

W. J. BAERG, 1885 - 1980

Dr. W. J. Baerg, Professor Emeritus of Entomology, University of Arkansas, died in Fayetteville, Arkansas on April 14, 1980. During his 31 years as Head of the Department of Entomology and for many years following his retirement in 1951, he devoted much of his energy and interest to the study of arachnids, especially tarantulas, scorpions, and species reported to be poisonous to man. Although his interests extended also to Ozark birds and flora as well as pest insects, 20 of his 75 published papers dealt with Arachnida, culminating with a small book, *The Tarantula*, a narrative account of his long personal association with those spiders.

Coming to his first academic appointment at the University of Arkansas from Cornell in 1918, he saw his first tarantula—a tarantula ghetto, in fact, on a hillside on the university campus which has long since been displaced by fraternity houses—and his enchantment-at-first-sight with the creature remained all of his life. From about that time on he was in correspondence with arachnologists world-wide, and he was one of ten living American arachnologists listed in Bonnet's *Bibliographia Araneorum* when it was published just after World War II. It was one of the pleasures of his later years that Bonnet visited him personally in 1975 after some 50 years of correspondence.

Although Professor Baerg made extended observations on perhaps as many as 35 species of Central American, Mexican, Caribbean, and North American tarantulas, he became exasperated and finally disenchanted with the vagaries of mygalomorph taxonomy. He was especially intrigued, however, with the apparent discrepancy between the reputation for toxicity and its actual effects, not only of the tarantulas but of other arachnids as well. He induced numbers of them often with difficulty, to bite or sting him and recorded his personal response to the effects of their venom. At the age of 85 he volunteered to be the experimental animal to test the toxicity on humans of *Chiracanthium inclusum* (Hentz) whose biology I was at the time studying in his laboratory. (I declined his offer, and the effects of its bite are still uncertain.)

Between 1924 and 1955 he made numbers of trips in connection with his studies, to Europe in 1929 and 1931, to Panama in 1924 and 1936, as a Fulbright Scholar to Jamaica in 1951 and 1952, and as a Guggenheim Fellow to Mexico in 1954 and 1955. He worked with Snodgrass at the National Museum on the internal anatomy of tarantulas and made numerous excursions throughout the United States and Mexico studying scorpions and tarantulas in the field.

Such was his devotion to the tarantula that he considered that all of his students of entomology should at least make its acquaintance. For some 30 years that he taught beginning entomology he would introduce the students to the large native species by having them pass one from hand to hand around the class. Only one person was ever bitten, he averred, and many a character was strengthened.

Numbers of his former students have achieved national and international recognition in the field of entomology, and he inspired and endeared himself to many other entomologists and arachnologists, among whom I was one of the privileged. Although our

connections were intermittent, they spanned some 45 years. I first came under his influence as a high school student when he took me on a personally guided tour of his "tarantula hill" south of Fayetteville. He had at one time the burrows of as many as 80 *Dugesiella hentzi* marked in this locale, and he recorded their habits and life history data as the colony waxed and waned. About 25 years later he obligingly offered to share his laboratory with me and for nearly three years provided a daily fare of wit and wisdom.

In the 1930's he built a house on a spacious lot on the outskirts of Fayetteville upon which he collected and planted many of the lesser common species of Ozark trees and plants. He also transplanted some of the native tarantulas there for easily accessible observation. To avoid the disturbance of wandering dogs and children he surrounded the entire property with a four-foot high stone wall, one of the iron gate entrances of which was wrought in the form of an orb web with its spider in place. He outlived some of the trees he planted and all of his tarantulas, but the garden still retains its character and beauty. Such a long career as his may be essential to study the life history of such long-lived creatures. His is probably the only complete life history study of *Dugesiella hentzi* one which lasted 24 years from eclosion to death in the specimens he cultured.

The considerable arachnological library that Professor Baerg had accumulated through his more than 60 years of work, containing many now-rare reprints, has been donated to the University of Arkansas Library where they are now bound and have become a part of that library's rare book collection.

William B. Peck

#### LIST OF ARACHNOLOGICAL PUBLICATIONS - W. J. BAERG

1922. Regarding the habits of tarantulas and the effects of their poison. *Sci. Monthly*, 14(5):482-489.  
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 1929. Cocoon making by the tarantula. *Ann. Entomol. Soc. Amer.*, 22(2):161-167.  
 1934. Some poisonous arthropods of southwestern Mexico. *Ann. Entomol. Soc. Amer.*, 27:527-532.  
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 1945. The black widow and the tarantula. *Trans. Connecticut Acad. Arts Sci.*, 36:99-113.  
 1948. The black widow. *Pests (for April)*:16-17.  
 1954. The brown widow and the black widow in Jamaica. *Ann. Entomol. Soc. Amer.*, 47(1):52-60.  
 1954. Regarding the biology of the common Jamaican scorpion. *Ann. Entomol. Soc. Amer.*, 47(2):272-276.  
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 1959. The black widow and five other venomous spiders in the United States. *Univ. Arkansas Agri. Expt. Sta. Bul.*, 608. 42 p.  
 1961. Scorpions: Biology and effect of their venom. *Univ. Arkansas Agri. Expt. Sta. Bul.*, 649. 34 p.