Memorial to Victor Ben Meen
1910-1971

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Victor Ben Meen died in Toronto, Canada, on January 7, 1971. Although his death followed a long struggle against cancer, it came as a great shock to his family and friends.

Dr. Meen was born in Toronto, Canada, on July 1, 1910, the son of Benjamin and Mary Tidy Meen. His father was a prospector and mine developer, so Vic became interested in geology at an early age. His entire schooling was in Toronto, including the University of Toronto, where he received his B.A. in 1932 and Ph.D. in mineralogy in 1936. Upon graduation, Vic was appointed lecturer at the University of Toronto and scientific assistant at the Royal Ontario Museum. He continued this dual role throughout most of his career, advancing to full professor at the university and to head of the Earth Sciences Division of the museum. He resigned from the university in 1959, and in 1964 was appointed chief mineralogist at the museum, a position he held until his untimely death.

After his first year of teaching, Dr. Meen went to the University of Minnesota for postdoctoral work under Frank Grout, and after his second year was sent to the Smithsonian Institution for further study under W. F. Foshag and E. P. Henderson.

During the summers of the years 1936 to 1941, Dr. Meen worked as a field geologist for the Ontario Department of Mines, and several of his early publications were geologic field reports. While doing his postdoctoral work at the University of Minnesota, Dr. Meen advanced his interest and skill in mineral chemistry, and for some years at the University of Toronto he taught a course in mineral and rock analysis. Because of this, during the war years (from 1942 to 1944), he was assigned to the Provincial Assay Office in Toronto, first as assistant and then acting provincial assayer. During this period he continued to teach at the university, and was assistant director and then director of the Royal Ontario Museum of Mineralogy.

During his stay at the Smithsonian, Dr. Meen became keenly interested in meteorites, and it is in this area that he made one of his major contributions through his field studies of Canadian Shield impact craters.

In February 1950 Frederick W. Chubb, a prospector of Whitby, Ontario, was looking over some aerial photographs released a short time earlier by the Royal Canadian Air Force, which provided the first aerial views of the largely uncharted northern wilderness. Chubb became quite excited over a large crater-shaped feature seen on a photograph of a section of the peninsula between Hudson Bay, Hudson Strait, and Ungava Bay. In the extreme northwest of the province of Quebec, the crater lay at 61°17' N. and 73°40' W. He brought the photograph to Dr. Meen, who reasoned that
it was probably an impact crater, and its 11,000-ft-diameter made it the largest known on earth to that time. Chubb, on the other hand, hoped it might be of volcanic origin, possibly a diamond-bearing kimberlite diatreme. Because of the remote possibility that the crater might have commercial value, Meen decided to organize a privately financed expedition. He obtained funding from the Globe and Daily Mail Publishing Company of Toronto and from six private citizens. In July 1950 he carried out a preliminary field examination of the crater. This confirmed that the crater was probably of impact origin, although no meteoritic material was found.

A year later a joint National Geographic Society-Royal Ontario Museum expedition allowed Meen and a party of five to spend four weeks at the crater. Again no meteoritic material was found, but a magnetic anomaly was located between the highest peaks on the crater rim, thus confirming that the crater was of impact origin. First known as Chubb Crater, this feature is now known as the New Quebec Crater.

In 1954 an expedition to investigate Merewether Crater in northern Canada was organized by Dr. Meen and jointly sponsored by the National Geographic Society, the Royal Ontario Museum, and the U.S. Air Force.

The first known photograph of this crater was made in 1943 by Colonel Arthur F. Merewether of the U.S. Air Force, who chanced to fly over it. Although he took the picture, he forgot the location and later could guess only that it was in Labrador. Using Merewether’s one picture as the only major clue, Dr. Meen searched the photographs of the Air Photo Library of Canada and finally found a topographically similar area, although the crater was not recognizable. In 1953 Meen made a search by air and located the crater. In 1954 he led an eight-man team to the crater to carry out field work from July 23 to August 19. A magnetometer survey was made, but the results were inconclusive. Origin by vulcanism, collapse, glacial kettle, and meteorite impact were considered, and the latter origin was considered most probable, although no meteoritic material was found.

Dr. Meen extended his interest in extraterrestrial bodies to planetaria when, in the early 1950’s, he became involved in planning for a planetarium for the Royal Ontario Museum. During his extensive travels he visited all major planetaria, and, according to Donald A. MacRae, chairman of the Astronomy Department of the University of Toronto, he was perhaps the best informed person in the world on planetarium planning.

The study of gems was the third major thrust of Dr. Meen’s varied and productive career. Largely through his efforts, the gem collection at the Royal Ontario Museum grew from practically nothing to one of the best in the world. His interest in gems was broadly based, and he conceived an excellent research program which he outlined as follows:

Many gem deposits are located in difficult terrain, in the past often infested with dangerous animals and fever; recovery operations have been small, in many cases carried out by single individuals and attended by secrecy concerning the nature and amount of gem material found. The gem dealer is not interested in or conversant with conditions under which the gems formed, and the economic geologist is little concerned with deposits in which recovery is so sporadic as to defy modern mass-production methods.
This combination of circumstances has resulted in poor and incorrect descriptions of the geological occurrences of many gem deposits. As a geologist, mineralogist, and gemmologist, I have embarked on a project to visit all major gem deposits of the world in order to provide an authoritative geological and gemmological report of each.¹

The project was begun in 1960 in northern Burma by a study of the ruby and sapphire deposits in the Moguk area. With the aid of a grant from the National Geographic Society, it continued in late 1964 and early 1965 in Japan, Cambodia, Thailand, India, and Ceylon. At this point, continuance of the project was postponed because of an unexpected opportunity to study the crown jewels of Iran. Upon completion of the Iran study, Meen returned to his investigation of world gem deposits with a 1970 trip to western Canada and the United States. Because of failing health, he was unable to continue and regrettably most of the information gathered in this study has not been published.

In 1966 Dr. Meen organized and led a Royal Ontario Museum team to study the crown jewels of Iran in Teheran. This major effort produced the first documentation of the world’s greatest gem collection, a collection that for most of its history had been virtually unknown outside of the court circles of Teheran. The Royal Ontario Museum team spent three months in Teheran studying the collection, and the results of their study were published in a handsome volume *The Crown Jewels of Iran*, authored by Dr. Meen and Dr. A. D. Tushingham, published by the University of Toronto Press.²

The foregoing chronicles briefly the highlights of a scientist’s varied and productive career, but in no way conveys the great warmth of Vic Meen. I had the privilege of forming a close personal friendship with Vic in the early 1950s. His ready smile, hearty laugh, and great sense of humor made our all too infrequent meetings events to look forward to.

He will be sorely missed by his friends and colleagues all over the world, but most of all by his lovely wife Thelma and three daughters, Heather (Mrs. David Crampton), Beverley (Mrs. Peter Casson), and Sharon (Mrs. George Constable). Vic was extraordinarily devoted to his family and they to him. He is also survived by his father and mother, a brother, Arthur, and two sisters—Mrs. W. E. White and Mrs. J. F. Johnson.


² A complete bibliography of Meen’s work may be obtained by ordering NAPS Document Number 01714 from National Auxiliary Publication Service of the ASIS, c/o CCM Information Corporation, 866 Third Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10022.