**Geology 'Giant' John D. Cooper Dies**
**Cal State Fullerton Professor Had Retired, Yet Still Followed His Passions** Sept. 06, 2007



The outpouring of stories and comments about John D. Cooper, emeritus professor of geological sciences at Cal State Fullerton who died Monday, have a common thread: He was larger than life in his work, in his interests, in his caring for students and in his teaching.

Cooper, 68, collapsed from a massive heart attack while on his morning walk. The Chino Hills resident had taught in the Department of Geological Sciences, a part of the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics (NSM), for more than three decades, from 1970 to 2002. He is widely lauded at CSUF as one of the faculty members who helped build the department and its reputation.

“He had so many interests, and he pursued them with a passion,” said his wife, Nancy. “He was a naturalist. By that, I mean he studied the history of planet Earth, he studied all living things, the outdoors. He loved how things fit together in the environment.

“He was a history buff. He went to all of the Lewis and Clark signature sites. He studied how Native Americans lived with the land and what naturalists they were. He had wide-ranging, voracious appetites, and he loved imparting his knowledge. He loved education, he loved working with students,” she said.

“Dr. Cooper took a personal interest in the students, especially those who worked on research projects with him,” said Linda Johnson, administrative coordinator of faculty affairs.

“He was one of those largely responsible, through both teaching and research, for the outstanding reputation the department enjoys today, and he is one of the reasons the department’s students are so sought after.”

David Bowman, chair and associate professor of geological sciences, said: “John was a legendary figure among geology students at Cal State Fullerton and a giant in the field of sedimentary geology. He touched many lives and will be sorely missed.”

Diane Clemens-Knott, professor and immediate past chair of the department, characterized Cooper as “an outstanding educator. There is already an outpouring of grief from former students.

He had intensely high standards and high expectations, yet students always rated him very highly. He has students who have gone far in their various professions, including at least one who is now a tenured professor of geology.

“His research,” Clemens-Knott added, “is internationally recognized. His primary area of research was in the evolution of eastern California and how it made the transition over millions of years from a marine environment to part of the continental land mass. He did this by painstakingly studying ancient sedimentary rocks and the fossils they enclosed.”

NSM Dean Steven Murray also praised Cooper and his work: “John Cooper was an exemplary faculty member whose presence will be very much missed. He was very highly regarded by his colleagues, the many students he so ably mentored, and the many people whose lives he touched. Although a retired emeritus professor, John was still active in the pursuit of his academic passions. All of us in the college are deeply saddened by his passing.”

Cooper’s research concerned an area little touched upon until he began his work more than 20 years ago. In studying how the southern Great Basin area of the United States and the eastern Southern California/Mojave Desert area became part of the continent, he became expert, Bowman said, in the use of sequence stratigraphy to investigate the paleo sea level, regional stratigraphic correlations and continental margin evolution. He shared that knowledge internationally and supervised the theses of nearly 60 CSUF students. He also authored or co-authored almost 80 publications, many with the participation of his students.

“He also served as a driving force in the Society of Sedimentary Geology, serving as treasurer and managing editor of the organization’s Pacific section publications until his death,” Bowman said, noting that in 2002, Cooper was instrumental in creating a curatorial facility for the Orange County Archaeological-Paleontological Curation Project, a part of the Orange County Harbors, Beaches and Parks Division.

“Dr. Cooper was a champion for the collections. A three-year grant was funded in 2002 to establish a curatorial framework for the collection. Even after the funding ended, and even after he retired from Cal State Fullerton, he continued to volunteer his time,” said Andrea Murray, a lecturer in anthropology and coordinator of archaeology for the curation project.

“John spoke out at public meetings in favor of increasing the level of care for the collections and dedicated much of his time toward creating a better home for the fossils and artifacts. He was respected among both the archaeology and paleontology communities for his work … and, for me, he was a co-worker, a mentor and a friend,” Murray said.

Rob Selway, district supervisor for historical facilities and programs for Orange County, pointed out that Cooper’s efforts began long before the 2002 curatorial project. “Dr. Cooper began this stewardship role in the 1970s, chairing an award-winning county task force, and he continued it as a respected and tireless adviser. His contributions have been extremely valuable and his devotion unmatched.

“Besides that, Dr. Cooper, to me, was a brilliant friend who I respected very much. He was certain of the great value of paleontology, imparting it to generations of students in his teachings and to public officials and business people through his advocacy and scientific work. He applied his knowledge and energy in helping to develop policies and solve problems in the community and for the county.”

Among his many awards and honors, Cooper was named Volunteer of the Year in 2005 by the Orange County Division of Harbors, Beaches and Parks; he received the Distinguished Faculty Award and Outstanding Research Award from the College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics in 2000 and 1997, respectively, and the Distinguished Educator Award from the Pacific Section of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists in 2000; and was made a Fellow of the Geological Society of America. He earned a Ph.D. in geology from the University of Texas at Austin.

Besides the Society of Sedimentary Geology and over the length of his career, Cooper was a member of the Olinda Oil Museum and Trail Task Force, a board member of the Shoshone Museum, a reviewer for the Petroleum Research Fund and a co-author of the proposal for Irvine Ranch Land Reserve to be designated a national natural landmark.

In lieu of a public memorial service, Cooper’s family has asked that donations be made in his memory to the John D. Cooper Field Camp Award. Donations can be made online at [www.fullerton.edu/supportcsuf](http://www.fullerton.edu/supportcsuf) or by calling University Advancement at 657-278-7071.

Cooper is survived by his wife, Nancy; daughter, Chaska Cooper of Burbank; son, Zachary Cooper of Fullerton; stepson, Randy Thompson of Chino Hills; grandson, Dylan Thompson; and sister, Patricia Cooper of Lexington, Ky.

**John D. Cooper, 68; Cal State Fullerton geologist curated Orange County fossils**

By Valerie J. Nelson

Los Angeles Times

Sept. 8, 2007 12 AM PT

John D. Cooper, a Cal State Fullerton geologist who was widely known for his research on the evolution of eastern California and for curating a significant collection of fossils that were unearthed during the development of Orange County, has died. He was 68.

Cooper died Monday of a heart attack suffered during a morning hike near his Chino Hills home, said his wife, Nancy.

By painstakingly studying ancient sedimentary rocks and the fossils they enclosed, he documented how eastern California transitioned over millions of years from a marine environment to being part of the continental land mass, said Diane Clemens-Knott, who until recently headed the Cal State Fullerton geology department.

Cooper was recognized as an international expert in sequence stratigraphy, a relatively new branch of geology that attempts to link prehistoric sea-level changes to sedimentary deposits. Much of his work was done in the eastern Mojave Desert and southern Great Basin.

“He did world-class research, but he always brought it back to the people,” David Bowman, chairman of Cal State Fullerton’s geology department, told The Times on Friday. “He was deeply involved in a number of very important projects.”

Among them was setting up a curatorial system to deal with the estimated 500,000 to 1 million artifacts that had been kept in local warehouses beginning in 1978 after being uncovered by bulldozers. Remains as tiny as prehistoric rodent teeth and as huge as a whale’s spinal column are among the fossils from the Miocene epoch, a period in geologic history that spanned from 25 million years ago to 5 million years ago, when California was underwater.

“The county arguably is in the possession of the largest raw collection of fossils on the planet,” Cooper told The Times in 2005.

He began managing the collection, known as the Orange County Archaeological-Paleontological Curation Project, in 1999. After retiring from Cal State Fullerton in 2002, he continued trying to find a permanent home for the collection, which might include a permanent role for the university.

For more than 30 years, Cooper used Shoshone, Calif., a village at the southeastern edge of Death Valley National Park, as his base for field research. He gave back by developing exhibits for the Shoshone Museum and serving as president of its board of directors.

In Brea, he helped establish the Olinda Historic Museum and Park and helped develop geologic exhibits related to Olinda, a once-bustling oil town.

John Doyne Cooper was born June 12, 1939, in Wichita, Kan., to Byron Nelson Cooper and the former Willie Elizabeth Doyne.

After growing up mainly in Blacksburg, Va., where his father taught geology at Virginia Tech, Cooper received a bachelor’s degree in geology from the University of Michigan in 1961. At the University of Texas, he earned a master’s degree and, in 1970, a doctorate in geology.

He came to Los Angeles in the late 1960s to work as an exploration geologist for Shell Oil and began teaching at Cal State Fullerton in 1970.

A popular professor, Cooper was recognized by the Geological Society of America for making the intellectual enrichment of his “armory of principally undergraduate student ‘colleagues’ “ as important as his research.

“He was an Eagle Scout and lived his life like one,” his wife said. “He was honest, trustworthy, caring.”

In retirement, Cooper attended many events related to the bicentennial celebration of the Lewis and Clark expedition of 1804-06. He also indulged in trail hiking and logged more than 5,000 miles, mainly in the hills around his home.

In addition to his wife, whom he married in 1976, Cooper is survived by a daughter, Chaska of Burbank; son Zachary of Fullerton; stepson Randy Thompson of Chino Hills; a sister; and a grandson.

Donations may be made to Cal State Fullerton’s John D. Cooper Field Camp Award: [www.fullerton.edu/supportCSUF/geologyrocks](http://www.fullerton.edu/supportCSUF/geologyrocks)