

# Malcolm Carnegie McKenna, 77, Paleontologist



Malcolm Carnegie McKenna, Frick Curator Emeritus at the American Museum of Natural History, and Professor Emeritus of Earth and Environmental Sciences at Columbia University, died on March 3 in Boulder, Colo. He was 77.

The author of hundreds of research papers collected in over a dozen volumes, Dr. McKenna was a world-renowned and influential paleontologist. He specialized in the history of mammalian evolution, but also published interdisciplinary work in cosmology, astrophysics, geology and molecular biology. He spent his 41-year career at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. After retirement, he had adjunct positions at the University of Colorado and the University of Wyoming.

A Fellow of New York's Explorers Club, Dr. McKenna organized annual American Museum field expeditions to the western United States, Patagonia, the Andes, China, Mongolia, Greenland and the Canadian Arctic. He taught and mentored over 30 Ph.D. students in paleontology. The prominent evolutionist and writer Stephen Jay Gould once said that everything he ever learned about mammals, he learned from Malcolm McKenna.

McKenna was awarded the Romer-Simpson Medal of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontologists in 2001, and the Gold Medal of the Paleontological Society of America in 1992, the top honors in his profession.

McKenna was a proponent of a new classification paradigm, called cladistics, introduced in the 1960s. Through his affiliation with Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Lab, he was also an early supporter of continental drift theory, not yet widely accepted until after magnetic data of ocean floor samples were analyzed. He delighted most in interdisciplinary studies and exhorted his students and colleagues to synthesize knowledge as much as specialize in it.

In 1964, at the height of the cold war, he visited Mongolia as a tourist in order to arrange for the resumption of field work in the Gobi Desert initiated by the American Museum's expeditions of the 1920s that were led by Roy Chapman Andrews and subsidized in part by Childs and Henry Clay Frick. These museum expeditions were finally resumed in the 1990s, resulting in remarkable fossil discoveries.

McKenna's life's work was a new *Classification of Mammals Above the Species Level*—both living and extinct—that in 1997 he and Susan Bell of the American Museum of Natural History published in both book and database form. This succeeded the 1945 scientific classification of G. G. Simpson, his predecessor at the museum.

McKenna's current research concerned how small mammals and other animals survived the infrared 'baking event' theorized to have been caused by sub-orbital debris in the first few hours after the asteroid impact that wiped out the larger dinosaurs.

As an active private pilot in the 1950s, McKenna would often do field work from the air, navigating the western United States solely by geologic features, sometimes landing his Cessna on remote dirt roads in Wyoming. From 1967 until 1975, he was an avid runner of rivers in the Colorado River basin, participating in a 100th anniversary John Wesley Powell expedition in 1969. He twice rowed a wooden boat through the Grand Canyon in the early 1970s. He had a prodigious cartographic memory and was an expert on the geology and fossil beds in the western

United States, especially in Wyoming.

While traveling on an Arctic ice-breaker in the summer of 2000, Dr. McKenna and his wife took pictures of the North Pole's lack of sea ice. The pictures were prominently featured on the New York Times' front page, on the David Letterman show, as well as in Time Magazine and elsewhere, bringing global warming issues to wider attention. In his later years, McKenna traveled the world giving enthralling lectures on earth history and the fossil and biological evidence of evolution.

Never one to pass up a little mischief or to tweak authority, McKenna loved off-color limericks and good practical jokes, such as electrifying a toilet seat, building an unauthorized telephone line or funding an underground high-school newspaper. After winning a late-night poker game against a Wyoming rancher, McKenna and his field crew posted signs claiming the ranch as the property of the Regents of the University of California, which led to a friendly feud involving forklifts, trees, weather balloons and mail boxes. As recently as 2003, McKenna attended a public meeting at the Museum of Northern Arizona in disguise to help demonstrate that official deception was in the works.

Malcolm McKenna was born in Pomona, Calif., in 1930, the son of Donald and Bernice McKenna. He grew up in Claremont, Calif., where he attended Webb School. As a child, his imagination was fired by H. Rider Haggard's adventure tales. He installed a working water system in his large tree house. He was self-taught in electronics, physics, astronomy, chemistry, and metallurgy, which had been the family business for generations. As a teenager in 1945, McKenna built the first homemade television set in his town, using a WWII surplus radar tube. He was a ham radio enthusiast.

The founder of Webb School's paleontology museum, Raymond Alf, inspired McKenna as a teenager to become a paleontologist. At age 17, McKenna discovered his first fossil titanotherium skull, nicknamed "Betsy," in Nebraska. McKenna initially attended Caltech and Pomona College, and then received his Ph.D. from the University of California at Berkeley.

In addition to his scientific activities, Dr. McKenna was a board member of numerous educational institutions, including the Flat Rock Brook Nature Center, the Elizabeth Morrow School and Dwight-Englewood Schools, all in Englewood, N.J.; the Raymond M. Alf Museum at the Webb School in Claremont, Calif.; the Museum of Northern Arizona in Flagstaff, Ariz.; and the Lemur Conservation Foundation in Myakka City, Fla.

Mr. McKenna's great-grandmother, Anna Hogan McKenna, was a cousin of Andrew Carnegie. His father, Donald, was one of the founding trustees of Claremont McKenna College in Claremont, Calif.

Dr. McKenna is survived by his wife of 55 years, Priscilla McKenna, of Boulder, Colo.; four children and their spouses, Douglas McKenna and Judith Houlding, of Boulder, Colo.; Andrew and Jacquie McKenna, of Boulder, Colo.; Katharine McKenna and Mark Braunstein, of Woodstock, N.Y.; Bruce and Maureen McKenna, of Santa Fe, N.M.; and nine grandchildren, Caitlin, Alison, Madeleine, Ian, Conor, Eliza, Dónal, Alexandra and Juliana McKenna.

Donations in memory of Malcolm McKenna may be sent to: The Malcolm C. McKenna Goler Research Fund, Raymond M. Alf Museum of Paleontology, 1175 West Baseline Rd., Claremont, CA 91711.