In Memoriam: George Knaphus

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George Knaphus, 75, died Saturday, 20 May 2000, after a two year battle with lymphoma. He was born at McCallburg, Iowa and resided on a farm near there except during his WWII service years and his undergraduate college years at UNI until moving to Ames in 1998. He graduated from McCallburg High School in 1942, served in the U.S. Army from 1943–45 in the 112th Infantry 28th division in Europe, and fought in the Battle of the Bulge, receiving the Bronze Star. He graduated with a B.S. in education from Iowa State Teachers College in 1949, earning master and doctorate degrees in plant pathology in 1951 and 1964, respectively, from Iowa State University. He married Marie Gjenvick in August 1947. He farmed and served as teacher and principal at McCallburg Consolidated School and as a science teacher at NESCO High School prior to returning to Iowa State University to complete his doctoral studies. He joined the faculty at Iowa State University in 1964, eventually serving as a professor in the departments of Botany and of Curriculum and Instruction. He is survived by his wife, Marie, sons Kris and Dan, daughters Debbie and Dawn and nine grandchildren.

Dr. K., as his students called him, taught general botany courses and education courses concerned with high school biology teacher preparation. His research interests were with fungi, often in collaboration with Lois Tiffany. Our projects included a ten year survey of morel and false morel distribution in Iowa, an on-going study of fungus diseases of prairie plants particularly of a smut on big bluestem and a just completed (1999) ten year study of the fungi of Big Bend National Park, Texas. He helped many people learn mushroom identification at workshops and at annual field trips at Iowa Lakeside Laboratory at Lake West Okoboji and at the Loess Hills seminars. He co-authored the regional guide to Iowa mushrooms, “Mushrooms and other fungi of the Midcontinental United States”, with Don Huffman and Lois Tiffany.

Dr. K. had a special talent for teaching and working with students. He believed that every student should have an optimum opportunity to grow during their college years. His office door was always open, students were always welcome! The only reasons for a short conversation were 1) if the time was five minutes after five in the afternoon and there was an intramural softball game scheduled at 5:15 or 2) if he was already late for a lecture. If it was a student’s first visit, George’s first question
was "Where do you come from?" After establishing that he was asking where home was, not campus address, the student would name a town, often a small Iowa town or vicinity and George would say "Oh, that's in Butler county, by the way, do you know Bill Jones?" If he couldn't place the town, the student was richer by one nickel. He seldom lost! The conversation proceeded from there, the student soon realizing that here was a concerned friend, someone interested in him/her as a person and in helping to solve the problem at hand.

Dr. K. was an expert at guiding students through the academic maze. If he didn't know an answer or a possible solution, he knew who to contact by telephone to get an immediate answer. Or if not a complete answer, options that the student could pursue. And often another question would come—"Do you play softball?"—he was always on the lookout for players for both his men's slow pitch softball intramural team the Boppers and also for the Co-wreckers. He was both pitcher and coach for both intramural teams and also played on a church league team in the summer. He started to keep track of his pitching wins after having heart surgery when he was 60, and pitched his 500th victory on May 1999.

Dr. K.'s Botany 102 class has become a campus legend—"Do you know that he gives away nickels in lecture?" Dr. K. called them Alfred E. Neuman awards. He gave away much more, an awareness of the significance of green plants in providing food, clothes and shelter to all of us. He could even make Kreb's cycle sound like an exciting adventure! One student once raised the question, "Why do we have to learn all this crap?" Dr. K.'s response was "That's a very good question and one every teacher should consider"—then he proceeded to point out our dependence on green plants for survival. That student received 50 cents.

Dr. K.'s contacts and commitment to students extended far beyond the formal teacher-student, advisor-advisee basis. Without his constant concern and encouragement, some students would not have persisted to graduation and moved on to successful careers. He was the faculty advisor for the Liberal Arts and Sciences College undergraduate council for 33 years, urging the council members to serve on college committees, to become articulate members of the university community.

I had the privilege of serving as co-advisor of Botany Club with him for 35 years. He always made time for evening meetings every other week, fall weekend camping trips, and organized annual Botany Club lectures like Norman Borlaug and Paul Sears—always making sure that such prestigious lecturers recognized that a Botany Club lecturer was not only expected to give an evening lecture but also to interact with students in small discussion situations and at meals, often at the student dormitory dining facilities.

Perhaps the events most frequently discussed when former Botany Club members called or visited during the years after graduation were the spring camping trips. A ten day camping trip to various spectacular remote places in Utah with Dr. Stan Welsh as our guide, to Big Bend National Park, Texas, to the Grand Canyon, to the Smoky Mountains—usually traveling in a yellow school bus loaded with students and gear—these trips were learning and growing experiences with many dimensions. We all learned that we could survive being wet, cold and miserable and that such inconveniences were a small price to pay for the special things we saw and experienced.

I quote from a letter from Stan Welsh written after George's death, "I will long remember our meetings at Thompson, at Grand Junction, at Bates Wilson's ranch, on the San Rafael Swell, at Natural Bridges and at the Lytle preserve. Too, thoughts bring my mind again and again to Ames, to our visits in George's office, and to the sharing of ideas—the love of the outdoors, of plants in all their glory and diversity, and of students in all their glory and diversity."

After a reminiscence session about the unique problems and special events of a particular trip, Dr. K. would summarize our trips as a journey 1 1/2 times around the earth at the equator—all those miles in a yellow bus.

Dr. K. was equally at ease with students of all ages, those younger or older than the college students that were his usual audience. Of his many field trips with nonstudent groups, Dr. K. particularly enjoyed the diversity of fellow hikers that participated in the fungus-mushroom walks of the annual Loess Hills Prairie seminars. Even encountering a dry, not very productive mushroom year, having many eyes looking invariably discovered a fascinating range of fungi. One of his favorite memories was of a hike during a wetter season. Walking up a north facing slope with the group which included two five- or six-year old girls who noticed everything, he called their attention to some cup fungi growing on the ground (the fungi looked like little 2 or 3 inch cream colored bowls), and suggested that they lean down and blow on them. When they did this, spores of the fungus were released as the dry air moved over them resulting in what appeared to be a puff of smoke from each cup. They screamed and giggled, then began to search for other cups to "puff". Their enthusiasm was catching, everyone began to look for cups.

Larry Stone has written the following memories of George:

"Before I knew about George's WWII experiences, I marveled at his perpetual good humor, and his great interest in other people. He was always willing to take time to help a struggling student—or a bewildered newspaper reporter on a tight deadline. Then I learned of George's war heroics at the Battle of the Bulge. (If my notes are correct, only 20 people in the company of 140 were not killed or wounded.) George modestly described the horror of the battle. And then he revealed his philosophy of life. "When people say 'it's a terrible day, it's raining out,' I take them outside and say 'Take a deep breath. Did you get oxygen? It's a good day!"

Later, George wrote in a letter to The Des Moines Register of the years since the Battle of the Bulge. "Each of those days has been an unexpected gift," he declared.

I think George made the most of those days and that gift by exploring the wonders of the natural world around him. He could marvel equally at a tiny fungus growing on a fallen twig, or at the majestic vistas from atop the Loess Hills. And he helped the rest of us appreciate the miracle of life." Dr. K. had many interests in addition to family, teaching, research and students. He was an active member of the McCallburg Lutheran Church and the McCallburg Legion Post, a founder of the Prairie States Mushroom Club, an amateur group of Iowa people interested in fungi, served on various committees of the Iowa Academy of Sciences and was an active supporter of Academy programs, an expert shot and enthusiastic pheasant hunter for many years, a key involved member of the Borlaug Restoration committee and a leader of efforts to preserve the Norman Borlaug home farm at Cresco. He viewed each day of living to be treasured and used wisely.

Laura McCormick, who as an undergraduate and later as a graduate student was involved in many impromptu discussion sessions in Dr. K.'s office and around campfires, wrote the following poem several years ago.

To George on Borrowed Time

It's true as you say-
That fateful collision of political and cosmic events
with your small point in time and space
could have left you staring at some unfamiliar clod
at the bottom of some hungry ditch.

But having seen the clod and come away
with something in your heart to share with those of us
who walk navel on
And having shared it so lovingly
for all these years...

Can you say that God doesn't know a good investment
when He sees one????