



VICTOR BEN MEEN
1910-1971

It is with great regret that I report the death of Dr. Victor Ben Meen, who passed away at his home on January 7, 1971. His death was a great shock to his many friends and acquaintances, as well as a family spanning four generations. It is rare and especially poignant to be mourned both by grandchildren and one's own parents.

Dr. Meen was born in Toronto in 1910. His father was a prospector and mine developer in Quebec and Alberta and with this background, it was natural for Vic to pursue the field of mineralogy at university. He did his undergraduate and graduate work at the University of Toronto, finishing with his Ph.D. in 1936. Upon graduation, Vic was given a dual appointment as lecturer at the University of Toronto and Scientific Assistant at the Royal Ontario Museum.

His career was an extraordinarily varied and interesting one. It seemed to fall into three overlapping and successive phases, the germ for each being present in earlier stages.

His Ph.D. was in mineralogy, geology and chemistry, and it was the chemistry of minerals which initially interested Vic. After his first full year of teaching, the University of Toronto sent him to the University of Minnesota for a short post-doctoral study under Dr. Frank Grout. Grout's Rock Analysis Lab at Minnesota enjoyed world-wide renown at that time. After his second year of teaching at the University of Toronto, Vic was sent for another short visit to the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where he studied meteorites under E. P. Henderson. These early experiences may well have been the germinating influences in the first and second phases of his career.

Upon his return from Minnesota, Vic quickly became an expert in the field of rock and mineral analysis. His course on the subject at the university was extremely popular; one geologist has described it as the finest course he ever took. When wartime came, and Vic volunteered his services, it was natural that he should be posted to the Provincial Assay Office in the Parliament Building in Toronto. During those war years, from 1942 to 1944, while continuing to teach and curate, he filled the positions of Assistant and then Acting Provincial Assayer in the Ontario Department of Mines. Mineral chemistry lost a very able practitioner when Vic's interests shifted to other fields. As evidence of his uncommon ability, some of his analysis of thirty years ago are still quoted in the literature today.

The second main thrust of Vic's career had its origins in outer space. During the two months he had spent at the Smithsonian in 1938, he described and analyzed their recently acquired Maria Elena Meteorite from Antofagasta, Chile. Later, in Toronto, he analyzed the Santa Lucia de Goyaz Meteorite (Brazil) from the same collection.

With this unusual interest in meteorites, he was especially receptive the day Fred Chubb walked into his office in September 1950. Fred Chubb was a prospector who had been long known to Vic. Fred, like many Canadian prospectors, knew of the diamonds that had been found in the Great Lakes area which might have had their origin in the Far North, carried down during the Ice Age. Fred Chubb, leafing through aerial photos in Ottawa, came across a picture of a huge hole in the ground in Ungava, which he thought might be the remains of an extinct volcano. He took this to Vic, who thought it was more likely due to the impact of a meteor. From the scale marked on the photo, he could see it was of extraordinary size. The area seemed inaccessible until the *Toronto Globe and Mail* lent their private plane, and the men flew in for a preliminary

look. Vic judged that this might be the largest crater in the world. The subsequent expeditions in 1951 and 1954 with the National Geographic Society proved this to be the case.

Professor Donald A. MacRae, Head of the David Dunlop Observatory and Chairman of the Astronomy Department at the University of Toronto and a longtime friend of Vic's, reported in *The Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, "It seems to be agreed that the extensive Canadian meteorite crater program carried out later, principally by astronomers of the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources, had its beginnings in Meen's discovery and study of this remarkable feature of the Canadian land." *

From meteorites, it was just an extra-terrestrial step to planetaria. In the early 1950's, Vic, along with many professional and amateur astronomers, became interested in the possibilities of a planetarium at the museum. In his many travels, he visited all the major planetaria, and Dr. MacRae wrote, in the same testimonial quoted above, "... he brought his valuable museum experience to the instrument committee and the building committee. He was perhaps the best-informed man in all the world on planetarium location, matters of assignment and arrangement of floor space, back-up facilities, questions of structural materials and staffing..."

Vic continued his association with the University of Toronto until 1959, reaching full Professor in 1956. At the Museum he also rose to become Director of what was variously called "Royal Ontario Museum of Geology and Mineralogy" "Division of Geology and Mineralogy" and "Earth Sciences Division".

I first met Vic in 1959 when he hired me as Associate Curator of Mineralogy. I will always be grateful to him for introducing me to the many-splendored joys of curatorship, and a career which I never dreamed could be so delightful. Vic was an able administrator, and I particularly appreciated him for the amount of freedom he gave me in my job, leaving me far more time for research than I have ever known since.

In 1964, Vic became Chief Mineralogist at the Royal Ontario Museum. This position freed him from much of the administrative detail and allowed him to follow up more fully the third major interest of his career, the study of gems. The mineral collections of the R.O.M., accumulated by Dr. T. L. Walker and Professor A. L. Parsons, were of formidable size, but the R.O.M. had only a token gem collection. Vic built this up from practically nothing, procuring the funds at a time when funds were virtual-

* Royal Astronomical Society of Canada, *Journal* 65, No. 3, (1971).

ly non-existent. Now, through his efforts, the R.O.M. boasts a gem collection which ranks among the best in the world.

Those travels of Vic in which he looked at planetaria were primarily to investigate gems and gem localities of the world. In 1966 he organized and led an extremely talented five-man team to Iran to study the Crown Jewels, probably the most valuable collection of its kind on earth. This R.O.M. team consisted of Dr. A. D. Tushingham, Chief Archaeologist; Research Associates in gemmology Mr. G. G. Waite and Mr. E. B. Tiffany; and Mr. Leighton Warren, who took the resplendent photographs for their book, "The Crown Jewels of Iran", the culmination of Vic's interests in gems.

Vic was a popular speaker. His list of professional honors is long. He was Honorary President of the Walker Mineralogical Club, President of the Toronto Round Table, President of the Royal Canadian Institute, Honorary Director of the Canadian Gemmological Association, Canadian Representative of the International Commission on Meteorites, and of the Commission on Museums of the International Mineralogical Association. He was a member of our own executive from 1968 through 1970.

When we write a memorial, we tend to think only of the public man. I cannot do this particular man justice without touching on the private side of his life.

When my wife and I first came to Toronto — two strangers in a strange land — the Meens were most solicitous, and invited us often into their home. There, in their close-knit family circle, I could see a different face behind the face of the museum administrator; that of a devoted husband and a loving father.

It was in his last months, in his long struggle against cancer, a struggle which he seemed for so long to be winning, that I came to know Vic best. Anxious for the health of his own parents, who were then 83 and 87, he kept his illness as quiet as possible. At his memorial service, one of his daughters summed up his attitude during that most trying of times. She said her father and mother had been, for their three daughters, a pillar of strength.

Vic faced his end with fortitude, with bravery, yes, even with good humor, and his example of quiet heroism is something I shall never forget.

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