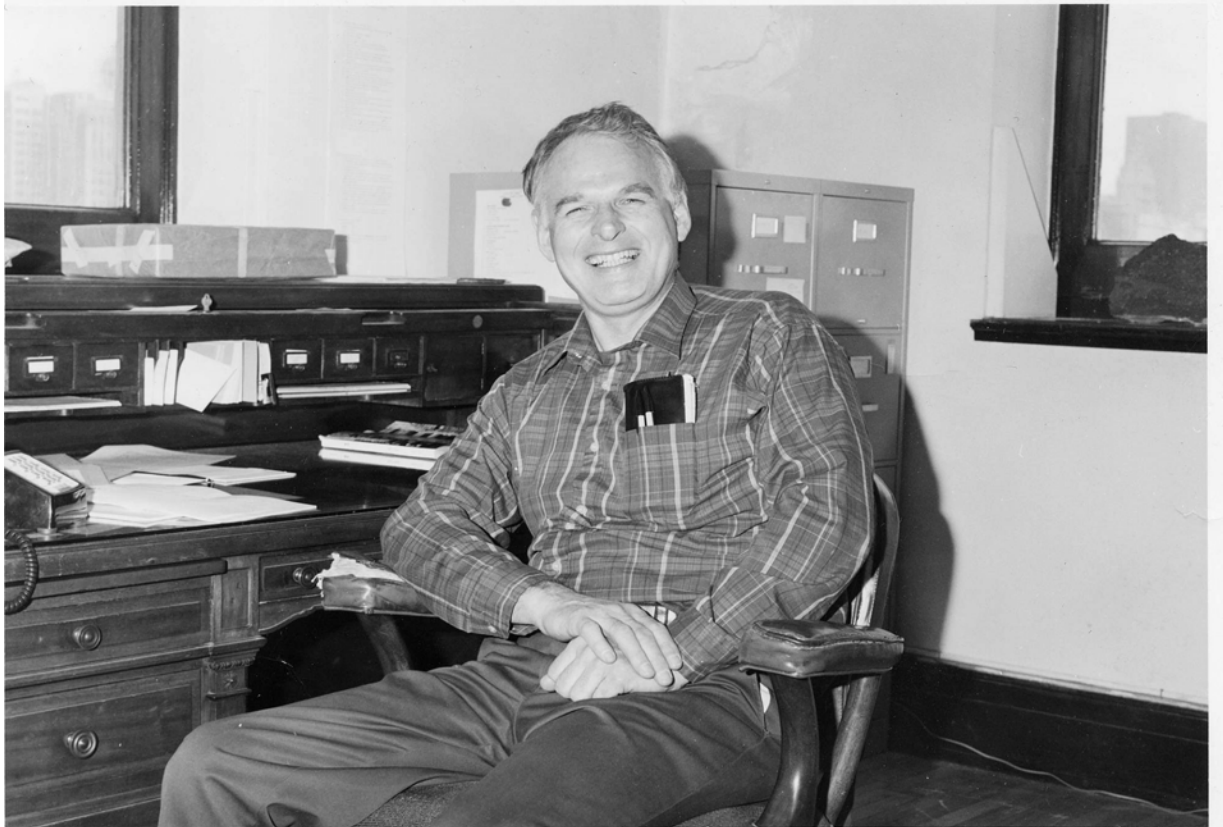


Robert E. DeMar: 1931 - 2007

Pursued lifelong love of fossils

By Trevor Jensen
Tribune staff reporter

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Fascinated by dinosaurs as a child in New England, Robert E. DeMar overcame a teenage bout with polio to pursue a career as a paleontologist and lay the groundwork for the geology curriculum at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Mr. DeMar, 75, died Saturday, April 21, in his Hyde Park home, possibly of a heart attack, said his sister Barbara Roberts.

A professor of vertebrate paleontology at UIC, Mr. DeMar led field trips to South Dakota, Montana and the Ozarks of Missouri in search of fossils. In the classroom and working with students in the field, Mr. DeMar employed a Socratic method of teaching and rarely gave direct answers.

"A student would ask, 'What's this?' and he'd say, 'What do you think it is?'" said Roy Plotnick, a UIC professor who worked with Mr. DeMar.

His analysis of fossils focused on what the animal could do when it was alive, using clues from the geologic record to hypothesize how fast it could run and how hard it could bite, for example, Plotnick said.

A teacher at UIC for 41 years, Mr. DeMar was chairman of the department of geological sciences from 1979 to 1986. He retired in 1997. Many of the courses he developed early in his career are still offered at the school, Plotnick said.

Mr. DeMar also was a research associate at the Field Museum, using its collections to further his study of primitive amphibians, said John Bolt, curator in the museum's geology department. One of Mr. DeMar's interests was the dynamics of tooth replacement in those amphibians, Bolt said.

Mr. DeMar's father was Clarence DeMar, winner of seven Boston Marathons. As a boy in New Hampshire, Mr. DeMar had a paper route and, demonstrating the tenacity and ingenuity that would serve him well throughout life, learned to knit so he could make mittens and hats to stay warm in winter, Bolt said.

The summer before he was to enter college, he contracted polio, his sister said.

He recovered in time to start at Harvard College only a month or so late but was left with an unusual gait and bouts of post-polio syndrome that often made walking difficult for the rest of his life.

"You could see in some sense he was disabled, but he'd never mention it and he'd carry on like anybody else," Bolt said.

After Harvard, he received a master's degree and doctorate from the University of Chicago and started as an instructor at UIC when the campus was on Navy Pier. He met his wife, Mary Lou, on a field trip to the Ozarks in the late 1950s. She died in 2001.

An accomplished cook, Mr. DeMar developed a knack for Chinese cuisine.

He also became quite attached to dogs, first an Australian cattle dog named Xanthippe -- the name of Socrates' wife and also a cow on the DeMar family farm -- and later a border collie named Venus.

Survivors include two other sisters, Dorothy Foster and Betty Mueller.

A service will be held at 3 p.m. June 17 in First Unitarian Church of Chicago, 5650 S. Woodlawn Ave.