



IN MEMORIAM



Dr. William (Bill) Francis Font Jr. 11 August 1944–8 April 2022

Dr. William (Bill) Francis Font Jr. died of a sudden heart attack on April 8, 2022, in the company of his wife, Avril, of 53 years. He is survived by his daughter, Sedley, and his three grandchildren, Gwenllian, Gareth, and Wiliam. Bill's ashes are spread out over Whiskey Bay, Louisiana, near many of his favorite parasite sampling locations.

Bill was born August 11, 1944, in Des Allemands, Louisiana, where he grew up romping through the marshes and swamps. He graduated from Hahnville High School and attended Tulane University on a NJROTC scholarship. After graduating Tulane with a B.S. in 1966, Bill served in the U.S. Navy as a Radar Intercept Officer (Suppl. Fig. S1). He served honorably in 2 tours flying in F-4 jets during the Vietnam War from 1966 to 1970. In

1968, while on shore leave in Hong Kong, he met and married Avril.

Upon leaving the Navy, Bill went to graduate school to study ecology (Font, 2012). He obtained his M.S. (1972) and Ph.D. (1975) from Louisiana State University (LSU) under the direction of Dr. Kenneth C. Corkum. As such, Bill's academic pedigree traces back to a pioneer in North American Parasitology, Dr. Henry Baldwin Ward. Corkum's Ph.D. advisor was Dr. Harry J. Bennett, who was an M.S. and Ph.D. student of Ward's (Gunter, 1983). In 1975 Bill started as an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire (UWEC) and in 1983 rose to the rank of Associate Professor (Fig. S2). Not finding the cold Wisconsin winters to his liking (Font, 2012; see Darwin

Wittrock's reflection below), Bill seized an opportunity to return to his home state in 1985 to join the faculty in the Department of Biological Sciences at Southeastern Louisiana University. In 1988 he obtained rank of Professor and in 2010 retired from the classroom to become Emeritus. However, he continued to conduct research as a Scholar in Residence and attend departmental seminars until the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020.

Bill had a 50-year (1970–2020) productive and influential career as an academic (researcher, teacher, and mentor) in the field of parasitology. He was a parasite taxonomist and ecologist with 85 peer-reviewed publications (Suppl. Reference List) and garnered research funding from the Hawai'i Division of Aquatic Resources and National Science Foundation. He is known for his research on the ecological ramifications of introduced parasites (e.g., Font, 1998; Criscione and Font, 2001; Vincent and Font, 2003), seasonal infection patterns (e.g., Eaton and Font, 1985; Steinauer and Font, 2003), community structure (e.g., Lotz et al., 1995; Fiorillo and Font, 1996; Fontenont and Font, 1996), and the taxonomy and phylogenetics of trematodes (e.g., Font and Corkum, 1975; Smythe and Font, 2001). Indeed, with regard to the latter, Bill's academic career began (his dissertation; Font, 1975) and concluded (NSF-funded research as co-principal investigator, DEB no. 1145508; Kasl et al., 2018) with studying the fascinating life cycle variation displayed by trematode species in the genus *Alloglossidium*. Bill was passionate about all things parasites, but he had a particular fondness and aesthetic appreciation for trematodes. His zeal for trematodes was exemplified in his 12 chapters in the *Keys to the Trematoda, Volume 3* (Suppl. Reference List). Bill even enlisted Avril to do the line drawings for these chapters.

Bill's impact in the field of parasitology extended beyond his immediate research contributions. Bill was a long-time member of (at least since 1973) and contributor to the American Society of Parasitologist (ASP). Upon moving back to Louisiana, he also became a member of the Southeastern Society of Parasitologists (SSP; a regional ASP society). He served as an Associate Editor for the *Journal of Parasitology* from 1997 to 2007 and was on the Editorial Board for *Comparative Parasitology*. He was known for his friendliness to and welcoming of new individuals to ASP and SSP. Upon his passing, we heard from several ASP and SSP colleagues about how Bill always made an effort to talk to them at meetings about their research. In 2012 Bill received the Clark P. Read Mentor Award from ASP after being nominated by his former graduate students (Steinauer and Criscione, 2012). He mentored 14 M.S. students, was on 10 external Ph.D. committees, had 3 students for Undergraduate Honors Thesis, and provided 46 additional undergraduates various research experiences. Bill was also a stout defender of science and in particular defended evolution as a scientific discipline to his community school boards. Avril told us that Bill often described himself as “a meek, mild-mannered professor battling against ignorance and intolerance.” In the same breath, she jovially stated that his self-description was in contrast to the “dashing aviator” that she knew.

A few other of Bill's “life-history traits” are noteworthy. Bill had several very strong friend relationships with several other academics and departmental colleagues. Dr. Mike Fitzsimons (former curator of fishes at LSU) was a mentor to Bill (Font, 2012) and introduced him to the Hawaiian system where Bill studied introduced fish parasites. Mike passed away in 2012, and Bill co-authored Mike's In Memoriam (Schoenfuss and Font,

2012). His friendship with Dr. Robin Overstreet (Parasitologist from the Gulf Coast Research Laboratory in Ocean Springs, Mississippi) was well recognized by any ASP member. The two often traveled to and roomed together at ASP and SSP meetings. Ash Bullard, Robin's former Ph.D. student (Bill served on Ash's doctoral committee), shared a photo (Fig. S3) of the two that we affectionately refer to as “the *Dumb and Dumber* shot.” Taken aboard the riverboat cruise on the Mississippi River during the 2014 ASP meeting in New Orleans, the photo is a testament to the strong brotherhood, mutual admiration, and giddiness that the two would display for each other at ASP meetings. Often the two could be heard or seen sharing stories; Robin laughing with a high-pitched squeal and Bill nodding his head in silence with an ear-to-ear grin. But, of course, only those two understood what was so funny. Robin passed away one month after Bill (Andres et al., 2022).

Bill had an instantaneous and directed sense of humor. At a SSP conference at the Outdoor Laboratory of Clemson University in April 1998, Dr. Sharon Patton (Veterinary Parasitologist from the University of Tennessee) gave a talk on pinworms of gorillas where samples were obtained from feces. After the talk, Bill raised his hand and with a straight face asked the question (paraphrased) “Have you thought about doing the Scotch-tape test to screen the gorillas for pinworm infections?” Everyone had a great laugh at the mere thought of approaching the rear-end of 400 lb gorilla with a piece of tape.

Another trait thoroughly recognizable by anyone who knew Bill was his “hoarding” behavior, especially with field gear, parasitological lab supply, and aquaria—everything a parasitologist and field biologist would ever need. His lab was filled from top to bottom with various gadgets (often homemade) designed to better collect a host of one form or another, labeled tools of every kind, and even a canoe hanging from the ceiling! Nevertheless, his lab was very well organized as a labyrinth of homemade shelving and “nooks and crannies,” and he knew where everything was located. It was a surreal place with an aroma of coffee and classical or Hawaiian music filling the air. He was also very protective (think momma grizzly bear) of a set of “perfect buckets” that he numbered. They were perfect because they floated in the water and could hold his host samples without tipping over. Dr. Christopher Beachy (Biology Department Head at Southeastern at the end of Bill's career) exclaimed, “Once Bill finally committed to it, he asked me to take care of clearing out his space. It was a massive undertaking to clear out the space, because as you surely know, Bill kept EVERYTHING.”

On a more serious note, one of Bill's character traits that really stands out was his great appreciation and respect for Hawaiian culture. Bill was at the forefront of studying the intersection of parasites and introduced species biology, and Hawai'i was the perfect natural laboratory for this. For Bill, research in Hawai'i was not only a privilege, but also an obligation to ensure water quality and stream integrity for the native ecosystems. Bill has passed these qualities down to his former students such as Dr. Amanda Vincent, who works now to protect Louisiana waterways for the state's Department of Environmental Quality.

Before we give our own reflections and those of others, we highlight one last distinguishing trait of Bill's. He was an avid baseball fan. Baseball was the one thing that would pry him away from a microscope. Indeed, he was a faithful attendee of all of Southeastern's home games with a seat behind home plate. He

knew the players and their stats. Upon Bill's passing, the Southeastern baseball team took a moment of silence in remembrance of Bill. The team also honored Bill by having a placard with his name placed on the seat he always sat in. It is comforting to know he will still always be in attendance for their home games.

I (C.D.C.) owe Bill my career on several fronts. He took a chance on someone who originally had no interest or prior knowledge of parasites. He subsequently had a role in where I did my Ph.D. I will not rehash these stories as they are published in Bill's Mentor Award introduction (Steinauer and Criscione, 2012). What I would like to emphasize is that Bill was a great mentor not because he told me specific things to do, but because he taught by example. His passion and rigor for parasitology and science as a whole are instilled in me because he lived the lesson himself. Bill continued to support me after I completed my M.S. such as writing reference letters for me well into my career. When I was on job interviews, faculty would often remark on the superb letters Bill wrote. I would also often pick up the phone and call to ask various parasite-related questions or to vent about academic tribulations. He always took the time to answer my questions, provided sage advice, or just provided a considerate ear.

Even though Bill knew he was approaching retirement, he still happily agreed to be a co-principal investigator on my NSF grant "Biodiversity in the parasitic fluke genus *Alloglossidium*: Evolutionary origins of changes in life cycle complexity." Our third iteration of this grant was funded in November 2011, a year after he retired. At the age of 68 and for the next 4 years, Bill assisted in fieldwork trudging through creeks seining (Fig. S4) and carrying buckets of water with fish or crawfish. During these tasks, I often think Bill was quoting Michael Corleone from *The Godfather: Part 3*, "Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in!" Actually, although his joints may not have agreed, he clearly enjoyed the fieldwork.

Outside of academia, I greatly treasured my friendship and "baseball time" with Bill. As far back as my work with Bill in Hawai'i, we would take time to watch LSU in the College World Series. In 2015 ASP was in Omaha, Nebraska, in the hotel next to TD Ameritrade Park where the College World Series was being played. The series between Virginia and Vanderbilt went to game 3 and happened to fall on the night most of us arrived for the meeting. As soon as Bill got in, he called me to go get tickets at the gate. I think I impressed him with my haggling skills with a scalper, saving us a few dollars. There were also a many other College or Professional World Series where we often texted each other during games. Bill's passing is still surreal to me. There are times when I catch myself about to grab my cell phone and text Bill about baseball or call him to ask a parasite question.

I (A.B.S.) am confident that I am still involved in biology and parasitology today in large part thanks to the tremendous support that Bill provided me while I was his masters student and well into my career. I began my M.S. program with Bill under the assumption that I wanted to study the ecology of parasites. I knew I was fascinated by parasites, ecology, and evolution, but didn't have a clue what sort of research project to undertake. Taking Bill's Invertebrate Ecology class introduced me to the animals and ecosystems of southeastern Louisiana, a very different place than Vermont, where I had done my undergraduate degree. He had very high expectations as a teacher but was always fair. In this course, I created an invertebrate collection that

I still use today in my own invertebrate biology course. Early on in Bill's research lab, I started with a variety of ecological questions, such as exploring the distribution of helminth parasites in mosquitofish or eels, but none of these projects really inspired me or took off. Bill and I spent nearly 2 years searching for a project that was right for me, and he never gave up on me. I was unmotivated and seemingly lacking in talent for parasitology. Bill somehow knew that I could work hard and succeed at a research project, if only I could find the right one. One of his best qualities as a professor and mentor was that Bill Font had faith in his students, even when they may not have it in themselves. Finally, in the third year of what should have been a 2-year M.S. program, Bill noticed my increasing enthusiasm for systematics and phylogenetics. He suggested that I conduct a phylogenetic analysis of *Alloglossidium*, a genus of trematodes he'd studied as a Ph.D. student. This project finally lit a fire in me; I completed it in just over a year and finally graduated with my M.S. in biology. Bill encouraged me to get my Ph.D. with Steve Nadler at the University of California at Davis, where I studied molecular and morphological systematics of free-living nematodes, still my primary research passion.

While I moved away from parasites for my Ph.D. and postdoctoral research, I returned to teaching and doing research in parasitology as a faculty member. Bill was incredibly supportive of me through my 6-year quest to find the right tenure-track faculty position and continued to support and encourage me until his untimely death. I will never forget his passion for parasites, the support he gave me in so many areas, and the friendship we developed over the years.

I (M.L.S.) came to Bill's lab knowing I wanted to be a parasitologist and excited to explore Louisiana and all of its parasites. Bill fed my interest and excitement and, importantly, helped me channel them into science. He taught me how to throw a cast net and provided a boat and motor, field gear, and maps to some fantastic collecting sites. It was a whole lot of fun. I could not have asked for a better mentor. Bill and I shared a passion for parasites, but I lacked so much knowledge of how to turn this passion into a career. He encouraged me to be independent and taught me by example how to be thoughtful, generous, and polite. Others have mentioned his southern hospitality charm, which resonates loudly in my memories of Bill.

Bill was a marvel at the microscope. It was definitely one of his favorite places to be, especially with a bucket of fish next to him. He was also a natural teacher. Being able to work side by side with him at the microscope was a real privilege. I learned so much from these experiences—from the morphological features of the parasites we were viewing to the various microscopy and dissection "hacks" that I have used extensively throughout my career. There will always be echoes of Bill in the work I do and papers I publish. I am forever grateful for having known and worked with him, and his passing leaves a giant hole in our profession and our hearts.

No one individual has had a more profound impact on my (R.A.F.) professional life than Bill Font, and I miss him dearly. I do not want to write about his academic or professional achievements, as we are all aware of those. I would rather tell you about how he affected my life, because at the end of the day, I believe most of us get into academia to make a positive impact in the lives of our students. Bill certainly did that for me. I met Bill while an undergraduate at Southeastern Louisiana University.

His classes were not easy, but his enthusiasm for the biology was infectious. I enrolled in his parasitology course in my last semester as an undergraduate, and because of Bill's passion, as I tell my parasitology students now, I had my "worm moment" and fell in love with parasitology. Near graduation, Bill asked me if I was interested in joining his lab to pursue an M.S. degree. To be honest, I did not believe I had what it took to do it, and I knew nothing about the process. Bill saw something in me that I did not recognize at that time, and he took a chance on an average student at best.

Bill demanded a lot of his students, and I am grateful for that today. I constantly questioned my abilities and commitment, but Bill always seemed to know when I needed praise, reassurance, or a kick in the pants to get me going. Without a doubt, Bill Font exemplified what a great mentor should be: he genuinely cared for his students as individuals, was not afraid to be honest with them, and continued to be supportive long after students left his lab. I used to see Bill, usually around Christmas, when I traveled back to Louisiana. I always looked forward to our visits and conversations. He continued to mentor me as I began my career in academia, and over the many years, I benefited greatly from his advice on teaching, research, and faculty relations. He always made time for me. The pandemic put a stop to those visits, and I regret greatly that I did not get to see him prior to his passing.

In April 2022, I received a teaching award from the Association of Southeastern Biologists. As I accepted the award, I thought of Bill and the impact he had on my life. Much to my regret, I never had the opportunity to share the news with Bill as he passed a few days later. I realized that none of it would have been possible had he not taken a chance on an underachiever long ago. I will always be grateful to an incredible scientist and wonderful man, my mentor Bill Font.

Reflections from friends, past students, or colleagues

Dr. Jeffrey Lotz (Professor Emeritus, University of Southern Mississippi, Gulf Coast Research Laboratory, colleague and former labmate): Bill was working on his Ph.D. at LSU when I joined him in Ken Corkum's lab for my M.S. program. Bill was the de facto leader of the lab, helping all the graduate students navigate the university as well as the formidable fieldwork in south Louisiana. After Bill graduated he obtained a tenure-track position in my hometown in Wisconsin. This served me well as I visited his lab whenever I came to town to see my parents. After getting my Ph.D., my first job was in Minnesota, just a 2-hour drive from Bill. During one of my visits to his lab, he suggested that bats might be a model to study intestinal helminth communities. This suggestion led to a fruitful collaboration. During a period of unemployment for me, Bill provided lab space and encouragement as we navigated the formidable task of identifying bat helminths and describing the structure of their communities. Eventually Bill moved back to Louisiana and I to Mississippi. Although we never worked on bats after our moves, we were again only a couple of hours away from each other and continued to collaborate. Along with Al Bush we investigated the idea that helminth community structure might be transferred from intermediate hosts to definitive hosts using fiddler crabs, rice rats, and microphallid digenans as a model system. Although our interests diverged as I found funding opportunities in diseases and parasites of shrimp, we remained close. Bill always encouraged me

in difficult times and provided me with friendship when I needed it. Bill was a great friend to me, and I will miss him.

Dr. Brian Crother and Dr. Mary White (Professors; departmental colleagues at Southeastern Louisiana University): When I (B.C.) joined the faculty at Southeastern in 1990, it was clear he was one of the serious scientists in the department, but it wasn't until later that I realized just how serious a researcher he was. He was an internationally known and respected parasitologist, one of the giants really, and he was doing it all at Southeastern, a regional non-Ph.D.-granting institution. Bill's example was perfect for the new assistant professors! I also loved that Bill loved baseball. Mary and I frequently saw Bill at baseball games. In fact, the last time we chatted with him, it was after a baseball game, just a couple weeks before his passing. At a Southeastern baseball game after Bill's passing, because he was such a long-time loyal fan, Bill's passing was recognized before the start of the game, and there was a moment of silence for him.

Dr. Richard A. Seigel (Professor Emeritus, Towson University; former departmental colleague at Southeastern Louisiana University): Bill Font had a major impact on my life in three ways. First (and foremost), he was a shining example of how to be a professional colleague. Second, he and I shared an unexpected passion for using technology in our professional lives, and walking over to Bill's lab to see his latest "toy" was one of the most enjoyable times I had as his colleague from 1987 to 2001. Finally, it was Bill (as a native to southern Louisiana) who helped me learn to love Cajun food, especially crawfish, a lifelong lesson I will always be grateful for.

Dr. Vasyly Tkach (Professor, University of North Dakota; ASP colleague): I cannot even express enough the sadness I feel at the news of Bill Font passing away. Although I did not work with him closely and saw him only a few times, mostly at meetings, he was a dear colleague whom I knew from papers and then personally from the mid-1980s. His research provided a lot of inspiration to me, and he helped me on every step of my career after I arrived here in the U.S. by providing support. Bill was an epitome of kindness and willingness to help others, and an example of serving this country. I remember introducing him to another former flyer turned helminthologist during the Anchorage meeting.

Dr. Amanda Vincent (M.S., M.B.A., Ph.D., P.M.P., Manager, Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality; former M.S. student of Bill's): I was a student in Dr. Font's invertebrate zoology, medical parasitology, and evolutionary biology courses at Southeastern Louisiana University. I always appreciated his teaching style, and I learned from him about the life cycles and ecological and evolutionary connections among many hosts and parasites. As one of Dr. Font's graduate students, I felt very fortunate to work with him on the research of parasites in native and exotic Hawaiian fishes for my master's thesis. It was apparent to all that Dr. Font loved what he did; he was always willing to share his knowledge and to engage with others as they shared their research ideas. I would say that Dr. Font inspired many students, including me, and for that I am grateful.

Dr. Eric (Sam) Loker (Distinguished Professor Emeritus, University of New Mexico; ASP colleague): I owe much to Dr. Bill Font. He will be remembered fondly for his input throughout all stages of my own parasitology career, as a friendly, supportive, and constructive person, always willing to share ideas and offer encouragement at many an ASP meeting. One special occasion I

will treasure is when we had the opportunity to collect snails together in Louisiana, Bill's faultless southern hospitality on display, accompanied by a steady stream of banter regarding the local parasites that he obviously knew so well. His love for our discipline and his inherent humanity were always in evidence.

Dr. Stephen A. Bullard (Professor, Auburn University; Bill served on Ash's doctoral committee): He has been a source of invaluable encouragement and timely advice at a few pivotal crossroads during my career, and I sincerely believe that if all of us had his talent for engaging and inspiring students, our institutions, fields of study, and society would be much improved. Those interactions with Dr. Font helped shape my approach to interacting with my own students. These "generational effects" in our respective fields and professional societies are not to be glanced over or undervalued. I always gravitated toward him at meetings and was always glad to see him and talk with him. He was a true scientist, a no bullshit guy.

Dr. Darwin Wittrock (Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire; former departmental colleague): In 1976 I got a job teaching general biology and electron microscopy at UWEC. Here I met Bill Font, who became a life-long friend and colleague. Not knowing anyone in Wisconsin, Bill took me under his wing, and together we learned how to become members of a university faculty. We spent many hours tramping around local ponds and creeks collecting any creature that ventured into our nets. And together we identified many interesting parasites—Bill studied their ecology, and I looked at their ultrastructure. We attended many meetings of AMCOP and ASP, and I became friends with his Louisiana colleagues and Bill developed friendships with my Iowa State buddies. Bill also opened his home to me, and I got to know his supportive wife, Avril, and daughter, Sedley. But I could see that Bill disliked our Wisconsin winters. I think I was the cause of him moving back to Louisiana, when one cold Wisconsin day as we were walking to our cars, I remarked "You know, Bill, it is warmer in our freezer than it is in this parking lot." After his move to Louisiana in 1985, we kept in regular contact, and I greatly miss our phone calls to catch up on parasites, colleagues, hurricanes, and baseball. His unexpected passing will always leave a hole in my heart.

In remembrance of Bill's devotion to research in parasitology and science as a whole, Avril established the Dr. William Font Endowed Scholarship in Graduate-Level Biological Sciences in the Department of Biological Sciences at Southeastern Louisiana University. The first award was given this past academic year of 2022–2023. Contributions to the scholarship can be made by contacting the department head in the Department of Biological Sciences at Southeastern Louisiana University.

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