

IN MEMORIAM:
JOHN EARL AVERETT (19 APRIL 1943–1 JANUARY 2017)

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On 6 January 2017 I learned from Dr. Tom Watson that his long-time friend Dr. John Averett had passed away on 1 Jan 2017. In the mid-1960s Tom and John were students and frequent field companions in the Department of Biology at Sul Ross State University, and they were classmates in doctoral programs in the Department of Botany, The University of Texas, Austin. The two friends remained in contact over the years. Tom was having a difficult time dealing with the passing of his close friend. The news about John's death was a shock to me. I did not know he was ill. It seemed that only a short time ago we were involved in telephone conversations, mostly about the treatment of *Chamaesaracha* (Solanaceae) John was preparing for the *Flora of North America North of Mexico*. Also John was making arrangements to donate his personal collections of *Chamaesaracha* to SRSC—a full circle of sorts, in that they would reside in the folders with specimens he had collected and annotated during his days at Sul Ross.

On 6 January 2017, John's beloved wife Audrey related to me that "John was diagnosed with prostate cancer and underwent a prostatectomy in 2003. It was a particularly virulent strain of cancer and the prognosis wasn't good. Somehow he managed with unpleasant but tolerable side effects until 2012. The cancer had metastasized to his spine and hips. Surgery, radiation, chemo and several clinical trials of new meds followed. He never lost his sunny attitude and was braver than any of us."

My earliest recollection of John Averett comes from his presence in a Plant Taxonomy class at Sul Ross, Fall 1964. As a new Assistant Professor, this was my first or second time to teach the taxonomy class, made popular to more than a generation of students of many disciplines, scientific and non-scientific, by long-time Professor Barton H. Warnock. I remember that John was sitting at one edge of a filled classroom, with a look on his clean-cut, angular face that could be interpreted as "wonder what this will be like." John was a Biology major, interested in botany, and looking forward to taking one of the most popular courses on campus—Warnock's Plant Taxonomy. This particular year, as I remember, over 50 students enrolled in the taxonomy class, double maximum room capacity; two sections were formed, and I was assigned to teach one of the sections. Later John told me that he enrolled in the class because Warnock was the teacher, and he was at first disappointed that he had been placed in another section of the class. It was my good fortune. John excelled in Plant Taxonomy. Subsequently I got to know him better as a straight-A student in several other upper level botany classes (Fig. 1). Most of our classes had laboratory and field components. John demonstrated exceptional interest and talent in lab and field exercises.

After completing his BS degree in Biology at Sul Ross, John immediately enrolled in the Master's program, and elected to pursue thesis research under my direction. I suggested to John that he might take on a systematic study of the genus *Chamaesaracha* in Trans-Pecos Texas. At the time there were only four species of *Chamaesaracha* known for the region, and only one published chromosome count for the genus. Some of our preliminary field and laboratory work had demonstrated considerable morphological and chromosomal variation in Trans-Pecos populations of the genus. John took up the challenge, carried out extensive field and chromosomal investigations, compiled 64 chromosome counts revealing diploid, tetraploid, and hexaploid

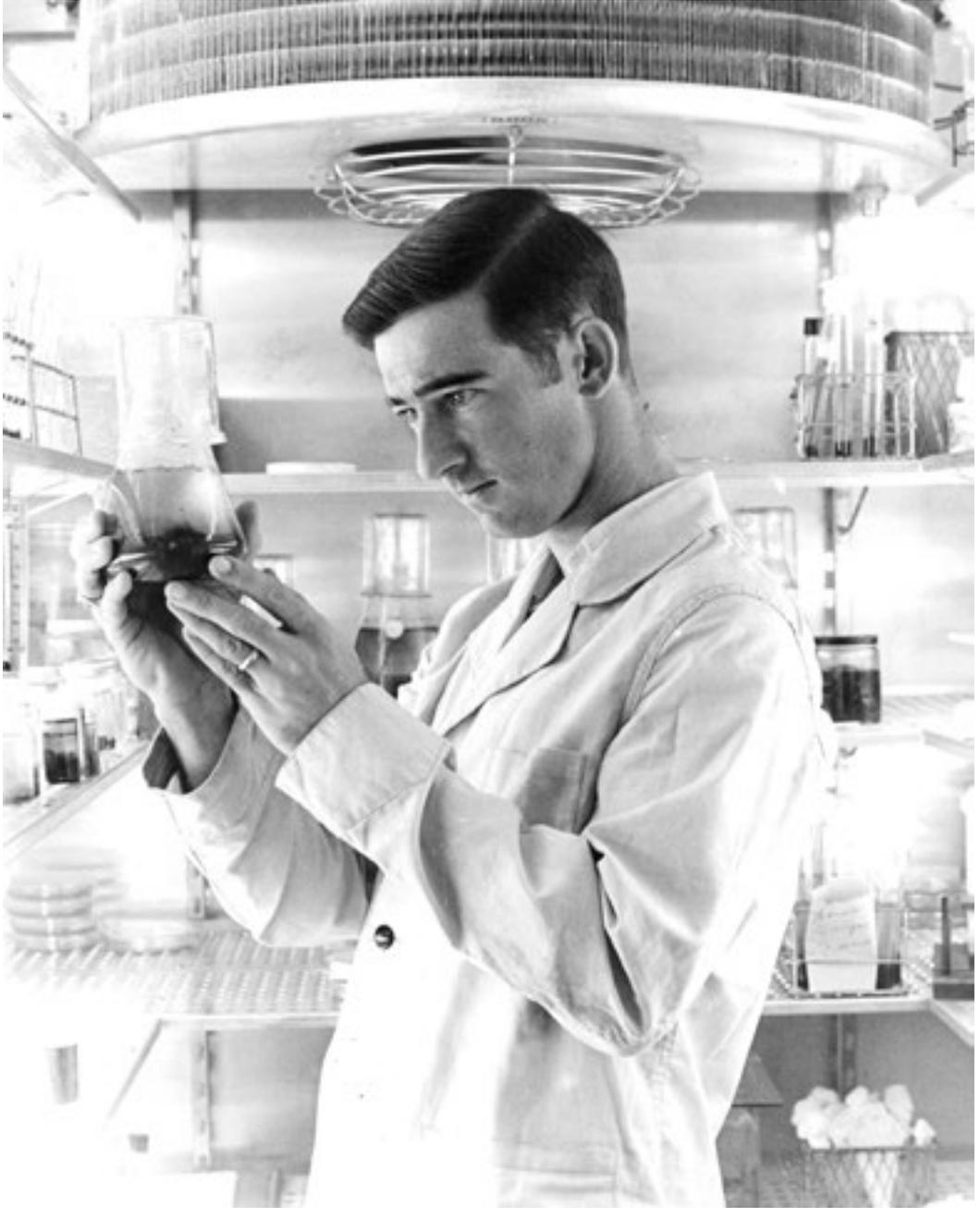


FIG. 1. John Averett in a Non-Vascular Plant Morphology class laboratory, 1965, Sul Ross State University, Alpine, Texas.

populations, employed two-dimensional paper chromatography in analyzing flavonoid profiles (an early-day technique in biochemical systematics; Alston & Turner 1963), and completed a thesis study (Averett 1967).

During his time at Sul Ross, John and I frequently planned and embarked on field excursions, often with other Biology faculty and students. Over-night field trips always involved serious botanizing, as well as camping and cooking over the camp fire, and if there was water nearby, a little fishing. John was a popular field companion. He quickly developed a genuine interest in research projects other than his own, those of both students and faculty. He delighted in exchanging ideas about approaches to and the resolution of systematic problems. He was a willing helper in collecting voucher specimens and other study material, for example buds for meiotic analysis. John was steady in personality, always friendly, "a gentle and modest man who saw good in everyone." He had a unique sense of humor, in fact so spontaneously funny that he often had his companions laughing beyond control. I remember field trips across much of the rugged northern Chihuahuan Desert topography in Trans-Pecos Texas. The road along the Rio Grande in Presidio County was a favorite botanizing and camping area. There was also a memorable trip to Mexico, in Sonora, at a secluded bay, along the coast of the Gulf of California. The most memorable expedition of all was a backpacking and trout fishing adventure in the Gila Wilderness of New Mexico, years later humorously chronicled by John (ca. 1985, unpublished short story, 21 pages; filed in the Sul Ross Herbarium). We became close personal friends, in my mind, and were too infrequently in touch after he moved away from Alpine, entered and completed a doctoral program, and progressed through a distinguished botanical career.

John Averett was born on 19 Apr 1943 in Coleman, Texas, a small town not far from the geographic center of the state. The family moved farther west when John was young, and he grew up in Midland, Texas. John met Audrey Knox of nearby Odessa, Texas, when they were students at Odessa College (Audrey was a senior in high school, taking an AP English class). They married in 1963 and moved to Alpine in Jan 1964. The couple attended Sul Ross State University, and completed undergraduate degrees in 1966. John and Audrey have two children, Cynthia, who was born in 1966, and Matthew, born in 1969 while John was working on his PhD in botany at The University of Texas, Austin.

Soon after John finished his Masters degree in 1967, John and family moved to Austin where John enrolled in the doctoral program in botany, under the direction of Dr. B. L. Turner (Turner 2015). During that period, students of plant systematics at UT Austin could take advantage of schooling in the use of secondary compound chemistry, especially flavonoid compounds, in the laboratory of Dr. T. J. Mabry, as an approach to resolving systematic problems. His dissertation research involved an expanded investigation of *Chamaesaracha*, this time encompassing the entire genus, which is mostly distributed throughout the southwestern United States and northern Mexico, with additional consideration of related genera. John continued a biosystematic approach to his taxonomic investigations, and added the isolation and identification of flavonoid compounds to his tool chest. John completed his UT Austin taxonomic studies of *Chamaesaracha* just in time to have his treatment of the genus included in the Appendix of the *Manual of the Vascular Plants of Texas* (Correll & Johnston 1970).

Soon after completing his dissertation (Averett 1970), John accepted a position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Biology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL). John taught courses in several areas of botany, and in environmental biology, including field courses in Mexico and Costa Rica. While at UMSL, John was active in taxonomic research, and he continued to develop expertise in the utilization of flavonoid chemistry in plant systematics. This resulted in a steady stream of publications, many of them involving taxa of one of his favorite families, Solanaceae (e.g., Averett 1971, 1972, 1973; Averett & Mabry 1971; Averett & Judd 1977; Averett & D'Arcy 1983; Pate & Averett 1986). John's research led to field excursions in the United States and Mexico, and in the mountains and rainforests of Bolivia and Peru. Early on John expanded his interests to include other plant families, including Asteraceae and Onagraceae, and entered into a series of individual and collaborative investigations, where the application of flavonoid chemistry was central (e.g., Averett, 1975; Semple & Averett, 1975; Averett et al. 1978; Bufford et al. 1978; Averett et al. 1979; Averett et al. 1982; Averett &

Raven 1983a, 1983b; Averett & Raven 1984; Averett & Bufford 1985; Bohm et al. 1986; Averett et al. 1986; Averett et al. 1987a; 1987b; Averett et al. 1988; Averett et al. 1990; Averett et al. 1991).

During his tenure at UMSL (1970–1988), John was a Research Associate (1970–1988) across town at the Missouri Botanical Garden (MBG), where he worked closely with the Director of the MBG, Dr. Peter H. Raven, and the “Onagraceae team,” as attested to in the publications cited above (Fig. 2). During the St. Louis period, John also took advantage of opportunities to broaden his teaching and research experiences as a visitor at different institutions. In the summer of 1973, John was a Visiting Professor at the University of Wyoming. In 1977–1978, he was an Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow and Guest Professor at the University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, West Germany. In 1984–1985, John was a Research Fellow and Guest Professor at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. In the Fall 1986, John was a Visiting Scientist at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. And while at UMSL, John’s other professional activities included: Vice President, Phytochemical Section, Botanical Society of America (1971–1972); Associate Editor, *Phytochemical Bulletin* (1976–1978); Editorial Representative, Botanical Society of America (1981–1982); member of a number of committees of the Botanical Society of America, and the American Society of Plant Taxonomists. John moved through the academic ranks in the Department of Biology, being promoted to Associate Professor (1976–1983), and Professor (1984–1988), and he served as Department Chair in 1987–1988. During most summers, John vacationed at Yellowstone National Park, and trout fishing trips there with grandsons were a family tradition (Audrey Averett, pers. comm.). John took advantage of the vast Yellowstone natural laboratory to acquire first-hand experience in plant and animal ecology, and he took this knowledge with him back to the classroom. The Yellowstone experiences formed the basis of numerous lectures on bison conservation, reintroduction of the wolf, predator/prey interactions, and, following the infamous 1988 fires in Yellowstone, fire ecology and plant succession. In St. Louis, John was featured in a local PBS series, 12 episodes, where he talked about ecology and answered viewer-submitted questions (Fig. 3).

In an obituary prepared for dissemination in St. Louis, former colleague at UMSL Dr. Zuleyma Tang-Martinez wrote: “John was a rigorous scholar but also a kind and caring person who made many friends where ever he went. He was a devoted teacher and mentor. He regarded fairness and encouraging others, including younger colleagues, as part of the mission and responsibility of an academic.” And Tang-Martinez included in the obituary a quote from another former UMSL colleague, Dr. Victoria Sork: “He was encouraging, supportive, and warm. I will never forget how much fun it was to work with him on projects. I am grateful to have had him as a friend and colleague when I was starting my career. He left a great mark at USML that I hope he realized.”

After 18 years in St. Louis, John decided to try a new professional direction. In 1988, he became the Director of Research at the National Wildflower Research Center located in Austin, Texas. The 1960s idea of a national wildflower center, which would focus on research and education concerning wildflowers/native plants, and would function as a nationwide clearinghouse for all kinds of information about native plants, is attributed to Lady Bird Johnson. Her original initiative was realized in 1982 when the National Wildflower Center was formally founded by Lady Bird Johnson and actress Helen Hayes. The first home of the Wildflower Center was on 60 acres of land (gifted by Lady Bird) in east Austin. John served as Research Director of the Wildflower Center, under the first Executive Director, Dr. David K. Northington, often working closely with former first lady, Lady Bird Johnson (Fig. 4). As part of his responsibilities, John served as Editor of and frequent contributor to the *Wildflower*, the Journal of the National Wildflower Research Center. John left the Wildflower Center In 1993, to return to academia. In 1995, the Wildflower Center moved to a new 42 acre site in southwest Austin (later expanded to over 240 acres). In 1997 the National Wildflower Center was officially renamed the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, in honor of the former first lady, and in 2006, the Wildflower Center became a research unit of The University of Texas at Austin.

In 1994, John accepted a position as Professor of Biology and Department Chair at Georgia Southern University, in Statesboro. In addition to administrative and teaching duties, John quickly gained interest in nearby ecosystems, and began working with the wetland flora of coastal Georgia. Among John’s favorite



FIG. 2. Peter H. Raven (left), Director, Missouri Botanical Garden (MBG), Marguerite Ross Barnett (center), Chancellor, University of Missouri-St. Louis (UMSL), and John Averett, Professor and Chair, Department of Biology (UMSL), 1987, at dinner celebrating the establishment of a new collaborative agreement, initiated by John, between UMSL and MBG, St. Louis, Missouri.



sites for ecological research and recreation were Cumberland Island, Georgia's largest barrier island, and location of the Cumberland Island National Seashore, and the much smaller Sapelo Island, location of the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Research Reserve. John taught courses in the classroom and in the field, the latter in Georgia and Florida, and in 2002 received the Excellence in Teaching award, Department of Biology (Fig. 5). While at Georgia Southern, John's other professional activities included: Board of Directors, Magnolia Gardens, Georgia Southern University (1994–2009); member of the Academic Advisory Council in Biology (1994–2002), composed of department chairs from each of the colleges and universities in the state, Chair of the Council (1998–1999); Membership Committee, Association of Southeastern Biologists (1995–2009); Savannah River Region Health Information System Steering Committee (1996–1998), Vice-Chair (1998–1999); President, Coastal Plains Native Plant Society (2002–2004); and member of the International Oak Society (2000–2017).

In 2009, John retired, and he and Audrey moved

FIG. 3. Assistant Professor John Averett, Department of Biology, University of Missouri-St. Louis, on the set of a local PBS produced series, 1975, featuring John talking about ecology and answering viewer-submitted questions, St. Louis, Missouri.



Fig. 4. John Averett, Director of Research, National Wildflower Research Center, and former first lady, Lady Bird Johnson, 1992, at the LBJ Ranch, Gillespie County, Texas.

to Omaha, Nebraska, to be closer to their granddaughters. Approaching and after retirement, John published several additional papers dealing with taxa of Solanaceae (Averett 2009a, b; Averett & Martínez 2009; Averett 2010a, b). In 2016, John's last taxonomic contributions, treatments of *Chamaesaracha*, *Leucophysalis*, and *Oryctes*, were submitted to his taxon editor, Dr. Janet R. Sullivan, for the *Flora of North America* (vol. 14, forthcoming). In an email communication to Audrey, Janet said of John: "I first met him in the early 1980s when I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Oklahoma studying the genus *Physalis* (in the Solanaceae). John was always very kind, and very generous with his knowledge of the "physaloid" genera, and I appreciated that he treated me as a peer while I was still a student." After retirement, John continued summer visits to Yellowstone National Park, and in 2012, John and Audrey worked seasonal jobs there, from May to October (Fig. 6).

Cynthia Averett graduated from St. Edward's University in Austin, and has two sons, Stephen and Robbie. Stephen graduated from Loyola University in Chicago and lives in China with his wife; they have a young son, affectionately known as "Banana Bread."



Fig. 5. Department of Biology Executive Committee, and John Averett (center) Professor and Chair, Department of Biology, after having been presented with the Excellence in Teaching award, 2002, Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, Georgia.



FIG. 6. Professor Emeritus John Averett and Audrey Averett, 2012, Mammoth Hot Springs, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming.



FIG. 7. John Averett, standing, and Audrey Averett, seated, and their granddaughters, left to right, Annabel, Chloe, and Lilian, Halloween 2016, Omaha, Nebraska.

Robbie went to Northeast Missouri State University; he and his wife live in St. Louis and are the parents of a young daughter, Azalea. Matthew K. Averett, Ph.D. (art history, architecture, and archaeology), and his wife Erin W. Averett, Ph.D. (archaeology), are both Associate Professors at Creighton University, Omaha, Nebraska, in the College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Fine and Performing Arts. Matthew and Erin have three children, Annabel, Chloe, and Lilian (Fig. 7). In early Jan 2017, Matthew prepared an obituary for his father; he said in a closing sentence, "Dad loved nature, fishing, the Cowboys, and his family."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Audrey Averett responded quickly to my frequent requests for help in acquiring information about life and achievements in the Averett family after leaving Sul Ross, including sending John's CV/publications and a selection of pertinent photographs, "from 53 years accumulation," as well as obituaries written by son Matthew, and former colleague at UMSL, Zuleyma Tang-Martinez. Audrey and Matthew kindly reviewed an early draft of the manuscript and offered helpful improvements in accuracy and content. The current tribute to John could not have been realized without their help. Shirley Powell kindly prepared the photos included here, and reviewed the manuscript.

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