoing, a great field companion with a ready sense of humor, and not at all reverent of academic protocol. He made many other trips, especially to the Great Basin and desert parts of California and adjacent states, often accompanied by visiting coleopterists from Mexico and elsewhere.

In his early years, Chemsak often traveled with and coauthored research papers with E. G. Linsley, and in later years often with numerous protégés, including students at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City, and several amateur collectors in southern California and elsewhere, whom he helped train to become competent and productive taxonomists. Chemsak carried out extensive correspondence with longhorn beetle specialists worldwide and exchanged representative cerambycid collections with A. Lobanov at the Zoological Institute in Russia, and with other museums. Attesting to the diversity of collections that he made and persons whom he assisted, there are at least 31 species and two genera named in his honor. More than half of them are longhorn beetles, described by 10 specialists in several countries, but in addition, there are patronyms for new beetles of three other families and insects of four other orders — five true bugs (Hemiptera) in four families, five moths in four families, a fly, a wasp, and a bee.

John Chemsak was elected a fellow of the California Academy of Sciences in 1971 and was a research associate of the academy. He was president of the Pacific Coast Entomological Society in 1973 and served as editor of the *Pan- Pacific Entomologist* for five years (1985-1989). He was a member of the editorial board for the UC Press Publications in Entomology for many years. During 1964 to 1974, he assisted with meetings of the Biosystematists, a multi- institute group of evolutionary biologists in central California, who met monthly to discuss ongoing research and controversial ideas in evolutionary biology.

John died on August 26, 2007, at the age of 75. He is survived by his wife of 22 years, Hatsue Katsura, who often accompanied him on field trips to Hawaii, Mexico, and Costa Rica; by two daughters and a son from a former marriage — Sheryl Zimmerman of Elmira, Oregon, Laurie Chemsak and John M. Chemsak of Richmond, California; by his sister, Mary Ann Nissen, also of Richmond; and by his grandchildren.

As a friend, coleopterist, and museum manager, John A. Chemsak is much missed. His death leaves a considerable gap in Berkeley's entomology and systematics programs, as well as in the national and international community of curators and coleopterists, with diminishing numbers of persons willing to devote primary effort to descriptive taxonomy and biodiversity.

Jerry A. Powell