In memoriam: Leo Hickey

Yale UniversityYale University

Leo Hickey, a leading paleobotanist and Renaissance man who led Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History from 1982 to 1987, died on Feb. 9. He was 72. The cause was melanoma, said his wife of 45 years, Judy.

A wake is planned for Thursday, Feb. 14, at Sisk Brothers Funeral Home in Hamden from 5 to 8 p.m. The funeral will take place 11 a.m. Friday, Feb. 15, at St. Thomas More Chapel in New Haven.

An expert in stratigraphy, the plant fossil record, and the history of life broadly, Hickey from the start melded botanical and geological approaches to understand plant evolution. He revolutionized the study of fossil leaves by making a comprehensive study of leaf vein patterns in living plants and using the detailed patterns he found to identify and classify the fossils. By analyzing the sediments in which the earliest fossils of flowering plants were preserved, he could reconstruct the ecological setting in which this preeminent group of plants evolved.

"Leo was an internationally-recognized leader in paleobotany," said Jay Ague, his colleague and the current chair of Yale's Department of Geology and Geophysics. "It is an understatement to say that the field has suffered a tremendous loss with his passing.

Hickey joined the Yale faculty in the early 1980s from the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History, where he began as a postdoctoral fellow and became curator and research scientist in paleobiology. While at the Smithsonian he served as chief scientist for four major permanent exhibits that have educated and

attracted millions of visitors.

When he joined Yale's Department of Geology and Geophysics as a professor in 1982, he also took on the directorship of the Peabody, and during his tenure there significantly modernized its operations. From 2003 to 2006 he served as chair of the Department of Geology and Geophysics.

All along he forged ahead with his research, producing more than 80 scientific papers and six books.

Inspired by fieldwork, especially in the northern Rocky Mountains and the Canadian Arctic, Hickey led numerous collecting expeditions, often with students in tow. These trips led to important discoveries about mass extinction at the end of the Age of Dinosaurs and the vegetation of a period of global warmth 50-150 million years ago.

Said Ague, "Many of his students have gone on to be scientific leaders in their own right, a testament to Leo's rigorous and caring mentoring."

Leo Hickey was born in Philadelphia on April 26, 1940. He attended a minor seminary in Indiana for high school and graduated from Villanova University in 1962. He received his Ph.D. in geology from Princeton University in 1967.

A year later he married Judy McKendry. Through the 1970s they and their three sons lived in Washington D.C., while spending several summers in Montana and Wyoming for fieldwork.

Even in the roughest field conditions, amid rattlesnakes and polar bears, Hickey maintained certain formalities, his family said. These included a morning shave, a clean khaki shirt, a brimmed field hat, chocolate chip cookies at lunch, and a bourbon in the evening.

Field trips were non-stop learning opportunities for Hickey, and not only in the realms of geology and botany. He was fascinated by early Christian history, frontier lore, Celtic culture, formal logic, and classical languages.

In 2009 Hickey was awarded the Moore Medal by the Society for Sedimentary Geology for his major insights into plant ecology and evolution, insights enabled by his integration of geological and biological approaches to the plant fossil record.

After his directorship of the Peabody, Hickey remained a curator there and helped develop seven exhibits, including the new Cretaceous Garden that surrounds the Torosaurus statue facing Whitney Avenue.

Even in the last months of his life he continued to work, writing to a colleague from his hospital room prior to brain surgery, "Here are the two specimens that I asked about this morning: Sequoia longifolia Lesquereux, 1878, Plate 61, figures 28 and 29 … They have come to take me away now so there is no time for further comment."

Hickey is survived by his wife, Judy; his sons Geoffrey, Damian, and Jason; three grandchildren, Ephraim, Tallulah, and Ellery; a sister, Patricia; an aunt, Marguerite; and numerous nieces and nephews.

Said Ague, “We remember Leo as a loyal friend and inspiring scholar, teacher, and mentor.”

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