



Verne N. Rockcastle

January 1, 1920 – April 5, 2015

Verne Rockcastle, Professor of Science and Environmental Education in the Department of Education at Cornell, and Professor Emeritus, died Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015 in Ithaca, at age 95. Verne was an active faculty member at Cornell since 1956, despite formally retiring at age 66.

Verne was raised in Rochester, NY, a child raised during the Great Depression by teacher-parents. His career was influenced in no small way by his history and by his summers on Tupper Lake, his love for nature, and his commitment to hands-on learning. He wrote in his memoir, “Most of my boyhood memories centered on experiences on the Raquette River near Tupper Lake. My father had built a cottage there for our family doctor, Dr. Kimball, who had said to my father that he could be paid to build the camp, or he could use it for the month of July each year as long as he lived. Since my father was a teacher, he decided that the latter course was the better one.” Verne and his family have summered in Tupper Lake thereafter, building their own “camp” and enjoying time there together as the family has grown. He once boasted to his colleagues how the land at his cottage was of his own making—he had, for years brought leaves swept from his Cayuga Heights property up to the Lake, where nature took its course and created a rich soil in his ‘camp.’

Verne did not always aspire to be a science teacher and college professor, but his interest in science and nature were long-seeded since those early days in Tupper Lake. At first he had an interest in being a Forest Ranger. But still feeling the effects of the Depression, he attended the state-tuition side of Syracuse University College of Forestry in 1937. He soon concluded, “being in the woods was not the best way to support a family”—a thought that may have coincided with meeting his to-be wife Madeline, a junior transfer from Bucknell, during his sophomore year. Likewise, the world can thank his “disability” of being color-blind for his becoming a science teacher and teacher-educator. Due to discovering color blindness while a Pulp and Paper Engineering student and unable to do the visual work for his major, he transferred to major in Landscaping. But, he found that “the same color-blindness...still haunted me in Landscaping.”

He therefore took an additional year to finish the science and math requirements and became a teacher in 1942. He wrote, “I had grown up in a teaching family. So what better could I do than to pursue a teaching career?”

But before this career was underway, like most men of his age, Verne served in the Army upon college graduation, intent to fight in World War II. Due to a combination of fated factors such as exposure to illness, his high scores on an intelligence test, and what he called “luck,” he served in the Army by attending MIT, intending to be trained as a meteorologist in the US Air Corps. Instead of being shipped out, Verne was retained as a teacher at MIT to teach other Air Corp trainees. He there earned an M.S. degree (and married Madeline). After the war Verne attended a workshop taught by Cornell’s Dr. E. L. Palmer, a naturalist and experientially-based teacher, who influenced Verne to apply to the Cornell Ph.D. program. Accepted, Verne worked with Professor Eva Gordon as his Committee Chair, a professor who authored and edited the Cornell Rural School Leaflet, a 32-page Quarterly for rural elementary schools of the State, which Verne later took over for about 15 years, after Verne had joined the faculty at Cornell. Verne was at first an associate professor of science education, arriving here from teaching at SUNY Brockport, and he continued to be a beloved teacher throughout his career and his active emeritus status. Verne is most known and fondly remembered for his ability to bring science to life to students of all ages through experiential education.

In his teaching, Verne was before his time with experiential and experimental education. It was during his first sabbatical in Europe that Verne met Jean Piaget, one of the most world-renowned cognitive developmental scientists and father of constructivist education. Verne was one of a group of Cornellians, including Richard Ripple, also of the Education Department, who arranged for Piaget to give a series of lectures at Cornell in 1964, which marked among the first of Piaget’s trips to the United States. Verne’s own science teaching had always been constructivist in nature, without having made these theoretical connections at that time. Verne and Professor Ripple published a monograph based on Piaget’s visit entitled, *Piaget Rediscovered: A Report on the Conference of Cognitive Studies and Curriculum Development*.

Verne also served as a professor for the summer portion of Cornell’s Adult University (CAU) for more than 20 years, first in Ithaca, and later in other areas, including Tucson, the Grand Canyon, Alaska, and the Galapagos Islands. Additionally, he taught at Fresno Pacific College for 13 summers. He was senior author for the Addison-Wesley Science Program, and co-author of a number of science textbooks. Verne was always very hand-on and experiential when it came to teaching—at every level—before it was popular. Colleagues recall that he was most proud of these trips throughout the world, bringing people to science—whether it was in Alaska or in the gorge near Cornell. He used the world as his laboratory and brought people’s attention to it.

At age 66 Verne formally retired from Cornell, as “was the custom of the time,” he said, but did not retire from working. He continued to work nearly daily for the next 40 years, spending many days in the emeritus office at Cornell, as well as taking short teaching assignments throughout the country. Two decades after formal retirement, he developed a web site where he could “continue the development of simple investigations by school kids to demonstrate and explain science concepts that I felt were both basic and important, but were not often well understood, and often were not even included in elementary, junior high, or secondary school science.”

(Rockcastle, Acorn to Oak, p. 233). He called his web site (www.rockcastle.org) “Rocky’s Science Fun.” One colleague recalls Verne coming to her backyard to film her children conducting one of his outdoor experiments; the videographer was one of his own grandchildren.

For nearly all his years at Cornell, since 1956, Verne lived with his wife of nearly 72 years, Madeline, in a lovely cottage in Cayuga Heights, where they raised their two daughters. Verne always gave credit to Madeline for his success—whether it was through her hosting weekly visits at their home for students, continuing to bake her amazing baked beans recipe for potluck dinners on campus. She drove him to work each day in his later years, being sure to pack him a light lunch that included (or rather, comprised of) a cookie and fruit—which he thought to be the healthiest way to eat lunch! His longevity seems to prove his point.

Verne was an active member of the Ithaca community as well as the Cornell Community. In addition to being the faculty advisor to the Cornell track and cross-country team, which he took tremendous pride in, he and Madeline were generous supporting members of the First Presbyterian Church in downtown Ithaca, supporting myriad missions and programs there. After church each Sunday, Verne and Madeline could be seen visiting friends and residents of the Oak Hill Manor Nursing Home, even throughout his own 90’s. He always had a smile, a chuckle and a story to share with each of them. Skiing was another activity keeping Verne active into his 90’s. Even after surgeries on both knees, Verne was still making weekly trips to Greek Peak to ski, putting the rest of us younger colleagues to shame.

Verne’s wife Madeline died in November of 2015. He is survived by his daughters Lynn (Forrest) Thye of Blacksburg VA and Diane (John) Wiessinger of Ithaca NY; his half-sister Lois Rockcastle of Alaska and Tupper Lake; four grandchildren, eight great-grandchildren, and nieces and nephews, all of whom continue to spend time in Tupper Lake.

Photo of Verne and Madeline Rockcastle from the *Ithaca Journal* obituary.

Dawn Schrader, chair; John Sipple, Mark Conostas