



a LASTING impression

Remembering the life of Miles Peelle

by brad whitehouse

In 1936, Adrian College's new biology professor started teaching classes on the third floor of Old North Hall. The College was just scraping by after six gaunt years of the Depression, and the young 30-year-old had to be clever to make his \$35 equipment budget last all year—not to mention make a monthly salary of less than \$100 cover the needs of his wife and child.

Of course, no one knew at the time that when a new science building was built 24 years later, it would bear this man's name. And perhaps that's as far as the association goes for younger generations: he's the guy with his name on Peelle Hall. But those who actually knew Miles Peelle remember a great

mind and a great teacher, a person who helped shape their lives.

"Prof" Peelle passed away in a nursing home in Brevard, N.C., in December, but his memory lives on. Some people in life just seem to make a lasting impression, and he was one of them.

THE TEACHER

There's an old photograph of Miles Peelle standing in front of a blackboard, which is covered with formulas and diagrams. His unsmiling face is half in shadow, and he's looking directly at the camera in a way that's both penetrating and aloof. If you were misbehaving, this picture would make you squirm.

"He was a very serious person," retired professor Ken Ross said. "He loved his subject and he was thoroughly dedicated, and many people loved him, but he was a serious person."

"There wasn't time for chit-chat in his classes, you got right down to business," retired biology teacher **Elizabeth "Mickey" Blair St. Clair '46** said. "It was really something to take notes in his classes. You almost had to work in pairs!"

He was strict and disdained cheating. According to Peelle lore, he used his little Japanese typewriter to plink out his own tests, to avoid the risk that a student would see them when the office did it. And he was known to

sleep in the lab the night before lab exams, to make sure no one broke in.

Former students and retired educators **Duncan '46** and **Alice Dennis Paterson '46** heard that he once caught some male students hiding answers to their anatomy quizzes.

"The story we heard – we weren't there at the time – was that the students were writing ponies on their arms," Duncan said. "He marched them over to the Little Theatre and made them take their shirts off and take the quiz!"

Behind the stern exterior, though, was an intense and lasting loyalty to the students he got to know – many of whom stayed in touch his entire life. And if you had an interest in biology, it was easy to get swept into step behind the science dynamo as he tramped through fields or gave animated lectures.

"For me, it was extremely interesting, because I'd had no introduction to biology before coming to Adrian. I became fascinated with it," Mickey said.

In a world where more and more people began to specialize, Peelle was known as one of the last generalists, amassing a store of knowledge that covered mammals, reptiles, plants, and more. He approached nature as a whole. He read widely, and he encouraged his students to do the same.

"He was a Renaissance man," said Garrit Lugthart, who taught biology

under Peelle in the 1950s. "He was brilliant, but he was modest about it."

"He was the head of the department, and it was a different time. He had license to do whatever he wanted," **Robyn Arrington, M.D., '66** said. "Therefore, his courses were very interesting. He wouldn't let his courses be boring!"

The biology department expanded from one faculty member to six under his leadership.

"He was the one who interviewed me when I came to Adrian—at least for the biology part," retired biology professor Robert Husband said. Husband came to AC in 1964. "He had a lot of optimism about the department, and it was expanding. I interviewed at six schools – it was a seller's market back then – but I was impressed by the attitude of the staff here, and by him."

BEFORE ADRIAN

Born in Ohio in 1906, Miles Peelle grew up Quaker. His love for science started early, and he never forgot the time a family member took him to see Martha, the last passenger pigeon, at the Cincinnati Zoo. However, he didn't focus on science right away. He graduated from Wilmington College with an English degree, and then earned a master's degree from Haverford College.

In 1929, he married Eleanor Johnson, and that spring they loaded into a

Model A Ford and trekked all the way to Vancouver, stopping to see the Canadian Rockies, Banff and Lake Louise along the way.

"Dad said he went through 15 or 16 tires," recalls David Peelle, Miles' son. "Then they sold the car and got onto a ship to Japan."

Miles had accepted a position to teach English in Sapporo, Japan. The next few years were eventful. Their first child was born. Miles researched spiders and observed whales on the side, and skied in the mountains of Hokkaido. He also became great friends with a young man named Yutaka Katayama, who is credited with bringing Datsun to the U.S., and who served for years as president of Nissan Motor Corporation USA. He remained a lifetime friend of the Peelles.

One day in class, a student asked Peelle his opinion about Japan's recent invasion of Manchuria in China, which the government claimed had been provoked. Peelle candidly replied that he thought Japan was the aggressor. The government was already wary of him for a research trip he took to an area that had been appropriated for military use. The next day he was fired, his students yelled and threw rocks at the house, and the Peelles were put under observation until they left the country.

Back in the U.S., Peelle started working toward a Ph.D. in comparative



High school



In Japan



anatomy at the University of Chicago in 1933. He got a job as a social worker at the same time, and for a while worked under Jane Addams at Hull House. Times were hard, though, and eventually he couldn't afford school. In the fall of 1936, he took a job with Adrian College.

FOR THE BIRDS

Wives of scientists often have to put up with strange things. At the Peelle home, for instance, Eleanor had to get used to dead birds in the freezer. Adrian had an unusually large collection of birds in the 1950s, thanks to the efforts of Prof Peelle. He'd trap new specimens, club them to death, and then stick them in the freezer until he could get out his taxidermy equipment.

"One day mom opened the freezer door, and this bird flew out at her," David Peelle said. "It wasn't quite dead!"

Miles Peelle was a bird lover at heart. He kept his eye out for them wherever he went, identifying over 600 North American species during his lifetime.

Typical of biologists, he liked to get out of the classroom. In addition to summer classes out west, he went on frequent field trips in Lenawee County.

"On our ornithology field trips, if he saw a bird, he'd hit the brakes," retired biology teacher **Joe Pullen '59** said. "If he was thinking about birds, we thought we'd better watch the traffic."

"My father was one of those people who could not hike without identifying everything," David said. "We'd cover a quarter mile in a couple hours."

"You could learn so much from just walking through a field with him," Mickey St. Clair said.

Prof could also teach you a thing or two about resourcefulness. It's rumored that when money was tight in the 1930s,

Prof had his students dissect cats that had been collected from the area.

RECORDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Imagine going to your professor's house on Sunday nights. You sit on the floor, talk, munch on the snacks his wife provides. But mostly, you listen to classical music on his record player.

In our more material age, this might not seem like a big draw, but Peelle's record parties had their own allure in their day.

"This was kind of a tradition he started," David said. "It seems so weird now, because everyone owns a CD player. But back then, there weren't as many opportunities to hear classical music."

"I went often," Mickey said. "It had nothing to do with biology; he played classical music, and we sat on the floor, and talked and ate popcorn, and just listened. I always think of him, and appreciate those Sunday evenings; they were very, very special."

Peelle is also remembered for advocating his students when they went on in their professional lives.

"He was known far and wide for the value of his recommendations," Robyn Arrington said. "If you were pre-med, you wanted to get to know him."

The acceptance rate for students fortunate enough to get his recommendation was nearly perfect. When Joe Pullen was in graduate school at the University of Michigan, he got an outside perspective on his favorite professor's reputation.

"He was the only person in the nation who could recommend someone to the University of Michigan medical school, and they were accepted," Joe said.

Joe also recalls hearing from one of his U-M professors, who was considered one of the top ecologists in the world at the time, that Miles Peelle students were better prepared than his other students.

Psychiatrist **Peter Nims '60** said that it was Miles Peelle who recognized his potential and helped him get to where he is today.

"He was the person responsible for the letters of recommendation that got me into medical school," he said. "I was not an outstanding student, by



At the 1970 Commencement, with Eleanor



Field Biology trip to the Rocky Mountains in 1966. Clockwise from upper left: Ben Blazier '66, Tom St. Clair '68, Bob "Bear" Pentland '68, Dave Swift '68, Peelle, Chuck Scheltema '67, Harold Arrington '68, Steve Gregg '68.

any means, but I'd taken enough classes with him to make some sort of impression on him. I applied to four medical schools, and I was accepted to three."

AFTER ADRIAN

Prof Peelle retired from Adrian College in 1970 after 34 years. He and Eleanor moved to Florida, and Miles taught at an Audubon camp in Wisconsin in the summers. Eventually they settled in North Carolina. He stayed involved with AC for many years.

Prof could hike a full day with the Hendersonville Botany Club into his late 80s, and through it all, he never gave up his love for teaching. Duncan and Alice Paterson remember walking with him at Florida's Bok Tower Gardens.

"We'd go there with him, and he'd start explaining something, and everyone around us would start listening," Alice said.

On the way to New Zealand for a writing project on birds, Miles stayed in California with former student and retired surgeon **Toh-Bin Lim '58**.

"He took my son into the backyard,

and right away identified 17 species of birds. And ever since then, my son has had an interest in ornithology," Lim said.

Eleanor died in 1992. Miles lived out his final days in a nursing home in Brevard, N.C., and passed away Dec. 12, at the age of 97.

Miles Peelle had a long relationship with Adrian College. It wasn't always easy to make ends meet, and there were years when he had side jobs as a clerk at Cunningham's Drug Store, and as a preacher and a housepainter. But he stayed, and AC expressed its appreciation: he was named Teacher of the Year, Peelle Hall was named for him, and he was awarded an honorary doctorate.

Perhaps the greatest measure of what he meant to this place, though, is how he lives on in the memories of the people he knew here. People from all over the country visited him up until the very end.

When Prof retired in 1970, President John Dawson called him a living legend. Peelle gave the commencement address that year, and received a standing ovation. In it, he emphasized the vital connection between humans and

nature by quoting naturalist John Muir: "Pull one thread in the cloth of nature and we all move."

Prof was like that to Adrian. He was an integral part of the fabric of the College, and of the lives of alumni. At the time of his passing, it is appropriate to recognize the lasting contribution that he made.

This story drew from the work of Ken Ross, professor emeritus of political science, whose story on Miles Peelle was published in Contact in 1998. Terrance Robinson, M.D., '66 was a contributor.

A small note: Retired biology professor Robert Husband named a new species of mite after Miles Peelle. At right is his namesake, *Ovaccarus peellei*. Husband found it in association with the vaginal membrane of a Midwestern corn pest.

