

DR. ROSS H. ARNETT, JR.: PIONEER COLEOPTERIST AND PUBLISHER

CHARLES W. O'BRIEN (RETIRED)¹

Center for Biological Control, Florida A & M University

It is an honor and a privilege for me to present this Florida Entomological Society, Pioneer Lecture honoring Dr. Ross H. Arnett Jr. Some early history will set the stage for more than 50 years of his entomological contributions. He was an innovator in the study of Coleoptera and had a seldom-matched record as a publisher of entomological literature, including the initiation of several journals and entomological societies.

Ross was born on April 13, 1919 in Medina, New York. His interest in natural history began while he was in high school and, following graduation, he entered Cornell University where he studied under numerous outstanding entomologists, including J. Chester Bradley. As an indication of his considerable talent, he was given a desk in the graduate student laboratory while still an undergraduate. This enabled him to conduct research that he selected on Coleoptera, Silphidae. After graduating in 1942, he married Mary Ennis, his high school sweetheart.

In 1943, while working in the New York Conservation Department studying the stomach contents of birds, Ross was drafted and entered the Army as a private. He was sent to Sperry Bomb-sight School and subsequently transferred to the Avon Park Bombing Range in Florida, where he surveyed and controlled mosquitoes. His next duty was in Panama as a member of the Sanitary Corps (Fig. 1), later to become the Medical Service Corps. As a sergeant in the School of Malariology, he served under Captain Eugene J. Gerberg² who became his close friend. Ross was a hard worker and very successful in teaching officers how to control mosquitoes the Army way. Later, Lieutenant Woody Middlekauff (AKA, Woodrow), eventually a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, was sent to Panama to replace Captain Gerberg as commander of the School of Malariology. When Lieutenant Woody Middlekauff first attended Sergeant Arnett's class, he was so impressed that he gave him full responsibility and never appeared again. Ross independently taught the course in spite of being only a Sergeant. In the



Fig. 1. Young Ross in Panama, a clean-shaven Staff Sergeant in class 'A' uniform.

¹Dr. Charles W. O'Brien, Professor and Co-director, Center for Biological Control, Florida A & M University, Tallahassee, FL 32307-4100 (Retired) Current Address: 2313 W. Calle Balaustre, Green Valley, AZ 85614-8047 cobrien6@cox.net Now a Research Scientist in Entomology at the University of Arizona, Tucson AZ.

²Dr. Eugene J. Gerberg received his B.S and M.S. from Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, and his Ph.D. from the University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland. He retired as Colonel MSC from the U.S. Army Reserve. He has been an active member of the Florida Entomological Society for years and received the Outstanding Entomologist award in 1995. Currently, he is an Adjunct Professor of Entomology at the University of Florida.

military at that time, officers taught officers and sergeants only assisted. At the war's end, Ross

was offered a commission as a lieutenant but decided to return to Cornell as a graduate student. He was honorably discharged as a Technical Sergeant in October 1945.

Ross completed his master's degree at Cornell (1946) in medical entomology and aquatic botany. As an indication of things to come relative to his great interest in entomological publications, while still a graduate student he began the *Coleopterists Bulletin* in 1947 and edited it for several years. It is still a successful major entomological publication. He continued at Cornell focusing on the study of beetles and completed his Ph.D. degree (1948) working on the Oedemeridae.

In the years that followed, Ross and Mary lived a peripatetic life, moving often with their eight children. In the summer of 1948, he relocated to Arlington, Virginia where he became a beetle taxonomist for the USDA at the U.S. National Museum, Smithsonian Institution (Fig. 2). Ross left his position with the USDA in 1954 and became head of the Department of Biology at St. John Fisher College in New York. In 1958, he moved to Washington D.C. and joined the faculty of Catholic University. In a relatively short time, he became full professor and head of the Biology Department, and a member of the prestigious Cosmos Club. He published his monumental book *Beetles of the United States* in 1960. This work included keys to the families of Coleoptera of the World, and to the genera in the United States. Information on distributions and ecology were included as well. This became the standard refer-



Fig. 2. Ross at his job in the U.S. National Museum, Washington, D.C.

ence for the identification of Coleoptera for the next 45 years, replaced by his publication of *American Insects*. For this book, he received the prestigious R. R. Hawken award from the American Association of Publishers for producing the best science book of 1985.

In 1966, Ross moved to the Entomology Department at Purdue University to teach systematics and started "A Center for the Study of the Insect Order Coleoptera at Purdue." Shortly thereafter, in 1967, I met Ross for the first time and entered a long and fruitful professional relationship with him. He also met my wife, Lois, that year. I had received a Purdue Fellowship to work in Latin America and we remained at Purdue for two months to learn Spanish before going to Chile. Lois and I were both systematists who planned to teach at the Universidad Catolica in Santiago for one and a half years. Ross was designated as the Purdue entomological contact to assist us with information and help should it be needed while we were in South America. Ross was very helpful and friendly, so we soon became friends. Following our tenure in Chile, Lois and I returned to Purdue and worked for four months to complete our research and prepare associated publications. We also enjoyed many meetings with Ross at the university and his home.

Ross took a leave of absence from Purdue to accept a three-year appointment as a Henry L. Beadle Fellow at Tall Timbers Research Station in Leon County, FL, near Tallahassee. There he worked on the insect fauna and began a demanding and difficult project, "The North American Beetle Fauna Project" (NABFP). I was privileged to be on the Board of Directors. Lois and I had left Purdue to take a two-month position in mosquito taxonomy for the State of Ohio in Columbus and then moved on to Texas Tech University for two and a half years before accepting a position at Florida A & M University (FAMU). We had kept in touch with Ross by mail and at annual Entomological Society of America meetings, so he knew that my grant-supported position at Texas Tech was ending. He wrote to me and suggested that I apply for an Aquatic Coleopterist Position in the entomology program at FAMU, led by Dr. William Peters³.

Ross resigned from Purdue University and left Tall Timbers in 1973 to take a teaching position at Sienna College in Loudonville, NY. After six years there, he and Mary decided to leave institutional

³Dr. William L. Peters was very active in the Florida Entomological Society, serving as president. He passed away suddenly on June 3, 2000. Bill was the Director of the Center for Undergraduate and Continuing Education Studies in Entomology, and of the Taxonomic Entomology section, at Florida A & M University. Through the efforts of Bill, his wife Jan, and his other colleagues at A & M, one of the most impressive collections of aquatic insects in existence was built and now is considered part of the FSCA.

life and move to Kinderhook, NY. There, he published *The Naturalist's Directory* and concentrated on his new business venture, *World Natural History Publications*. He also moved the NABFP to his new venue, The Biological Research Institute of America, Inc. Soon thereafter he moved his home base to Baltimore, MD, where he began writing *American Insects*. During this period, he also served as editor of the journal, *Entomological News*. Ross was very accomplished and appreciated, having financed and directed all of these projects. He was ahead of his time, believing since the late 1960s that electronic publishing was in the near future (less than 5 years away). He worked hard to help this happen and no doubt was pleased to see his opinions vindicated during the final years of his life.

In 1982 Ross moved again, this time to Gainesville, FL, where he joined a large group of taxonomists who volunteer their time to curate the Florida State Collection of Arthropods (FSCA) and conduct research. He had donated his general insect collection previously and added his oedermerids in 1983 to the FSCA, Division of Plant Industry, Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. In 1983, he began another business as editor and publisher of

Flora and Fauna Publications, a great success. It was purchased by E. J. Brill Publisher, Leiden, Holland, who retained Ross as Editor and the North American Representative. Ross and Bob Woodruff⁴ organized "The Center of Systematic Entomology" in 1985 and started a new journal, *Insecta Mundi*, both of which have been very successful. In 1989, E. J. Brill Publishers changed its direction in the New World and discontinued Flora and Fauna Publications. Ross once again started a new publication, *Sandhill Crane Press* and incorporated the former Flora and Fauna Publications. In 1994, he sold his stock of books and began working full time with Norville Downie to complete *The Beetles of Northeastern North America*.

Ross (Fig. 3) touched many of our lives through his publications and professional activities. In addition to prodigious editing efforts and initiating so many publishing businesses, Ross traveled the world to collect insects and learn first hand about

⁴Dr. Robert E. Woodruff's interests in entomology include the systematics, biogeography, and ecology of Scarabaeidae. Since retirement from the Florida State Collection of Arthropods in 1988, he has worked in the Lesser Antilles, established a biological research station (Bio-Eco-Dom) in the Dominican Republic, and continued his work in insect taxonomy.

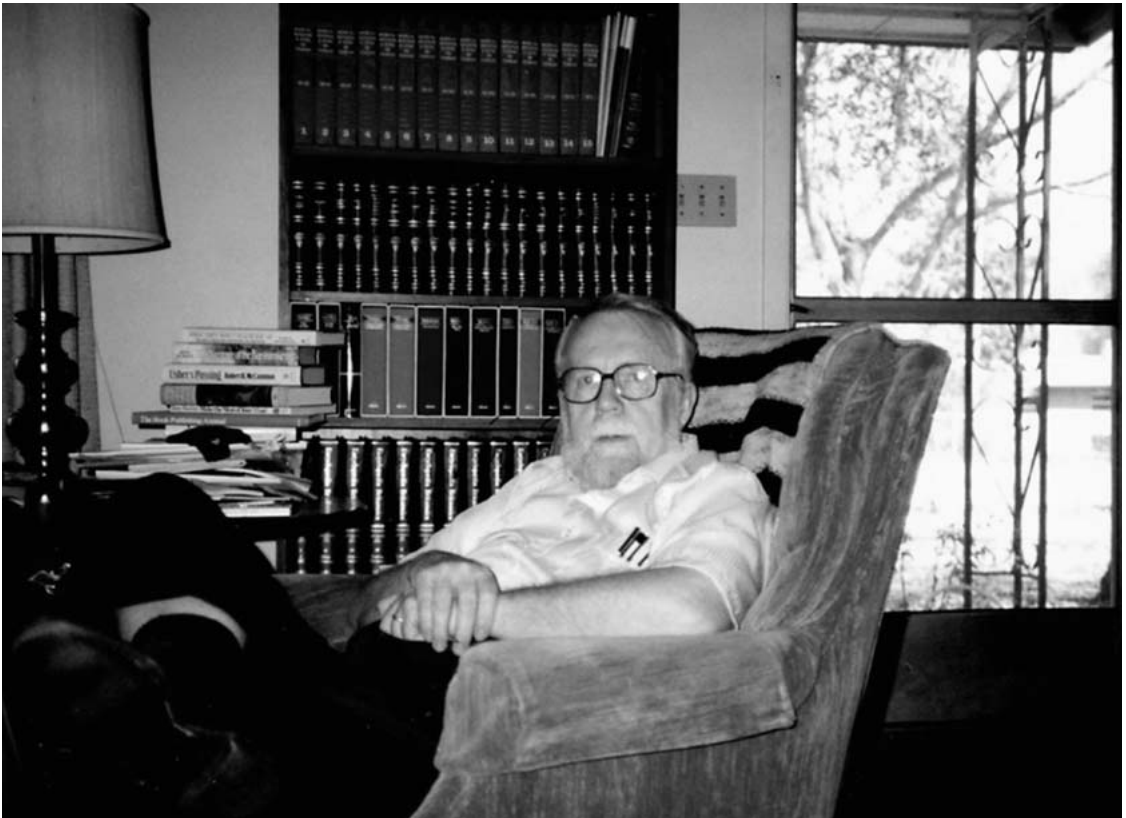


Fig. 3. Ross at his home in Gainesville, FL (1985)



Fig. 4. Dr. David Hall, Chairman of the FES Pioneer Lecture Committee, presenting the Pioneer Lecturer Award to Dr. Charles W. O'Brien (2004)

biogeography and evolution. He went to the Galapagos Islands, Tahiti, Japan, Australia and many other countries. He spent summers, when free of teaching responsibilities, with his family camping and collecting insects. He had a huge personal collection of the beetle family, Oedemeridae, which he had always planned to describe in a monograph but never accomplished due to other priorities. His Ph.D. graduate students included Lee Herman Jr., Eileen Van Tassel, Jeffery N. L. Stibick, Jerry Burendine, Al Samuelson, Ron Young, Eric Smith, and Richard Jacques Jr. In

part because of Ross's help, I have had a productive and most enjoyable career.

I thank President Richard Mankin, David Hall and the FES Pioneer Lecture Committee for selecting me to deliver this important presentation honoring Ross Arnett (Fig 4). I also appreciate the photographs and anecdotes provided by several colleagues, including Eugene J. Gerberg, Michael C. Thomas, and Robert E. Woodruff. Gene Gerberg was especially helpful since he was a close personal friend during 65 of Ross's 80 years. Dr. Ross H. Arnett, Jr. passed away on July 16, 1999.