

THE AMERICAN MINERALOGIST

JOURNAL OF THE MINERALOGICAL SOCIETY OF AMERICA

Vol. 35

SEPTEMBER-OCTOBER, 1950

Nos. 9 and 10



“THE PROFESSOR” IN HIS LABORATORY AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY.

“THE PROFESSOR”

JOHN C. RABBITT

To those of us who studied under Professor Larsen at Harvard and to many of his colleagues, he is always known as “The Professor.” The use of this title in this way sums up the unique esteem in which we all hold him as a man and teacher.

As a teacher, Professor Larsen’s methods resulted above all in well-trained students. He insisted on the proper balance of field and laboratory work and he exemplified this in his own scientific career. He had infinite patience with all of his students, the brilliant and the mediocre, the hard worker and the loafer. Steeped as he is in the art and science of petrography it was a privilege to the student to have those individual discussions with him in which his vast knowledge was made so readily

available. Nor were these discussions ever on the plane of expert and tyro; rather, they were on a plane of mutual seeking of geologic truth. The students' ideas, ill-conceived as they often were, were considered with respect and thus mutual confidence was attained. In formal lectures, in the field, during demonstrations at the microscope, in informal talks in his office, at the luncheon table, or in his home, this relationship always held. It was a marvel to see him handle a petrographic microscope; he was a natural-born field man and he spared no effort in spending time with his students in the field; informal talks with him were something to look forward to. In all this there was a complete lack of professorial authoritarianism and orthodoxy and yet I never saw anyone who took unfair advantage of this situation. There was no doubt as to who was the leader but it was a leadership which was not based on affectations, histrionics, or a need to uphold a dignity which everyone took for granted.

Coupled with this quality of leadership was Professor Larsen's eminently human regard for his students as individuals. He took an interest in each and everyone of them and, although he might occasionally forget their names, he didn't forget nor neglect their personalities. He was always the logical person to whom personal problems were taken with the assurance that sound advice and practical help would invariably be forthcoming. I have never regarded him as a sentimental man (he is rather a sensitive man); the sound advice and practical help were such as were most useful at the moment. The practical help, in which he was joined by Mrs. Larsen, was the kind that is supplied by "good neighbors" (rare in this modern world) and often resulted in sacrifices and discomforts to the Larsens.

Professor Larsen never enters much into scientific controversy. He has a regard for the other man's point of view and he isn't likely to ascribe an invidious motive to those who disagree with him. Confronted with a correction of some of his early work, his reaction is usually one of pleasure that we are all getting closer to the truth. He can and does, however, defend vigorously theories and work that seem to him to be reasonable but he does this with the least amount of sound and fury and in a manner that is least likely to injure professional feelings. As a result, there are few if any people who have strong feelings of derogation about him or his work. To put it plainly, he is one of the few people I know to whom are directed no unkind words, professional or private. I think this is because of his essential kindness and because he maintains a young mind. He doesn't cling dogmatically to untenable notions in the scientific field and he keeps himself young in spirit and outlook through association by preference with the younger men, to their and his advantage.

I hope I haven't made Professor Larsen sound like a repository of all virtues. He is, of course, not that. He is, however, a man of tremendous scientific ability and attainment, he was and is a fine teacher, and he is a good man. He manages to be all these things by being just himself.

Professor Larsen retired from teaching at Harvard over a year ago (June 1949) but in his present position as consultant to the Geochemistry and Petrology Branch of the U.S. Geological Survey he is in a sense continuing his career as a teacher in a broader field. He has many scientific "irons in the fire" and they are being brought to the right temper with his customary vigor and vision. He is becoming acquainted with a new group of young professional colleagues and is renewing contacts with old friends in and out of the Survey. We all wish "The Professor" many more years of fruitful work in his chosen field and relaxation with his many friends.