

STEWART SPRINGER (1909-1991)

As we pass through life we are rarely touched by an individual who greatly influences the direction we are headed. A family member of spouse, a best friend, a teacher -- if we are fortunate, one of these may play a significant role in our development. I was blessed to have known such a man, a man who combined all of these roles into one. For although Stewart Springer was not a blood relative, he treated me like a son and I grew to love him as a father.

When Stew retired in Gainesville I was excited since Stew had been my professional idol for years. As a young graduate student in ichthyology I quickly became aware of Stew's international reputation as the dean of his field, the study of sharks. I recall the first time I corresponded with Stew and erred in addressing the letters to Dr. Springer. Surely my transgression could be excused, for who would have thought that a man so well published and held in such esteem could have accomplished this without a Ph.D. I requested a series of his publications - far too many, in retrospect, for a brash young graduate student who had rarely published and had little to offer in exchange -- and asked his opinion on my plans for doctoral research. Stew's quick response, plus publications, was unexpectedly informative. Without dashing my spirit he indicated that my dissertation plans were likely to keep me in school until the next century, and that I might consider a somewhat less ambitious study. Thus Stew's first words of advice to me were particularly significant because they saved my marriage!

A number of years later Stew took me underwing and for eleven years happily shared with me his enormous knowledge of sharks and natural history. Stew was a tremendous story

teller, not in the sense of yarns but in his ability to recount one-time experiences with an amazing amount of detail decades after the fact. He recently confided to me that the most frustrating ramification of the aging process was the gradual loss of detail in his memory. To him this caused far greater pain than his deteriorating lungs and heart. Stew taught me more than any university professor, and I am honored that he so freely allowed me to tap into his life time of observations.

As a friend. Stew was warm, compassionate, and caring. I am still amazed that two people so different in age -- he was 45 years my senior -- could find so much common ground. In between measuring sharks in his study we discussed everything imaginable, from Civil War strategy to ornamental trees, from national politics to the unbearable state of Atlanta Braves baseball (alas, he missed the World Series!). We shared a passion for beer in frosted glasses and his wife Vergie's garlic dip, a heavenly concoction guaranteed to linger on one's breath for 12 hours or more. We discussed the merits of imported vs. domestic kippered snacks, and after much experimentation decided that Norwegian couldn't be beat. Perhaps the aroma was closer to the sharks we were measuring! I used to think that the politics of "old timers" were uniformly situated somewhere to the right of Jesse Helms; to my delight, Stew and I found ourselves in nearly total ideological agreement. I watched in awe as Stew dashed off a series of letters of protest or approval, all literary masterpieces, to a series of unsuspecting politicians and industrial conglomerates. One of my favorites was the one he forwarded to a tuna fish cannery, bemoaning the degradation of a once-fine product!

Stew did not confine his letter writing to strangers. His periodic letters to family and friends, often shared with me, were warm, insightful, and laced with philosophical messages couched in humor. His understated wit was nearly as dry as the occasional martini we shared -- his martinis always had more olives than vermouth!

Stew was a hands-on man. He was largely self-taught, and it was truly a tribute to his abilities that he was able to reach the top of a profession that puts such great stock in academic credentials. He felt that one had to touch a critter to really understand its biology, and I will never forget his ability to identify species of shark by feel during his last years when his eyesight began to fail! This shouldn't have come as a surprise to me, because it was Stew that discovered that embryonic sandtiger sharks possess teeth by getting bitten while sticking his fingers into the uterus of a large pregnant female!

Stew was a quiet, sharing man who always thought the best of everyone. He did not look for ulterior motives in others because he never had any himself. He was generous and monetarily supported a series of charities and causes. His mail always had pleas from charities that somehow had gotten his name. He cared deeply for Vergie and all his children, and was especially proud of his grandchildren. Stew followed their successes and failures, and had real opinions about how they were progressing, but offered advice only when asked. We will miss Stew greatly. He was my friend and mentor, and he will not likely be replaced in my lifetime. Someday I hope to see you again, pal. I'm sure the fishing's good wherever you are.

George H. Burgess

