IN MEMORIUM—ELWOOD BERNHARD “WOODY” EHRLE

Nancy D. Ehrle and Dennis W. Woodland

Dr. Elwood Bernhard “Woody” Ehrle, former Academic Vice President of Western Michigan University and Professor of Biological Sciences Emeritus, passed away on 19 July 2009 at Bronson Hospital, Kalamazoo, MI, following a fall and short illness.

Woody was born on November 13, 1933, the son of Katherine and Elwood Ehrle of Clifton, NJ. His family owned and operated a florist and nursery business in Clifton for over 30 years. Woody's earliest botanical training was from his grandfather, George L. Ehrle, who, in 1925, produced the world's first double-flowered “Baby's Breath,” now the florist standard all over the world. He graduated from Clifton High School in 1950. Woody earned a B.S. Degree in Ornamental Horticulture from Rutgers University in 1954, an M.A. degree in Botany from Columbia University in 1955, and a Ph.D. degree in Botany from Pennsylvania State University in 1958. He was Professor of Botany at Geneseo State University, Geneseo, NY from 1958–68 with a sabbatical leave taken at Cornell University to study Radiation Biology in 1965–66. He was Associate Director of the American Institute of Biological Sciences in Washington, DC from 1968–71. Woody was Dean of Arts & Science at Mankato State University, Mankato, MN, from 1971–76 and Academic Vice-President at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, IN from 1976–79. Woody was Academic Vice-President at Western Michigan University from 1980–83. In 1984 he returned to his first love, teaching people about plants, and became Professor of Biological Sciences at Western Michigan University, a position he held until his retirement in 1999. Following retirement, Woody and his wife donated to help update the student/display portion of the WMU Biology Department Greenhouses in honor of his grandfather. It is now known as the George L. Ehrle Greenhouse.

Woody received the WMU Alumni Association’s Teaching Excellence Award in 1995 and was loved and appreciated by his students. He enjoyed leading students and members of the Michigan Botanical Club (MBC) on field trips to distinctive habitats in the southwestern Michigan area or to the Lake Michigan dunes, where, along with flowering plants, he would also expound about any interesting mosses found. Woody taught classes for the Michigan State University Extension Service Master Gardener Program and the training program of the Michigan Federation of Garden Clubs.

Professionally, he wrote two books and published over 150 scientific and academic papers in 20 different journals, especially in the area of bryology. He collected more than 8,000 herbarium specimens, which are housed in the New York State Museum in Albany (NYS), the Hanes Herbarium at Western Michigan University (WMU) and a small collection of New York vascular plants and Michigan mosses at the Andrews University Herbarium (AUB).

In the early 1990s, the Michigan Botanical Club fell on difficult times.
Woody, with his administrative abilities, was voted president and immediately began getting the club functioning again. While President of MBC, Woody began his big tree work with Paul Thompson in 1992. He became Michigan's Big Tree Coordinator in 1994 and continued traveling the state, measuring trees and giving big tree talks to many groups. Woody received the Distinguished Service Award of the Michigan Botanical Club in 1998 and the Forestry and Parks Association Award for Meritorious Service with Michigan's Big Trees in 2002. He served for a number of years as Chairman of the Board of the Hanes Trust Foundation of Kalamazoo, established “to facilitate the study of Michigan plants.” The fund makes about 10–20 grants per year for this purpose.

Woody enjoyed gardening in the summer and chopping wood for his fireplace in the winter. In the winter months, he and his “bride” Nancy, of 52 years, enjoyed each evening a pre-prandial libation in front of a roaring fire. He loved traveling, and he and Nancy enjoyed 19 cruises to many parts of the world.

Woody leaves his beloved wife, Nancy Decker Ehrle; three sons: Erik (Jean-deceased) of Cincinnati, OH, Ben (Susan) of Valparaiso, IN and Royce (Lisa) of Aurora, CO. He also leaves a grandson, Aaron; and four granddaughters: Jessamine, Emily Rachel, Emily Josephine, and Celia. He was preceded in death by his parents and a brother, Donald.

Woody’s legacy will continue to benefit students of botany in Michigan. The Michigan Botanical Foundation (MBF) was set up as a 501c3 organization under Woody’s guidance in the mid-1990’s to fund small grants toward a better understanding of plants. In accordance with Woody's wishes, a sizable bequest from his estate has been given to the MBF to further its work promoting botany in Michigan. Additional memorial contributions may be made in his memory to the Michigan Botanical Foundation, c/o Patrick Fields, Chair, 5349 North Canal Road; Dimondale, MI 48821-8712 or to Robert Sabine, Treasurer, P.O. Box 332, Grand Haven, MI 49417.

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