

Findlay Ewing Russell: 1919–2011

“Do you want some water for your dog?” I stopped as I heard the voice call down from the road. It was a hot August afternoon in southeastern Arizona, and we were walking up the South Fork Cave Creek Canyon Road from Portal toward the Forest Service building. Looking up, I saw Dr. Findlay Russell standing at the driveway of his home, the Bar-M Ranch. As my black Labrador downed several gallons of water, Russell invited us back to join him that evening for “drinks on the veranda.” Over daiquiris, with the spectacular Chiricahua Mountains as the backdrop for an impressive sunset, Russell talked of snakes, venoms, academia, and the desert. For this budding toxinologist, it was a rare opportunity to discuss science and life away from the hustle and constant interruptions that have characterized much of life since, and I have never forgotten Russell’s mentoring and friendship at such a critical point in my early graduate career nearly three decades ago.

Findlay Ewing Russell was born in San Francisco on 1 September 1919, to William and Mary Jane Russell, but he spent most of his early years growing up in Los Angeles. As detailed in the Oral History Project at California Institute of Technology (Caltech) Archives (Cohen 1994), he attended grammar school at Santa Barbara Avenue Grammar School and then completed his public education at Foshay Junior High School and Manual Arts High School. Like many of us “herper types,” he had an interest in venomous and poisonous animals in high school, an interest that would lie dormant but not dissipate. Awarded a scholarship after graduating, he initially attended the University of Southern California (USC) but finished his bachelor’s degree at Walla Walla College in Walla Walla, Washington. He worked for a short time as a chemical engineer in Ohio and then joined the Army during the Second World War, serving as an army medic in the Okinawa Campaign. He received a Purple Heart and two Bronze Stars during his time in the military and left in 1946 after an injury. At this time, he decided to enter medical school where he completed his initial medical training at USC before transferring to Loma Linda University to finish his MD in 1952.

Russell was a Caltech research fellow from 1951–1953, during which time he initiated research on stingray venom, work that was later supported by the Office of Naval Research. This early work marked the beginning of his professional research with venoms and venomous animals, research which would take him around the world and involve him in refining treatment of one of the most enigmatic and difficult to manage medical

emergencies: snakebite. In addition to his research duties (and numerous practical jokes on fellow students and faculty), he sought to improve the social life of students and peers by teaching ballroom dancing; Russell and Dr. Albert Tyler also organized dances and invited female students from nearby Pasadena City College to join them. In 1951, Russell worked as an intern at the Los Angeles County General Hospital, and in 1953 he accepted a position at the Huntington Institute of Medical Research at the Henry Huntington Hospital in Pasadena. He remained at Huntington until 1955, when he received a professorship at USC. He worked at USC for over thirty years, serving as professor of neurology, biology and physiology and as director of the Laboratory of Neurological Research and Venom Poisoning Center at Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center.

At the Center, he was intimately involved in the treatment of venomous bites. The tremendous population growth in southern California at that time meant that encounters with biting and stinging creatures were inevitable.

