

## VALE NEV WALTERS



**Plate 1.** The winners of the Division of Building Research Great Bike Race in 1976. From the left: Graeme Keene, John Thornton, Nev Walters and Judy Creffield.

Neville E.M. (Nev) Walters, who worked as mycologist/timber pathologist/timber preserver with CSIRO Division of Forest Products, has died, aged 88.

Despite completing a law course and articling for five years, Nev's heart was not in that type of work. So he resigned and found a job teaching English to adults in Germany. This was in 1938. When he got to Germany, he found that '... the Germans had created a false exchange rate, which resulted in my salary being cut in half, and ... they took much of the rest in tax'. He had insufficient funds to pay for lodging and basic requirements. To survive he learned to identify and supplement his meagre rations with mushrooms collected in the Black

Forest. 'They kept me alive with a bit to spare.' This was the start of his love affair with the fungi.

He escaped Germany after the borders were sealed in 1939 and served in the British Army. Because of less than perfect eyesight, he was assigned to the much-loathed Pay Corps—ironically in view of his eyesight being essential for his critical examination of macroscopic and microscopic features of fungi. After escaping by ship as Singapore was falling to the Japanese Army, he was taken to Fremantle. During three weeks shore leave in Melbourne he met his future wife, Jean. The war kept them apart until 1946 when he returned to Jean and enrolled for a science degree in botany at the University of Melbourne.



**Plate 2.** Nev examining *Amanita muscaria*. Printed with permission of Leader Community Newspapers.

After graduating in 1950 and being hired by CSIRO, he returned to England to work for one year at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the Commonwealth Mycological Institute. One impetus for the study leave was to learn the Badcock technique for encouraging basidiomycetes to fruit. Upon his return to Melbourne, he began his work with CSIRO Division of Forest Products in the field of timber preservation research. He started with a tiny number of culture collections and eventually established a collection of fungal specimens which was described, by Roy Watling of the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens, as an internationally significant collection of wood inhabiting and wood destroying fungi. The fungal herbarium and culture collections were a labour of love for Nev who was allocated a maximum of 20% of his time to deal with these collections. For many years, the herbarium collection (about 5,000 specimens representing 832 named species in 204 genera) was stored in cabinets over DFP offices in a space Nev referred to as his 'mycelium' (a play on 'my ceiling'). The culture collection of some 2,100 cultures was one of the largest most diverse collections of wood-inhabiting fungi in the world. When, in 1999, changes at CSIRO threatened the long-term viability of the collections, I ensured that the majority of the herbarium material would be protected by expediting its transfer to the Royal Botanic Gardens Melbourne. The culture collection was transferred to Ensis (a

joint venture between CSIRO Forestry and Forest Products and Forest Research Australasia Ltd).

Nev did pioneering research in a number of areas including studies of cooling tower fungi, natural durability, and centre rot/heart rot fungi. Foremost would be his studies with *Serpula lacrymans*, a species that he postulated was imported into Australia on ships, became established in the port area and radiated to other parts of Melbourne and Victoria. Europeans did not expect that *S. lacrymans* would cause any significant problems in Australia. However, Nev showed that, while weatherboard homes were unaffected, brick and stone houses, if poorly ventilated in the subfloor, were susceptible to considerable attack. The sense of humour of this Baptist can be seen in his observation that *Serpula* discriminated on religious grounds—discriminated against Anglicans. He recorded the fungus attacking more Anglican churches than Roman Catholic churches. He believed that the difference was due to the Catholic churches having more activity during the week and hence more ventilation and drier timber than was found in the other denomination's facilities.

Although competent, enthusiastic and full of ideas, he was not encouraged to publish. His list of publications is sparse, but contains some influential works. His 'Australian House Fungi' was widely quoted and reprinted several times. He had a few papers, mostly taxonomic in nature, in the *Transactions of the British Mycological Society* (TBMS), but most articles were in the *Forest Products Newsletter* (FPN). A list of most of his publications follows the text.

Nev retired from CSIRO in 1977. For the next 25 years he dedicated himself to his expanding family and to local schools as a Christian religious education teacher. Numerous letters from appreciative students and parents attest to his influence. As befitting his Welsh heritage, Nev loved to sing. He was a long term choir member and had significant roles in local Gilbert and Sullivan productions.

Nev spent a lot of time in the Scout movement. He was a Scout Master, Senior Scout Master and Rover Leader in the UK, India and Australia. All his scouts would remember practical talks on nature, botany and fungi.

In the 1960s, he built a beach house on telephone poles (well protected against termites and fungi) which incorporated a home made solar hot water heater that is still in service today.

Each year his local newspaper would advertise field walks to be conducted by Nev around Blackburn Lake Reserve in Melbourne. Throngs who learned of the wonders the botanical and fungal worlds attended these nature walks. One of the newspaper pictures promoting the activity is included in this article (Plate 2).

Nev died 13 April 2004. His wife Jean, four sons and nine grandchildren survive him.

### Publications

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**Gary Johnson**

*Forest & Wood Products Research & Development Corporation  
Melbourne, Australia.*