

Peter Walter Claassen

March 17, 1886 — August 16, 1937

Peter Walter Claassen was born at Hillsboro, Kansas, March 17, 1886. He began his collegiate work at McPherson College but transferred to the University of Kansas, from which institution he was graduated with the degree of Bachelor of Arts in 1913. Although his major work as an undergraduate was in chemistry, on graduation he accepted a position as Assistant State Entomologist of Kansas and remained at the University of Kansas, continuing graduate work in his newly chosen field. He was granted a master's degree in 1915. He came to Cornell University in the autumn of 1915 as assistant in general biology and took graduate work in entomology, receiving his doctor's degree in 1918. For one year he returned to the University of Kansas as assistant professor of entomology, but after receiving his doctor's degree he retained his connection with Cornell University for the remainder of his life. During the academic year 1924-25 while on leave from the University, he taught at Tsing Hua College, Peking, China, where he reorganized the work of that institution in the biological sciences. In the scientific societies of his field, he played an active part.

The subject of his doctor's thesis was an ecological study of the insect inhabitants of the cattail, in the course of which work he uncovered many interesting and important facts about the numerous insect species which invade this plant. Later he undertook special studies in the Plecoptera or stone flies, his papers on this order of insects including a monograph of the nymphal stages. Shortly before his death he completed a manuscript for a catalogue of the stone flies of the world. Although chiefly interested in the taxonomic aspects of these problems he never lost sight of the possible economic applications of entomology. This is shown in his work on the grasshoppers of Kansas and his studies upon the animal life in streams polluted by milk and factory wastes.

This cold array of facts about his vocational and avocational activities fails to indicate the nature of the life and work of Professor Claassen. Not only was he a skilled observer in scientific fields, but he was outstanding as a teacher. His strength in teaching, whether formally in classes or elsewhere, rested chiefly on his happy disposition, his jovial informality, and his friendly attitude to all persons at all times. He was known affectionately to his friends and associates by his nickname and the attribute which led to this, which might easily have been mistaken by those who knew him less well as a lack of dignity, in no degree reduced the affectionate appreciation of his merit as a student and teacher. Few men have surpassed or equaled him as a friend of all his associates of whatsoever rank, and because he showed himself a friend, others were friendly toward him. In social affairs among his associates

and students he was a natural leader. That leadership was as natural to him as breath itself, and he showed unusual skill in using it to the advancement of his research and teaching.

The sudden death of Professor Claassen in Ithaca, New York, on August 16, 1937, followed closely on a trip which he took to the Pacific Coast while on sabbatic leave, on which he visited many old friends and made many new ones. On this trip, as usual, he assiduously collected insects of his chosen Order and took every possible occasion better to prepare himself for his later work by consultations with those in similar work in numerous institutions across the country. He seemingly looked forward to many more years of service for Cornell University, but these hopes were blasted. By his death Cornell University loses a loyal supporter, an ardent worker, and a friendly spirit. His many friends among students, faculty and fellow citizens mourn his death but are happier and better because of their association with him. He leaves a wife and two children who are inspired by the memory of his life.

The Faculty of Cornell University records its appreciation of the many years of service of their former associate and the sense of loss which members of the faculty feel in his death. The Faculty extends to members of the immediate family of Professor Claassen this expression of its sympathy in their loss.

Resources: Faculty Records, p. 2004 Resolutions of the Trustees and Faculty of Cornell University, November, Nineteen Hundred And Thirty-Seven