

Alex Hollaender: Recollections by ORNL staff

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 29, 2017)

Carolyn Krause brings us part two of the series on renowned scientist Alexander Hollaender, an early Oak Ridger of German descent who often hiked with friends and coworkers in the Cumberland Mountains. He enjoyed locating fossils and even brought a huge one off the mountain and installed it in the lobby of the Biology Complex's Building 9207, where it stayed for years. Enjoy the results of Carolyn's research.

...

After Alexander Hollaender and his wife Henrietta moved to Oak Ridge in 1947, he devised "a plan for a new Biology Division, which was given space in buildings initially constructed for chemical reprocessing at the Y-12 Plant," according to the Vol. 25, 1992-93 issue of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory REVIEW. "Hollaender was opportunistic and open to new ideas.

"He originally thought the effects of radiation on the genes of all species could be determined by studies of simple cells in microorganisms and fruit flies (*Drosophila*). But when he heard of the pioneering work on the genetic effects of radiation on mice by Bill and Liane (Lee) Russell at Bar Harbor, Maine, he realized that the results of mouse studies might be more applicable to humans than the results of fruit fly studies.

"He conceived of starting a large mouse genetics project, however risky in terms of the cost and the long time needed for useful results. So when Russell was thinking of leaving Bar Harbor, Hollaender hired him and his wife Liane to set up a genetics laboratory, dubbed the Mouse House."

In an interview held earlier this month, Lee Russell said that Bill, who had received several offers, originally wanted to work at Brown University. But Brown's rules forbade the hiring of a new employee's spouse. "The reason Bill chose to accept the job at Oak Ridge was that, unlike other institutions trying to attract him, Hollaender's new division had no nepotism rules," Lee said, adding that Hollaender allowed her, as Bill's wife, to conduct independent research while she was earning her Ph.D. degree in genetics.

In the July 1996 edition of the journal *Genetics*, former ORNL Biology Division researchers R. C. (Jack) von Borstel and Charles M. Steinberg wrote in their essay "Alexander Hollaender: Myth and Mensch," that Hollaender's "first problem was to get the money to make the Biology Division grow. The fuel to keep the division expanding came from paying scientists about 10 percent less than the average for ORNL."

Lee Russell said that "salaries back then were at the whim of the division director. A few decades later, a framework for pay scales was developed. Alex paid the spouses a lot less. It was ridiculous how little I was making."

She acknowledged that Hollaender paid the scientists as little as he could. "Some people screamed that they wanted raises and got them," she recalled. "Bill never opened his mouth. He certainly never tried to get a raise. He had a pitifully low salary."

Almost every senior scientist in the Biology Division was given a yearlong sabbatical. "Bill didn't get a sabbatical because he didn't publish as many papers as Alex wanted," Lee said. Nevertheless, both Bill and Lee later won Enrico Fermi Awards from the Department of Energy and were elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

"Alex was a little bit Machiavellian," Lee said, "because he purposely tried to put people in competition with each other to stimulate productivity, but it led to some unpleasant relationships."

Hollaender often took foreign visitors and foreign postdoctoral biologists, mostly from South America, Japan and Europe, on hikes on Sunday mornings in the Cumberland Mountains. He

Alex Hollaender: Recollections by ORNL staff

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 29, 2017)

and his guests found many fossils in the rock layers sandwiching coal beds in the mountains.

Some of the fossils, such as a petrified tree trunk later displayed in Biology Division buildings, were so heavy that Hollaender needed help from his guests in carrying the fossils, or parts of fossils that were later glued together. Hollaender, according to von Borstel and Steinberg, gave away some fossils "as gifts to visiting scientists from around the world, whether or not they had room in their luggage."

In 1951 Hollaender was the first ORNL division director to organize an annual research conference. It was held in the old Oak Ridge Public Library across from the Alexander Inn Guest House. After that the Biology Division's annual research conferences were held at the Mountain View Hotel in Gatlinburg.

Lee noted that Henrietta had a wonderful art collection that was on display in their house at 48 Outer Dr. "She picked up paintings and some sculptures in their travels," Lee added. "She left the art collection in St. Louis, where she was from. She also had mastered the art of the putdown.

She made quick and smart judgments about people." Many division staff members were involved in the arts in the community. Biochemist Waldo Cohn founded the Oak Ridge Symphony Orchestra, and Hollaender was the first president of the Arts Council of Oak Ridge.

Biology Division staff have stories to tell about Hollaender. Some noted that he drove a 1948 Ford for many years. Others recall that Kim Atwood could impersonate Hollaender by talking with his heavy German accent. At parties people would frequently say to Kim, "Do a Hollaender!"

In the early 1960s Hollaender, the Russells, technician Jean Bangham, and other staff of the Biology Division staged a sit-in at the McCrory store in Downtown Oak Ridge to protest McCrory's policy of refusing to serve lunch to black customers. "We entered the store, got seats at the lunch counter, welcomed blacks in the store, and asked them to sit and eat with us," said Bangham. "I was seated next to Dr. Hollaender and he asked me, 'What does one order in this place?'"

Lee recalled the incident known as the Pink Room revolution. The building blocks in one restroom for women were painted pink. Female technicians frequented this restroom, which had books of detective stories in a little library case that the women placed next to a couch.

Hollaender asked his secretaries to check the Pink Room periodically to find out who is tarrying (staying longer than the standard coffee break) and who is rumored to be pregnant. That way he could plan ahead, knowing that a few women might leave the division workforce in several months.

When the technicians realized they were being spied on, they became quite upset.

As they did every summer, Bangham and her colleagues watched for the first bloom of the magnolia grandiflora tree planted near the Mouse House. One day they enjoyed seeing the lovely first blossom, but the next day they noticed it had disappeared.

As word spread, Lee Russell reported to Bangham and others that she had just seen a magnolia blossom on the desk of Hollaender's secretary. He had picked it to give to her."

...

Thank you Carolyn for an excellent series and the insights of Hollaender's coworkers.

Alex Hollaender: Recollections by ORNL staff

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 29, 2017)



Alexander Hollaender



Bill and Liane Russell in the Mouse House

Alex Hollaender: Recollections by ORNL staff

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 29, 2017)



This ancient fossilized palm tree, also known as a scale tree or lycopod, stood for decades in the lobby of Building 9207, the main Biology Division building. Alexander Hollaender and his group of Sunday hikers found it in the Cumberland Mountains and had it brought to Oak Ridge. The fossil now resides at the UT Arboretum.

Alex Hollaender: Recollections by ORNL staff

(As published in The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking column on March 29, 2017)



Gene Bangham