

In Memory: Donald Hagen Voss 1922 - 2016

By William C. Miller III — Bethesda, Maryland

It is with sadness that I report the passing of Don Voss at the Fairfax Nursing Center in Fairfax, Virginia, in the early morning hours of August 12th.

When I first visited Don in Inova Hospital (also in Fairfax) on July 10th, it had been a rough week for him. He was very weak and ghostly pale. Over and above extreme dehydration, the experience had exacerbated an osteophyte-related swallowing problem and he had not been able to eat or drink anything by mouth since he was admitted. They had inserted a feeding tube through his nose which made conversation very difficult. After several days, the nasal feeding tube was withdrawn which made him much more comfortable. The story that he sheepishly related, in an almost apologetic tone, was horrible. It was July 4th and he had gone down into his basement to tighten a screw on some fixture. He had gotten down on one knee and discovered that he couldn't get up. He managed to get into a crouching position and found that he could not get up from that either. He decided to roll over onto his back, and he moved around on his basement floor (on his back) trying to figure out a way extricate himself from the situation. He remained in that position for several days. Don had lived alone since 2008, so he was truly on his own. Fortunately, when his cleaning lady arrived on her regular schedule and couldn't get in, she didn't just call it a day and go home. She had the presence of mind to go next door to get a key from Oswin Kummer, Don's next door neighbor. They discovered Don badly bruised and dehydrated having had nothing to eat or drink for several days. Despite Don's protests to the contrary, emergency services were summoned and Don was taken to Inova Hospital where he was admitted to the Progressive Coronary Care Unit. Evidently, that was where they had an available bed because he didn't have cardiac issues. Don was at Inova for several weeks. After they figured he was sufficiently stable,



▲ Don Voss (L) receives Distinguished Service Award from President L. Malcolm Clark at the 1993 ASA annual convention in Dallas, Texas.

▼ Don Voss at his customary workstation at the Herbarium, US National Arboretum, May 7, 2015.



he was moved to the Fairfax Nursing Center for rehabilitation. Because of his swallowing problem, the hospital had surgically fitted him with a tube that led directly to his stomach. The gastrostomy tube came with an owner's manual and from this point on, he would have to learn how to manage it. The staff was working towards Don recovering to the point where he could leave the Nursing Center. Unfortunately, he took a turn for the worse when he developed aspiration pneumonia. Despite their best efforts (antibiotics and supplemental oxygen), it was too much for his severely challenged condition.

Don was born on November 6, 1922 in New York City to Karl Voss and Donolda Hagen Voss. He graduated from Teaneck High School, Teaneck, New Jersey in June 1939. Following high school, he attended and graduated from the prestigious Phillips Academy, in Andover, Massachusetts in June 1940.



▲ Mary Rutley, Brookside Gardens Chapter Vice-President, presents the 2003 Frederic P. Lee Commendation to Donald Voss on December 7, 2003 at the Brookside Gardens Educational Center in Wheaton, Maryland.

Don proudly served his country in the military. He entered an Army ROTC program in May 1942 and went on active duty in April 1943. He was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army Transportation Corps and his tours of duty included the Boston Port of Embarkation, Manila in the Philippine Islands, and Kobe, Japan. Reverting to reserve status in September 1946, he remained in the reserves until 1970, when he retired with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Don's academic and civilian career record is equally remarkable. Entering Princeton University, he earned a BA in Public Affairs in 1947 and an MA in Economics in 1949. He found employment at Princeton where he held the positions of Assistant in Instruction and Instructor in Economics. In 1950, he was a junior economic analyst in the Investment Department of the Chemical Bank of New York. From 1952 to 1961 he was an Assistant Professor of Economics at Bucknell University. From 1961 to 1988, he was an Economic Intelligence Officer, in the Directorate of Intelligence at the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). During his career at the CIA, he was detailed (temporarily assigned) to the National War College faculty for the academic year 1977-1978. From 1978 to 1980 he was detailed as deputy director of the Office of Economic Research and Analysis, Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the State Department. While on detail at State, he was presented with the State Department's Tribute of Appreciation. The CIA subsequently awarded him their

Career Intelligence Medal by which the agency recognized his service and exceptional achievements that substantially contributed to the CIA's mission. When it came time to retire, Don was not destined for a rocking chair or inclined to become a "gentleman of leisure." He now had the time to freely pursue his many interests and avocations.

I first met Don in 1984 when, in my capacity as president of the Brookside Gardens Chapter, I invited him to speak at one of our regular chapter meetings. I had discovered that he was the son-in-law of Robert Gartrell, the developer of the Robin Hill Hybrids, and I expected that Don would be an interesting speaker. Noting Don's Vienna, Virginia address, I invited him to dinner at my house before the meeting to avoid the many problems associated with Washington rush-hour traffic which even in the 80's could drive a normal person to distraction. First impression—he was a perfect gentleman. He was quiet and unassuming, intelligent, and very precise in word and thought—positive qualities all too often found lacking in the general population. His Robin Hill presentation at the chapter meeting did not disappoint. It was excellent.

A skilled writer, Don's publication record is impressive. He has published in the areas of colorimetry, taxonomy, history, and plant behavior—topics that many people religiously avoid. His publication record included 32 articles in *The Azalean* and 38 articles in the *Journal of the American Rhododendron Society (JARS)*. His vocabulary and his ability to comprehend and convey difficult concepts in writing was enviable. On numerous occasions when reading Don's articles, I had to consult Webster's to look up the meaning of a word.¹ Don's willingness to serve as an officer (e.g., president of the Potomac Valley Chapter and District 9 alternate and director) or in an advisory capacity (e.g., the ARS Research Committee and the ARS Editorial Committee) was a major contribution to the ARS community. He was a leader in the ASA as well, and served as chairman of the ASA Board of Directors during a period when the ASA was ankle deep in growing pains. On the local level, he was a president of the ASA's Northern Virginia Chapter. His ability to write and his attention to detail made him an excellent reviewer for both the ASA and ARS publications. He served on *The Azalean's* Advisory Editorial Board beginning in 1987, and he was reviewing articles for the Fall 2016 issue when he passed away. An excellent manager, his experience and his no-nonsense approach made him a valuable resource, and I found him to be an effective sounding board for rough first drafts and for "second opinions." Hardly narrow in his interests, Don's avocations included rifle and pistol marksmanship, photography, botany, horticulture, and colorimetry. How many people do you know who have a spectrophotometer in their home library? He was much in demand as a flower show judge, and he was well known here and abroad for his expertise in and support of the various botanical codes and registries that we are all supposed to be familiar with and use.

Over the years, as Don became increasingly less mobile, his energetic stride gave way to an unsteady shuffle with a cane. He was 93 after all. I shuddered at the thought of his going up and down the stairs in his home and driving up

I-66 on his way to the US National Arboretum twice a week. By any measure and speaking from experience, Washington traffic is on a par with cruel and unusual punishment. We chatted on the phone fairly regularly—maybe once or twice a month—or more frequently when he had Arboretum news to report. He was interested in knowing what the ASA was doing, and he wanted my take on “current events,” foreign and domestic. Don made good use of the phone. The phone and email were important connections, his lifelines, to the outside world. Despite the ravages of old age, Don never quite lost his pedagogical bearing. Like any good educator, he was always patient and supportive of others. He strove for excellence in everything that he undertook. Like the people in the federal agencies during his professional career, the ASA and ARS people took notice. In 1993, the ASA presented him with a Distinguished Achievement Award at its annual convention in Dallas, Texas. In 2003, the Brookside Gardens Chapter honored him with their prestigious Frederic P. Lee Commendation. In 2010, the American Rhododendron Society honored him with a Gold Medal, their highest award.

Another very important chapter in Don’s life was his interest in the US National Arboretum. Many people knew about Don’s interest in the National Arboretum Herbarium, but that was only part of the story as revealed by the marvelous tribute written by Dr. Alan Whittemore, a Research Plant Taxonomist and Don’s supervisor at the Herbarium.² Selections from this follow:

“The Arboretum lost a valued colleague and very good friend when longtime volunteer Don Voss died on the 12th of August.

“Don first used the National Arboretum Herbarium in 1964, when his friend Henry Skinner was director. His father-in-law, Robert Gartrell, was a famed azalea breeder, and Don worked with him to document his breeding work and register the cultivars he bred. Don began volunteering regularly in the Herbarium in 1987, and continued for 29 years, often logging the most hours per year of any National Arboretum volunteer, despite his long, congested commute from Vienna, Virginia. He carried out major projects for the Herbarium, seeing Contribution Number 7 through to its completion and publication³, and thoroughly reviewing our type specimens and cultivated standards. He also made important contributions to the azalea community as an author, reviewer, and consulting expert for the major journals. Trained in economics, and employed for many years as a data analyst for the CIA, Don had the ability to be meticulous without losing sight of the big picture. He built up specialized knowledge in areas such as botanical nomenclature and the accurate description of colors, and his work will benefit plant scientists and growers for years to come. His contributions earned him the Gold Medal of the American Rhododendron Society in 2010.

“Don’s knowledge of plants and the rules for naming them was broad and detailed. He was always ready to help others who were interested in botany and horticulture, and his willingness to share his specialized knowledge in areas such as botanical nomenclature and the accurate description of colors has benefitted botanists and horticulturists all over the world.

“Over the past year, Don became noticeably less vigorous and less steady on his feet, while remaining mentally as sharp as ever. He continued to drive in to the National Arboretum twice a week until the beginning of July, when an accident at home sent him to the hospital, and then to a nursing home. At first, Don was hopeful that he would be able to move back into his home. However, treatment was complicated by several other medical conditions Don had been managing, and it became clear that Don wouldn’t be able to resume his independent life. He died the morning of Friday the 12th of August 2016.

“Don was an excellent companion—well-educated, well-read, with many interesting experiences and the ability to communicate clearly and vividly. He will be greatly missed by all of us who had the opportunity to know him and work with him.”

One of the very nice things about Dr. Whittemore’s tribute is how well it seemed to fit the person I knew. It shows that Don was genuine and not a different person to different people. I would submit that Don Voss was a good example of a good example, and we are all diminished by his passing.

References and Notes:

1. Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary Deluxe. 2nd edition. 1983. Simon and Schuster. New York, NY.
2. Material from Dr. Alan Whittemore used by permission to the author.
3. Meyer, F.G., Mazzeo, P.M., and Voss, D.H. 1994. A catalog of cultivated woody plants of the southeastern United States. United States National Arboretum Contribution Number 7. Washington, D.C.: US National Arboretum, US Department of Agriculture. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.63965>

Scanned online at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.58811>

Don Hyatt reports that this is a USNA Publication that included the inspection and verification of several thousand specimens from the genus *Rhododendron*.

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