OBITUARY

ASPB Pioneer Member

Eric E. Conn

An Appreciation

Eric Edward Conn, a highly respected, highly admired National Academy of Sciences member and a true plant science luminary, passed away September 2, 2017. Rarely in modern biochemistry research does one scientist make an enduring and lasting impact on metabolic pathways that stands the test of time and that guides follow-on research of scientists throughout the world. Eric was an exception. From pioneering work in plant biochemistry and metabolic pathways, his work is relevant today and has led to numerous exciting follow-on discoveries. Yes, he died in September 2017. However, his love of science and his positive attitude live on. We are all the better for it.

Eric displayed exemplary dedication and professionalism. He fulfilled tireless commitments to various societies, notably the Phytochemical Society of North America (PSNA) and ASPB. Eric was a long-standing and highly respected *Phytochemistry* editorial board member (1961–1999). He also served as associate editor of *Plant Physiology* (1968–1972), as executive editor of *Archives of Biochemistry and Biophysics* (1975–1991), as executive editor of *Recent Advances in Phytochemistry* (1984–1989), and as editor of *Biochemistry of Plants* (1981). The classic textbook *Outlines of Biochemistry* was first published in 1963, when Eric and Paul K. Stumpf, together with Roy Doi and



George Bruening, graciously provided it for the academic and scientific community.

Selected accolades include the PSNA Life Membership (1981), election to the National Academy of Sciences (1988), the ASPB/ASPP Charles Reid Barnes Life Membership Award (1991), the Pergamon Phytochemistry Prize (1994), the PSNA Phytochemical Pioneer Award (2007), and ASPB Fellow (2009). The ASPB Eric E. Conn Young Investigator Award, established in 2011, honors Eric's contributions to plant biology by recognizing young scientists. Some of Eric's research accomplishments include the following:

- Phenylalanine ammonia lyase discovery and coumarin biosynthesis
- Arogenate and Phe/Tyr biosynthesis
- Gallic acid biosynthesis
- Cinnamate 4-hydroxylase discovery and characterization
- Sorghum cyanogenic glucoside (dhurrin) biosynthesis and hydrogen cyanide (HCN) release
- Taxiphyllin biosynthesis in *Triglochin maritima*
- Flax cyanogenic glucosides (linamarin and lotaustralin) biosynthesis and HCN release
- Linamarin and lotaustralin biosynthesis in other cyanogenic species
- Prunasin biosynthesis and HCN release in peach, cherry laurel, and *Ximenia* species
- ß-cyanoalanine and ß-cyanoalanine synthase in *Lotus tenuis*
- *Acacia* and *Eucalyptus* chemotaxonomy studies
- Laetrile and amygdalin: quackery exposed

Service to ASPP/ASPB

Eric was deeply involved with ASPB, beginning with its forerunner, the American Society of Plant Physiologists. He served in numerous well-received capacities to help the Society achieve the tremendous standards and worldwide appeal it enjoys today. His service included stints as associate editor (1968–1972) and editorial board member of *Plant Physiology* (1980–1983) and as ASPB president-elect (1985–1986) and president (1986–1987).

Eric and Louise Conn's Philanthropy

Throughout his entire life, Eric had enormous appreciation for the progressive academic environment, as well as the positive culture and loyalty, that existed within the University of California, Davis,

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community. This was important to him, including in support of his own relentless quest for excellence. Eric's appreciation to UC Davis was reciprocated by both Eric and his wife, Louise.

One aspect in particular was the UC Davis Arboretum, a favorite walking, cycling, and meeting place on the UC Davis campus for the community and visitors alike. Eric, Louise, and the Conn family made various commitments to UC Davis through the Arboretum stemming from Eric's interest in Acacia species beginning in about 1960 (https://arboretum.ucdavis.edu/eric-e-conn-acacia-grove). Indeed, this lovely Arboretum has an Acacia grove of more than 50 species in honor of the Conns that includes *Acacia conniana,* named in honor of Eric's research on cyanogenesis. Eric and Louise supported the Arboretum as volunteers, researcher, advocates, and donors. In 2001, they began the Louise and Eric Conn Endowment Fund (see https://give.ucdavis.edu/Donate/YourGift/122180) to help financially support the Arboretum. In 2012, and following the passing of his beloved Louise, Eric provided additional matching funds to further support the progression of the Arboretum.

An Incredible Life

The story of Eric's life journey—so well spent—would not be not complete without glimpses of his childhood and young adulthood. Eric, the fourth and last child of William and Mary Anna Conn, was born on January 6, 1923, in Berthoud, Colorado, where his father served as assistant manager of a Farmers Union grain elevator. His family moved in the early 1930s to Bellaire, Kansas, for his father's grain elevator business. This was the time of the Great Depression, and the family experienced firsthand the dreadful Dust Bowl years and the devastating effects on the Great Plains. The Conn family lost most of their assets, except for their home. During this time, Eric became proficient in playing piano and developed a lifelong love of trains.

The family next moved to Fort Morgan, Colorado, a small town of around 5,000. There his father ran a gasoline station and his mother took in boarders to help make ends meet. This was, in many ways, a time for the family to start again in life, as it was for many. While there, Eric learned to play the pipe organ in a local Methodist church. Scholastically, he got off to a great start, graduating as valedictorian from Fort Morgan High School in 1940. He won an all-tuition scholarship for four years to study at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and graduated with a bachelor's degree in chemistry (cum laude) in 1944.

Eric was hired immediately by the Manhattan Project at Oak Ridge, Tennessee. He traveled there by train and worked primarily as an inorganic chemist through the remainder of World War II, first as a civilian and then with the same work after being drafted into the Army in 1945 as a private.

Eric used the GI Bill to earn a PhD in the Biochemistry Department at the University of Chicago. He then accepted an offer from UC Berkeley, joining Dennis Hoagland's famous Department of Soils and Plant Nutrition in a tenure-track position in the College of Agriculture in 1953. However, an exchange in departments of his appointment was suggested by Paul Stumpf, who was then chair of the Agricultural Biochemistry Department in the same college. Eric joined this small but vibrant department in 1954. Although Eric had already met Paul while doing a postdoc in Dr. Vennesland's lab, this marked the beginning of a wonderful lifelong friendship, highlighted by their writing of *Outlines of Biochemistry* and editing of *Biochemistry of Plants*.

In 1958, Eric moved to join the Biochemistry Department that Paul Stumpf was setting up at UC Davis. The next decade saw considerable expansion of their introductory biochemistry course with classes of nearly 400 students. Eric's contributions as a professor at UC Davis were highly valued. For course teaching and research, he received the university's highest distinctions, including the Distinguished Teaching Award of the Academic Senate (1973), the Faculty Research Lecturer of the Academic Senate (1977), and the Prize for Teaching and Scholarly Achievement (1990).

As noted by his son Kevin, "Kindness and intellect were the twin hallmarks of Eric's life. Eric

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lived a long and full life, never losing interest in making the world a better place. His wife, Louise, passed away in 2002. He leaves behind his two sons, Michael and Kevin, and many nephews and nieces, including newborn Noah Eric. Those who were lucky enough to know him will miss him deeply."

Norman G. Lewis
Laurence B. Davin
Institute of Biological Chemistry,
Washington State University

A full appreciation of Eric Conn's life was published in the PSNA News (http://www.psna-online.org/newsletters/PSNANews561.pdf). *This edited version appears with permission of the Phytochemical Society of North America.*