

DEDICATION:
Alan Romsper (Roms), 1945-2009

One of California's premier desert botanists, Alan Romsper, passed away on Wednesday, August 19, 2009. I will miss him dearly. Roms and I traveled and camped together for years. We collected plants, backpacked in the mountains, fished, and explored the southwest deserts. When I was still teaching at Fullerton College, I would stay at his house about once a week. We would sit on his front porch, drink whiskey, and solve the world's problems. He would smoke a cigar. It was kind of like Alan Shore (James Spader) and Denny Crane (William Shatner) of the television show "Boston Legal." We, of course, carried this ritual to campfires on our many camping trips.

I first met Roms in the early 1970s when he was freshly back from Viet Nam. We both took a class in Desert Biology at California State University, Fullerton. He went on to get his Bachelor's and Master's degrees there. Even though we most often thought of Romsper as a Botanist, he did his early research on the physiology of Amphibians, and he published two scientific papers on water relations in Amphibians. He also coauthored a paper with Jack Burk on the plants of the Algodones Dunes in Imperial County.

Alan was a member of Southern California Botanists since the early 1970s. Over the years, he held every office except secretary. He served as Treasurer for the last 30 years, during which time Board members will agree (or perhaps admit) that he was the glue that held the organization together. Alan kept the records, he balanced the books, wrote checks, reported our financial dealings to the IRS and kept up our non-profit status. He printed the mailing labels for *Leaflets* and *Crossosoma*, dutifully highlighting the expiration date of errant members. To save a bit of postage, he hand-delivered copies to members he knew. He sorted the mail by zip code and delivered it to the Post Office. He kept the membership records and, like a badger, he pursued members who hadn't paid their dues on time. Most of Southern California Botanists' records, materials and archives were kept in boxes at Alan's house. When it came time to distribute research grants, Alan headed the committee that read the proposals.

Roms took care of records and finances his own way. Nobody else understood it, but it always got done. He was a bit set in his ways and rarely saw reason to change them (though he did finally upgrade his ancient membership data base to a system compatible with 21st century computers). He could be a curmudgeon at board meetings, sometimes frustrating the other Directors, but entertaining to at least some (the Directors stifling their laughter or hiding it behind their paperwork).

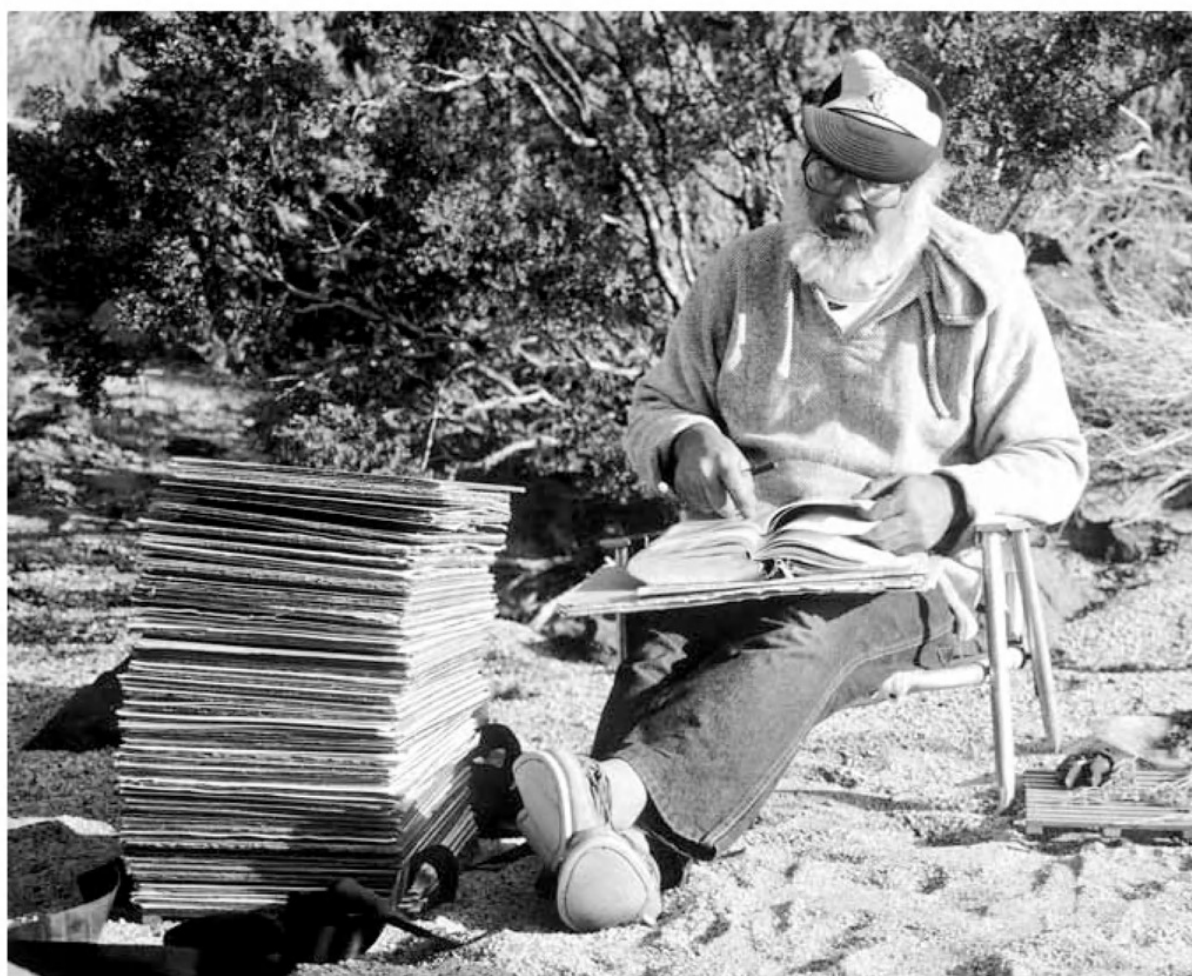
The Southern California Botanists symposium is our single, important social, scientific, and fund-raising event each year. Most of our members look forward to the long day of botany, and chance to meet new and old friends and colleagues, and maybe meet afterwards for beer. The Symposium is now in its 34th year.

Without Romsper's efforts, the Symposium would never have lasted. Each year, Roms reserved the Ruby Gerontology Center and made sure that campus security opened the doors at 7:00 am so we could start setting up. He kept track of early registrants. He would borrow a pickup truck, and sometimes single-handedly transport large folding tables from storage to the symposium site. He made the coffee, heated water, set up cold drinks, pulled tea bags, sugar, cream, napkins, hot cups, cold cups from storage, and bought doughnuts on the day of the symposium. We then set up tables and displays featuring SCB field trips, publications, and T-shirts. During the speakers' presentations he often remained outside to continue sales and welcome late-comers. He wrote receipts and tallied up the sales. He also organized and mediated the silent auction where funds for the Susan Hobbs grant were gathered. Romsper's annual symposium punch is legendary. It consisted of the sodas, bottled drinks, and powdered drinks left over from his year's camping trips, supplemented with ice and a few jugs of fruit punch or fizzy water on clearance at the market. When it was all over, Roms reported to the Board on attendance, sales, and expenses, detailing every line item to the exact penny.

In 1976, when the program started, Roms began a 23 year stint with the Desert Studies Center at Zzyzx in the Mojave Desert near Baker. His contributions to the Center are immeasurable. He was instrumental in all aspects of building or restoring the physical facilities, which were in a state of disrepair (they were originally obtained from an evangelist who ran a rehabilitation facility there, on public land, but without the permission of the BLM). As an expert on the desert flora, his knowledge was unrivaled. It was joked that he personally knew all the plants, calling them by name, "Joe," "Sally," etc. Through his botanical collecting, specimen preparation, and curation work, he produced for the Center the best herbarium in California's Mojave Desert. He collected extensively in the Panamint Mountains with the idea in mind that ultimately he would publish a flora of that mountain range. The Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden Herbarium now houses nearly 600 of his specimens collected in the Panamints.

At the Desert Studies Center Roms taught numerous courses sponsored through Cal State San Bernardino and other universities. I shared teaching duties with him numerous times, including recent years when he and I co-taught the "Flora of Joshua Tree National Park," offered as an extension course through the University of California, Riverside.

Among the groups to which he belonged he always was a leader. He was on the board of directors of the Desert Explorers, where his nickname was “Flower Child.” Desert Explorers sponsors 4-wheel drive excursions to desert locations. Roms and I lead together many of their field trips, always incorporating natural history into them. He also organized the highly successful Silent Auction at the Desert Explorer Rendezvous. And he was active in The Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus (the Clampers), a service group that establishes and builds historical monuments throughout the state. Alan’s love for the desert, bad roads, remote camps, and quirky sites and celebrations, may have made him an archetypical Clamper.



Alan Romsper loading his plant press, Mojave Road, 1992. Photo: Sherry Schmidt

We shall be telling Romsper stories for years. He was a skinflint and a collector. Besides plants, he collected bottles of hot sauce, and he had a huge stamp collection. I don’t think he threw anything away. He saved everything including bottle caps. He clipped coupons from the “Penny Saver,” and dutifully submitted receipts and rebate coupons. On desert trips he picked up discarded bottles and aluminum cans which he turned in for refunds.

Many of us remember his “thrifty” ways. He would drive out of his way to save

a few pennies on gasoline. One of the great stories goes back a number of years, when Roms was part of a group that was camping in the Avawatz Mountains at Sheep Creek Springs. He had left a pair of his shoes at a microwave tower on the south road to Death Valley. He talked the group into piling into a single vehicle and driving back to retrieve his shoes. It was farther than anyone expected, but he kept reassuring them it was just a little bit farther. As it turns out it was many miles away and took about a half day of driving to retrieve his pair of nearly worn out “flip-flops.” That experience, among his friends, led to a new unit of measurement known as a “Roms,” an unknown distance that is probably farther than you think. “How far is it to Grinderswitch Spring?” “I’m not sure, I’d say it’s about three Roms!!”

In spite of his apparent thriftiness and gruff exterior Roms was a caring and generous person. He would loan money to a hapless friend, never expecting to be repaid. He would buy something, usually at a swap meet, and then give it to a friend he thought could use it. Once, knowing I was building a new deck, he bought for me 15 gallons of the old, oil-based formula Thompson’s Water Seal, and never would tell me how much it cost.

His friends will remember his famous salsa. About once a year he would buy flats of tomatoes, onions, and chiles and spend two days cooking and canning. While Dave McClanahan most often helped with the process, I will never forget the tear-streaked hours, crying, while I chopped onions. Traditionally, at Christmas, he distributed jars of salsa to anyone who would take them. Nearly everyone did. In his honor, I may never open my last jar of salsa.

It was in May of 2007 when the specter of cancer reared its ugly head. Roms and I were sitting around a campfire in Cataviña. We were on our way back from Cabo San Lucas, traveling in his black Nissan. Roms asked me about a lump under his left ear, covered by his beard. It turned out to be non-Hodgkins lymphoma. He was treated with chemotherapy and radiation and subsequently was cleared of any cancer, but apparently the chemotherapy had taken a toll on his heart. He began to experience shortness of breath and congestive heart failure was diagnosed. He had been receiving treatment for that problem, but the shortness of breath continued and in recent months he lacked energy. It didn’t stop him. He continued his activities including his now famous roll-over on the road to Cataviña in 2008, and in his “newest” Nissan he accompanied the Desert Explorers on the Neal Johns trip to Baja in May 2009. In fact, Roms went fishing on Friday, August 14, two days before his long-time girl friend, Linda Harris, took him to the hospital for the last time. Once in the hospital he deteriorated rapidly. Associated with his weak heart and low blood pressure, blood supply to vital organs became diminished,

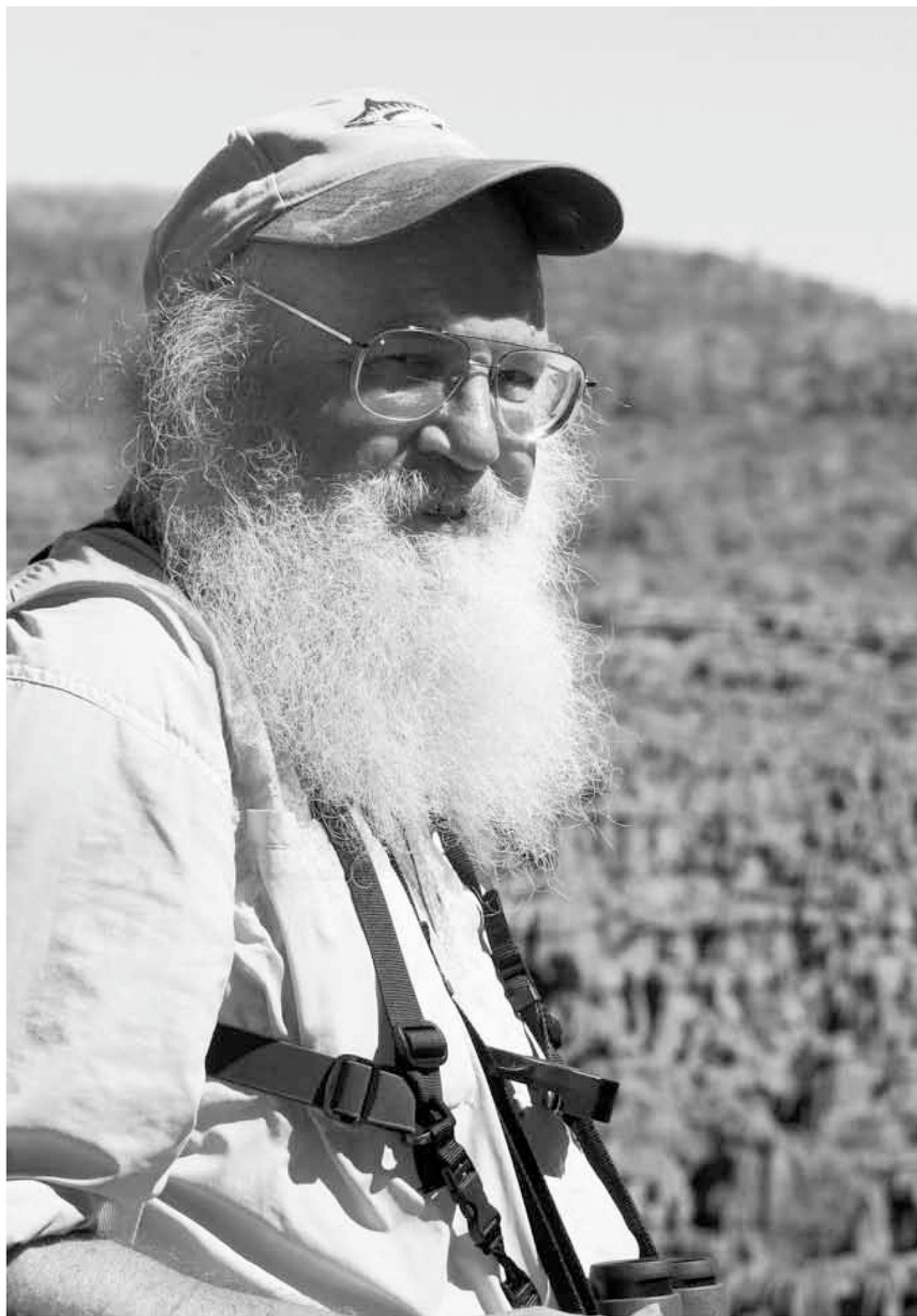
ultimately leading to kidney failure and reduced liver function. Life support was removed about noon on Wednesday and he was gone by 12:15 PM.

Alan Romsper was my friend. We traveled, botanized, camped, and hiked together. I shall never forget him, one of the best friends I or anyone could ever have.

by Allan Schoenherr



Roms at Catavina, Baja California, May 2007. Photo: Allan Schoenherr



Al Romsper in Madagascar, June 2006. Photo: Allan Schoenherr



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