

Remembering Robert B. “Mac” McLaughlin 1922 – 2012

John Gustav Delly

Editor’s note: Robert B. McLaughlin, a noted microscopist, longtime contributor to The Microscope and author of two volumes of The Microscope Series monographs, died on April 6, 2012, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. He was 90 years old. Following is a remembrance of Mr. McLaughlin by his friend, John G. Delly.

Readers will be saddened to learn about the passing of Robert B. McLaughlin in early April. He had just turned 90 years old in January.

Mac, as he was known to his friends, will be remembered by longtime readers of *The Microscope* as the author and editor of the popular “Diatoms” column, which appeared in each quarterly issue for 10 years in 1985–1995. He also wrote two highly respected books in the Microscope Series: *Accessories for the Light Microscope* (1975) and *Special Methods in Light Microscopy* (1977).

In addition, he authored or co-authored numerous articles on diatoms for specialty journals, including a major contribution (with John L. Stone), “Some Late Pleistocene Diatoms of the Kenai Peninsula, Alaska” (*Nova Hedwigia*, 1986). Mac’s contribution to



Robert McLaughlin in 2000.

Photo by Jorge H. Aigla

the diatom and microscopy literature was formally recognized when he received the Annual Award of the State Microscopical Society of Illinois. The ultimate recognition of Mac as a diatomist came when he had a diatom named after him: *Gomphonema maclaughlinii* E. Reichardt. He proudly displayed a photomicrograph of this diatom on the letterhead of his stationery. Incidentally, he was also mentioned by name in a crime novel by Patricia Cornwell as an expert in diatom identification during a forensic examination of trace evidence.

Mac and I first met several decades ago, when we were both members of The Quekett Microscopical Club, and he was still living in Alaska. I initiated a correspondence by Air Letter,

which was the standard snail mail of the time, and that continued until he retired to Santa Fe, at which time Mac and I learned that we were both amateur radio operators. From then on, we had skeds (prescheduled radio-telegraph contacts) via 20-meter or 40-meter shortwave every Thursday evening.

I remember our initial contact using International Morse code. My code speed was quite high, but I was

sending at 15 words per minute (wpm). As he kept up, I increased to 20 wpm, then 25 and 30. Mac was not only keeping up, but leaving me in his dust, and eventually, beyond 35 wpm, I had to ask him to QRS (slow down). It was then that I learned that Mac had received his ham ticket (FCC-assigned Radio Operator License) in 1938, when he was 16 years old. He built his own radio station, of course, and was assigned the call sign W6QIN.

In 1940, Mac joined the Navy for six years, and at boot camp in San Diego, he qualified for Aviation Radio School. He was subsequently sent to the Naval Air Station at Seattle, where he became a radio operator aboard a PBY aircraft. The squadron went to Kodiak, Alaska, in early summer 1941. It was here that he became a high-speed Navy telegrapher. The Navy did not furnish bugs (a kind of telegraph key with springs and adjustable weights that allows for adjustment of speed and touch) at the time, and Mac supplied his own — a MacKey, which he was still using to communicate with me. Mac's "fist" was beautiful; his tone was pure, and his well-formed characters were characteristically recognizable — it was a pleasure to copy his transmissions.

After Pearl Harbor, Mac and a buddy of his volunteered for a mission to install a one receiver/one transmitter radio station for weather reporting at Chernofski Bay on the other end of Unalaska Island. After a year at Umnak, Mac was transferred to be in charge of the Amchitka Transmitter Station at Kirilof Point. Then it was back to the States, where he became Chief-In-Charge of the Naval Transmitter Station at Pensacola, Florida.

In 1946, Mac went to Tri-State College in Angola, Indiana, and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in Electrical Engineering. He then moved to Anchorage, Alaska and the Civil Aeronautics Administration, where he was responsible for both the Intra-Alaska and Trans-Oceanic sites. In 1961, Mac became interested in diatoms, and started his studies on the diatoms found in Alaska's Kenai Peninsula. It was during this time that he started his unpublished 500-page personal manuscript notebook on diatom structure and identification.

His letters, which were always typed on his "mill" (manual typewriter), and his code transmissions were always full of fascinating detail about his diatom studies. I showed a selection of these communications to the Editor of this journal at the time, and Mac was invited to write a regular column on diatoms. Fortunately for us, he accepted, and gave us 10 years of articles and two books.

Mac's microscopy lab in Santa Fe, which was housed in his radio shack, was equipped with a Leitz CM microscope and a Zeiss Standard microscope. Interestingly, while in Santa Fe, Mac became a Research Associate of the Museum of New Mexico, where, from 1981 to 1991, he specialized in the microscopical examination of folk and fine art. I remember one project he worked on in particular, which involved the question of the origin of a specific piece of Southwest Indian pottery. Mac sampled the clay used to make the pottery, and found diatoms mixed with the clay. He identified the diatom flora, and then proceeded to examine clays from possible sites. He ended up pinpointing the exact origin of the clay, and thus, the tribe responsible for making that particular pottery piece. Successes like these gave him great satisfaction. As a side interest, Mac enjoyed collecting full blocks of postage stamps, and, of course, stamps that depicted microscopes.

When Mac started to have trouble with his eyes, he replaced his Zeiss photomicrographic camera with a video unit, so that he could view his images on a TV monitor. When it became apparent that his failing eyesight would no longer permit him to do serious diatom work, he donated his reference collection of more than 4,000 diatom reference slides, books and other equipment to the California Academy of Sciences, so that they could be added to what G Dallas Hanna had already established at the Academy. Mac, however, retained one microscope and about 200 diatom slides and spent his final days recording notes on these 200 slides so that his daughter Susan might have them; she has every intention of using her father's microscope and viewing the specimens while reading his notes.

What a privilege and pleasure it was to know Mac. Our dear friend will be missed.