Memo to Lawrence Whitcomb 1900–1984

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Dr. Lawrence Whitcomb, distinguished teacher of geology, a student of Paleozoic stratigraphy and paleontology, an independent thinker, and a man of great courage, died at the Luther Crest Retirement Village, Allentown, Pennsylvania, on September 6, 1984.

Larry was born on April 27, 1900, in Brookline, Massachusetts, the son of the late Lawrence and Katherine Newell Whitcomb. After attending elementary school and high school in Brookline, he entered Brown University in 1918 and chose to major in geology. He received the Bachelor of Philosophy degree from Brown in 1922. After a brief stint in the business world, he returned to geology and entered the graduate program at Princeton University. He received the Master of Arts degree from Princeton in 1928 and the Doctor of Philosophy degree in 1930.

Larry joined the faculty of Lehigh in the fall of 1930 and retired in 1965 after 35 years of active service. No other member of the Lehigh Geology Department faculty has served for this long a period.

Larry was widely regarded at Lehigh as an outstanding teacher, both by students and faculty. Students often remarked on the ease with which they could take notes in his lectures because the lectures were so well organized and so well presented. Because of his ability as a lecturer and his rapport with students, he taught one or more of the beginning courses in geology during each of his 70 semesters at Lehigh. His courses were popular, and some thousands of students took at least one course from him during the period of his tenure. He also taught undergraduate courses in historical geology and paleontology and graduate courses in advanced paleontology and the history of geology. These were equally well received. His lectures on the development of the geologic time scale in history of geology can only be described as superb. In recognition of his skill and dedication as a teacher, he was awarded the Lindback Distinguished Teaching Award in 1964.

Larry was extremely active in assisting student organizations. For many years he was the faculty advisor to Cyanide, the honor society for juniors. Cyanide was charged with the responsibility of assisting the freshman class in student governance; thus, as an adjunct duty, Larry served as faculty advisor to the freshman cabinet. He resigned his post with Cyanide to become the faculty advisor to Arcadia, the student council. He held that post for 8 years until his retirement in 1965. He was also a member of Omicron Delta Kappa (a society of student leaders and selected faculty), and an honorary member of Scabbard and Blade, the honorary society of R.O.T.C.

In 1961 the class yearbook was dedicated to him in recognition of his “service, devotion, and enthusiasm.”

During his professional career, Larry published 24 papers dealing either with Paleozoic stratigraphy and paleontology or the teaching of geology. Four of his investigations deserve special comment.

His Ph.D. dissertation, published in part by the Pennsylvania Geological Survey in 1932, was a careful study of the fossil population of some Ordovician limestones in Clinton County, Pennsylvania. He noted a striking similarity to the fossils found in an Ordovician section in Shropshire, England. This was long before general acceptance of
the idea of continental drift and the advent of the new plate tectonics. Nevertheless, as a consequence of his discovery, Larry was an ardent champion of continental drift even before 1930. At that time this was scientific heresy, at least in the United States.

During his early years at Lehigh, he became interested in the possibility of using ancient volcanic ash layers or bentonites as a correlation tool. He demonstrated that this indeed was possible for the Ordovician of Pennsylvania and Maryland and published several definitive papers. He was the first American stratigrapher to make such a demonstration. His papers on bentonite were required reading for me while I was a graduate student at The Johns Hopkins University.

At about the same time, Larry became acquainted with the "Spitzenberg Conglomerate," consisting of conglomerate, cross-bedded sandstone, and red shale capping a conical hill near Lenhartsville, Pennsylvania, and resting unconformably on the Ordovician Martinsburg slates and graywackes. No fossils had been found in the Spitzenberg, but it was generally assumed to be Ordovician. On the basis of lithologic similarity with the nearby Upper Triassic conglomerates and sandstones of the Newark Series, Larry suggested that the Spitzenberg conglomerate might be of Late Triassic age. This sparked a lively controversy that lasted for nearly 40 years. Recently, a few fossils have been discovered in the deposit that show it to be of Ordovician age.

Larry is also well known for his monograph *Geology of the Willsboro Quadrangle, New York*, written jointly with Professor Arthur Buddington of Princeton University.

Larry was a Fellow of the Geological Society of America, a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and a member of the Society of Sigma Xi. He was past president of the Pennsylvania Academy of Science, and in 1972 was named an honorary lifetime member of the academy. He is a former editor of the Eastern Section, National Association of Geology Teachers, and former associate editor of the *Journal of Geological Education*.

While a student at Brown, Larry served in Battery A, 103rd Field Artillery, Rhode Island National Guard.

Larry was the husband of Ruth Copeland Whitcomb and the father of Howard Russell Whitcomb (also a member of the Lehigh University faculty) and Sarah Whitcomb Keen of Washington, Pennsylvania. There are six grandchildren.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF LAWRENCE WHITCOMB