

EARL PAUL STEPHENS

September 5, 1920 – October 4, 2009

Earl Paul Stephens was born on September 5, 1920 in Marietta, Ohio, one of five children born to Earl L. Stephens and Ruby A. Reimann. He passed away on Sunday, October 4, 2009 in Memphis, Tennessee. He is survived by his wife of 65 years, the former Mary Blanche Herndon of Cincinnati, Ohio; son Timothy Stephens of Memphis, Tennessee; son Michael Stephens of Phoenix, Arizona; son Scott (Spirio) Stephens of Anchorage, Alaska; and daughter Kathy Stephens Stracener of Hearne, Texas, as well as six grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He is preceded in death by his son Jerry Lee Stephens.

At the age of seventeen, Stephens competed in the Camp Perry National Rifle Matches, winning in several categories over the next three years. After graduating from high school, Stephens attended Marietta College, where he was captain of the baseball team. He received his degree in forestry from West Virginia University where he graduated as Outstanding Senior in 1947. He went on to receive his Masters degree in Forestry and a Ph.D. in Biology from Harvard University in 1955.

Like most men of his generation, WWII interrupted Stephens' education and career when he was deployed to Europe with the 407th Infantry (the Ozarkians) as a rifle company platoon sergeant. While on their way to the Brandenburg Gate to meet the Russians, his platoon was taken captive and he became a POW. After his release, he participated in the emancipation of prisoners in Germany, eventually receiving three battle stars.

During his years with Champion Paper and Fiber Company in Hamilton, Ohio and Houston, Texas, Stephens was the Associate Director of Research and Development and participated in cottonwood and kenaf fiber research projects with Texas A&M University in College Station and in the Rio Grande Valley during the 60's. In the early 70's he accepted a position as Associate Professor with the University of Florida, which included a position with the United States Agency for International Development for two years in Saigon, Vietnam. His position there was as the USAID counterpart to the Dean of Forestry in the Thu Duc Polytechnic Institute at Saigon. While in Saigon, he helped in the development of a forestry school and the establishment of a wood-products cooperative. His favorite course was teaching conversational English to his Vietnamese students.

Back in the United States, he worked as a student recruiter for Tuskegee Institute (University) in Alabama while living in Auburn. As a professor, he coordinated the Forestry Resources Program and developed a cooperative of 20 industries and federal agencies to fund the Pre-Forestry Program started there in 1968. Stephens left that position in the early 80's and with his wife Blanche, moved to Anchorage, Alaska where he continued his work in forestry with the Department of Natural Resources and as the Executive Director of the Alaska Reforestation Council in 1994. In 1993, Stephens was named "Forester of the Year" by the Alaska Society of American Foresters. Stephens was a sixty-year member of the Society of American Foresters. He remained in Alaska until 2006.

Throughout his life, Stephens traveled all over the world, representing the United States in China, Europe and the Middle East, to Brazil and Australia, teaching overseas and conducting research on the uses of wood and fiber while promoting forest management. His “hands-on” approach to teaching and research kept him in the field where he passed on his knowledge personally as opposed to classroom instruction and publication of his work. He was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Ohio Academy of Science, American Institute of Biological Sciences, the International Poplar Commission and the Poplar Council of North America.

Stephens’ landmark thesis on forest reconstruction is still considered to be the classic work in that field and is a benchmark for those currently studying forest ecology. He initiated the “historical reconstructive technique” that is still used and studied today in forest research. The plot of land in the Harvard Forest where he conducted his studies bears his name today.

Earl Stephens loved his chosen field and was always proud to be a forester. His footsteps in the woods of the Northeastern United States will be hard to fill, if ever they can be.