

# In Memoriam

## Dr. George Frederick Drake 1930-2020

*By William C. Miller III—Bethesda, Maryland*

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It is with sadness that I report the passing of Dr. George F. Drake on August 31, 2020, at the age of 90. Born on July 3, 1930, in Irvington, New Jersey, he was the oldest of three boys (George Franklin Drake, Roy Allen Drake, and Stanley Drake) and the older of identical twins (George and Roy) by 15 minutes. His mother, Ann Palwick Drake, was the principal wage earner and was employed as a legal secretary for a law firm in Newark. His father, Stanley Wilson Drake, was often out of work due to the Depression, but was hired as an electrician with the New Jersey Power and Light Company with the onset of World War II. By far, however, the greatest influence on George on a daily basis was Stella Palwick, his maternal grandmother or “Nana” who stayed with the family.

George’s early home life wasn’t entirely positive. He didn’t get along with his father. Distressed by the domestic violence and drunkenness that he witnessed at home, George developed a love for the great outdoors. He spent a lot of time exploring the local woods, hunting for arrowheads and prehistoric shark’s teeth, and just generally enjoying the wonders of nature and the solitude that it afforded. He especially liked camping and hiking and did a lot of both on weekends. He found the Boy Scouts to be a satisfying experience.

George credits his mother with his world view and his independent nature. Her perspective influenced many of the decisions that he was to make throughout his life. There was more to the world than the Jersey Shore. Understanding other peoples, nations, and cultures became a lifelong personal goal, and he instinctively sought opportunities for public service.

### Drake’s Autobiography Online

I would refer you to George’s extensive internet autobiography, (<https://georgefdrake.org>) for a very complete and detailed account of his life, his activities, and his basic perspective. During his long and active life, he was at times a soldier, an educator, a social activist, and a politician, but it all stemmed from his strong philosophical belief in the importance of service to his fellow man (especially children and the poor) which became the foundation for much that he did.

In 1948, he left home at the age of 18, with \$148 and a bicycle, for Latin America where he worked for the

Inter-American Geodetic Survey in Panama and Guatemala. He returned to the US a year and a half later and enlisted in the US Army, where he was assigned to Army Intelligence and studied Mandarin Chinese. While serving in Korea, he became very interested in the orphanages and the plight of the Korean War orphans.

He continued his education, earning his BA and MA at the University of California at Berkeley where he met and married Mary Ann, an RN by training, who was to be his wife of 57 years. She passed away in 2017. Beginning in 1959, he taught high school for three years (9th grade social studies) after which he entered the US Foreign Service and went with Mary Ann and then five-month-old David (their Down Syndrome son) to Colombia, where George served as director of the United States Information Agency culture center in the city of Manizales. Upon returning to the US, he earned his Ph.D. in sociology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, which led to him taking a teaching position in 1967 at Western Washington University (WWU) in Bellingham, Washington, for the balance of his career. His family now included their adopted son Todd.

At WWU, besides being a teacher, he established or directed a number of programs and served on many boards, committees, commissions, and councils at the state, regional, and local levels. He was the director of the Center for East Asian Studies, Special Assistant to the President for International Programs, and the Director of the Office of International Programs. His involvement and activism was not limited to academia. He helped create the Washington State Commission of Hispanic Affairs and the state Office of Community Development. He created the Planning and Community Development Committee and was a positive force behind the City of Bellingham Park and Recreation Department during his four years on the Bellingham City Council. In fact, he was the first WWU professor to be elected to the City Council, and in 2001, Bellingham Mayor Mark Asmundson named him “Outstanding Citizen of the Year” for a lifetime of service to his community.

George wrestled with his personal decision to write an autobiography, which he described as a fundamentally egotistical act. Still, he reasoned that writing his

story was a worthwhile enterprise. Over and above what he called the “entertainment value,” George felt that he had practical thoughts on the sociology of communities, the requirements of and for social change, and the importance of public service that would be beneficial to those who share his interests.

## George’s Sense of Humor

George had a sense of humor which shone through in his autobiography. He credited his long life with his and Mary Ann’s enjoyment of regular physical activity and the great outdoors. They both enjoyed hiking and walking and George developed a serious interest in bicycle racing when the family moved to Bellingham. He had a bicycle as a youngster and utilized a bicycle during his time in Central America. In his autobiography, he remarked that the only way he was ever going to win a bicycle race was to outlive the competition. It came to pass, as in one race, he was the only entrant in the 70-74 age group. He was one of the few faculty members who commuted to the University by bicycle, and he actually made better time than those who commuted by car. Joining the local bicycle club, he participated in their program and worked his way up to their 100 miles per day ride.

When asked for his secret that explained how he appeared younger than his years, he replied “There are two parts to my secret. The first is to choose your grandparents carefully and the second is to take care of what they give you.”

## Big Rock Garden Nursery

Beginning in 1968, the Drakes began searching for property on which they would build a home. They settled on an 11-acre property on Sylvan Street in the Silver Beach neighborhood which is located at the eastern edge of the city and the northern end of Lake Whatcom. When Mary Ann retired from nursing at St. Joseph’s Hospital in 1980, she went back to school to study horticulture. She studied plant propagation, took the Washington Cooperative Extension Service Master Gardener program, and earned a pesticide applicator’s license.

On April 11, 1981, after two years of planning, the

Drakes opened up “Big Rock Garden Nursery.” According to George, David was about the finish school and Mary Ann’s goal was to create an employment opportunity for “brain-damaged, developmentally disabled, and mentally ill young persons in a supportive environment.” A 2.5-acre wooded parcel, which was to include a solar greenhouse, was set aside for the annual production of many thousands of azaleas, rhododendrons, and maples. Later, consistent with the context of the nursery, the concept was expanded to include an outdoor sculpture gallery selling fine art for the garden. In 1993, the city purchased the land as a city park and Big Rock Garden Nursery became Big Rock Garden Park.



Dr. George Frederick Drake at Mt. Shuksan near his home in Bellingham, Washington. Photo Credit: <https://georgefdrake.org/>.

## Huang Hybrid Azaleas

Records indicate that Mr. and Mrs. George F. Drake, Big Rock Garden, were ASA members from 1981 to 1988. I first heard about the Huang Hybrids in an item that Jack Shaffer, *The Azalean* editor, published in what was then the *Newsletter of the Azalea Society of America*, Vol. III, No. 4, October 1981, pp 11-12. It talked about a group of several hundred cultivars, derived from a 20-year project at the Shanghai Botanical Garden, that Drake had acquired and of his plan for the distribution of the Chinese plants to interested parties in the US. Dr. Drake’s facility with Mandarin and his chairmanship of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University made the connection and his unique, horticulturally important project possible.

I didn’t hear any more about Huang Hybrids until they appeared in Pete Vines’ *Vines Horticulture Gardens* catalog in 1987. Subsequent investigations revealed that Gordon Severe, John Rochester, Eleanor Stubbs, and George Harding also obtained Huang Hybrids for evaluation and sale.

The good news is that the Huang Hybrids are being studied by the ASA’s Legacy program under the leadership of Ronnie Palmer, in an effort to keep them from being lost. Ronnie published an article in the Fall 2016 issue of *The Azalean*, which asked the question: Do they need English cultivar names? I don’t believe there is anything that prevents English cultivar names being applied to the breeder’s working names (e.g., Hu-2-5-41) and that is under consideration.