

LESLIE A. VIERECK (1930–2008)

Les Viereck was born on 20 February 1930 in South Dartmouth, Massachusetts. Undergraduate urges for adventure led Les and two friends from Dartmouth to drive a Model A Ford to Alaska in 1948. By happenstance, after the briefest of interviews with the legendary Cap Lathrop, a colorful and enormously successful Alaskan pioneer and entrepreneur, Les was employed that summer at Lathrop's Suntrana coal mine. However, he spent his days off at Denali National Park, and when he returned the following year, the colorful Grant Pearson, then park superintendent, hired him as ranger for Wonder Lake.

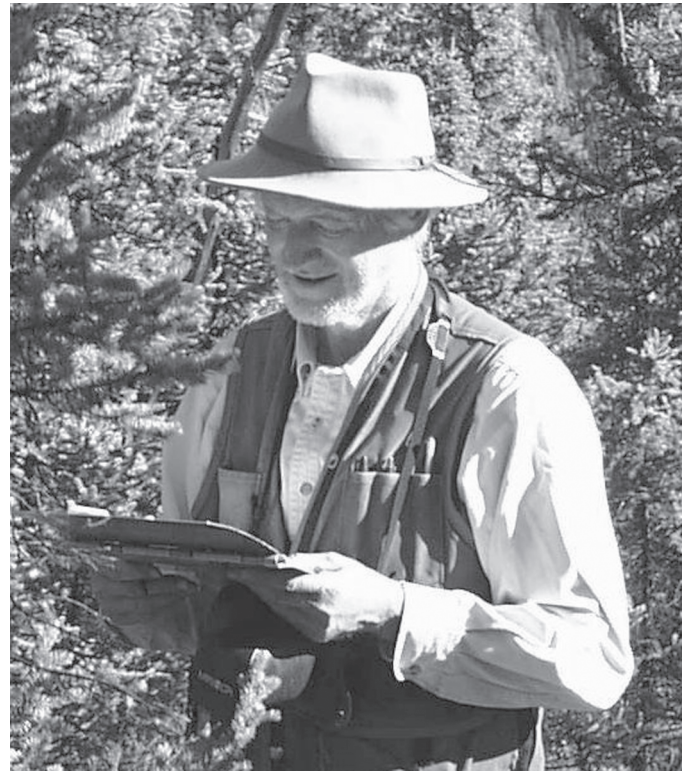
After graduation from Dartmouth in 1951, Les returned to Alaska and was promptly drafted into the Army. For part of his tour (1952–54) he served as post game warden at Fort Richardson, Anchorage, distinguishing himself by arresting one of his senior officers for a game violation. This clear sense of right and wrong presaged a serious test of character a bit more than a decade later.

While still in the Army, Les and three other climbers pioneered the South Buttress route on Denali. In an approach typical of the time but unheard of now, they began the climb at the railroad, not by flying to the Kahiltna Glacier. This climb has been chronicled elsewhere, and details can be found at <http://uaf-db.uaf.edu/jukebox/denali/html/levi.htm>. Although injured in a fall that led to the death of one of their party and severe injury to another, Les and Morton (Woody) Wood walked out for help, a demonstration of Les's physical toughness.

Les then considered graduate studies at the University of Alaska and McGill University before settling at the University of Colorado. There he earned his Master of Science degree with Bill Weber by working up plant collections he had made at the Knob Lake subarctic field station of McGill University, Schefferville, Quebec, followed by a doctorate with John Marr on primary succession on the Muldrow Glacier foreland, Denali National Park.

Les met Eleanor (Teri) Norton in Alaska and they married in 1955. They spent the summers of 1955–59 in Alaska, and during one of these worked with W.O. Field to investigate botanical dating of recent glacial activity in Prince William Sound.

In 1959, Les and Teri, shortly before the birth of son Rodney, traveled from Boulder north to Fairbanks for Les to take up a position at the University of Alaska, where he worked with Project Chariot to conduct what was probably the first environmental impact statement of consequence. Although it sounds reckless today, it was seriously considered then to excavate a harbor on Alaska's northwest Arctic coast by using a nuclear device. However, as data from multidisciplinary studies accumulated, it became increasingly clear to Les, Don Foote, and W.O. (Bill) Pruitt, Jr. that the "controlled" nuclear explosion could not be justified in the face of the likely radioactive aftermath on people using the region for home and hunting. Formal



Les Viereck in the Bonanza Creek Experimental Forest in the late 1990s. (Photo courtesy of the Bonanza Creek LTER Photo Archive.)

protests from Les, badly received by his bosses, led to an abrupt end of that job. In his letter of resignation, Les wrote: "A scientist's allegiance is first to truth and personal integrity and only secondarily to an organized group such as a university, a company, or a government." Dan O'Neill has recorded the entire episode of Project Chariot in his wonderful book, *The Firecracker Boys* (1994). Les and Bill Pruitt, who also resigned (Don Foote had died as the result of an accident), were both granted honorary degrees by the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1993, with explicit reference to their courageous stand for academic freedom decades before.

After resigning from the University of Alaska, Les went to work for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to evaluate Dall sheep habitat in the Dry Creek area of the Alaska Range. Teri and the children, Walter and Rodney, joined Les in the field, as they had at Project Chariot. Family participation occurs less often these days, but then they had the fine example of Mardy and Olaus Murie, who had taken their firstborn, Martin, into the Alaskan wilderness when he was very young, in the late 1920s.

During 1963–99, Les was principal plant ecologist at the Institute of Northern Forestry, Forest Science Laboratory, U.S. Forest Service, which ironically was located on the University of Alaska Fairbanks campus, where he had been shunned by the administration but admired by the faculty. He worked closely with colleagues on the faculty,

and through appointments with the Museum (Herbarium), Institute of Arctic Biology, and departments of Biology and Wildlife and Natural Resources, he served on numerous graduate committees and guided students throughout those years.

In 1968, Les worked with E.L. Little, Jr. on what would become *Alaska Trees and Shrubs*, a favorite field guide. Copies of this book are found in backpacks all over Alaska, mostly well worn from frequent use and smudged with soil (and perhaps a little peanut butter and jelly). A revised second edition was released in 2007.

The whole family, now with the addition of daughter Sharon, spent the academic year 1970–71 in Norway, where Les worked with noted lichenologist Hildur Krog on Alaskan lichens and with polymath Eilif Dahl on vegetation classification.

After retiring from the Forest Service, Les simply shifted his office to another place on campus and continued working, primarily with the Long Term Ecological Research project (LTER) at Bonanza Creek and in the Caribou-Poker Creek Research Watershed.

Teri has a distilled definition of Les's professional interests: fire, ice, and water. Indeed, he did study primary and secondary succession on glacier forelands and along the Tanana River, in permafrost environments where fire has been a big ecological component. The partial bibliography of his work available at the Bonanza Creek LTER site (<http://www.lter.uaf.edu>) shows the breadth and extent of his research collaborations. He played a central role in initiating this program and provided intellectual leadership for 25 years.

Les did a lot of his work over the long term, maintaining his own frost-tube readings for decades and making careful annual notes of phenology. He revisited his Muldrow Glacier study site for another look years later, and his trips on the Tanana River floodplain examining forest succession extended over many years and became family outings his children look back on fondly. He traveled all over the state. Les was the one whom you sought to ask such questions as "What does the tree line look like in southwestern Alaska?" for the tree line was yet another subject

to which he contributed. He was the dean of Alaskan botanists.

Les became a fellow of the Arctic Institute of North America in 1964 and was on the Board of Governors from 1974 to 1976. He was an associate editor for *Arctic* from 1980 to 1989.

Les's contributions to boreal ecology were enormous, defining the roles of wildfire, flooding, and glaciers in plant succession and the patterns of community diversity that develop in response to these disturbances. Equally memorable were his quiet humor and patience in training a generation of ecologists not only to understand many secrets of the boreal forest, but also to respect and love the land that produced them.

While many knew him professionally, his family and close friends also knew him as an avid gardener, with an enviable greenhouse and moose-proof garden. Les built the house the family lived in. He experimented successfully with solar panels before the technology became as refined as it is today. He was husband to Teri for 53 years, father to two sons and a daughter, and grandfather to six.

The memorial to celebrate Les's life was held on campus at the Georgeson Botanical Garden. Friends from all over came together, some of whom hadn't seen each other in years. It was a beautiful fall day with the birch and aspen foliage peaking in color, and from overhead we heard the goodbye calls of cranes and geese taking their leave of Fairbanks—a fitting sendoff.

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