

## CHAPTER 8: THE RETIREMENT ADVENTURE



Cover to Harlan's Retirement Roast at the U of I

*I asked my brother, Dr. Richard E. Harlan (REH), to write the final chapter to this saga. He had moved to New Orleans in 1985 to begin teaching at Tulane Medical School. His wife and daughter moved to the city the following year. So, he has some firsthand experience with the events of this period, as did I. I have added to his descriptions just a little bit, here and there. [HVV2]*

### **On the Boat**

Following his retirement Jack Harlan decided to unload his stuff. Jack's eldest daughter, Sue, came to Champaign and I helped him with a yard sale, a year or so after Jean died. Jack sold the house, gave everything away, first to his children and then to charities. He then dove to Florida, where he bought a sailboat – a 35-foot sloop. He moved his few remaining belongings onto the boat and the boat became his residence. He lived on the boat on the west

coast of Florida, the Tampa area, for several years. I am pretty sure that he sailed to the Caribbean, and he really enjoyed the islands. He told me about a bar that you could sail close to, but you had to swim to the tavern [REH].

HVH2 is going to tell the following story: Harlan sailed from Tampa to New Orleans late in 1986. On the way to New Orleans he anchored in Mobile Bay for a few days and notified Harry about his whereabouts. Harry brought his two sons, Leo – age 11 and David – age 8, to Mobile Bay and they spent New Year's night celebrating on the boat.



Jack Harlan sailing the sloop, the "Quartet", his retirement home.

After everyone had gone to sleep on board the Quartet that night a winter cold front swept through the bay with strong blustery north winds. The tide rose with the moon and the wind

blew and the Quartet's anchor began to lose its grip on the muddy bottom. As the wind rose and the seas rose with it, little by little the Quartet drifted across the bay until it was resting on its keel silently against some stranger's wooden dock. As night turned to morning the tide receded and the boat began to incline. By morning it was tipped at about a 30-degree angle.

When the sailors finally awoke from their New Year's celebration it was daylight, but something was terribly wrong inside the little sailboat. Everything was at a very steep angle. They crawled out to survey the damage. There were no injuries and no damage to the boat, but this was kind of embarrassing. The Quartet was now lodged against a stranger's wooden dock.



The Quartet in trouble in Mobile Bay, January 1, 1987

By now Jack was used to mishaps with the boat and he found a way to call somebody who knew someone who had a tugboat who would come out – on a holiday (January 1) and rescue the Quartet. The “tugboat” was nothing more than a motorboat with an oversized onboard motor. The tug threw us a rope which we attached to the bow of the Quartet and we all got on the boat to add our weight to the low side. We rocked the boat and rocked the boat and the tug pulled and pulled and finally the Quartet floated free of the mud. Jack paid the man some cash money and he went on his way; happy he could help. The Harlan sailors were now free to try to find Harry's car parked somewhere on the shore. (Harry's remembrances.)

Harry and his sons stayed with his father on the Quartet for the weekend. Over the next few days Jack and Harry, with Leo & David, took the boat out into Mobile Bay and even into the gulf for a short excursion. Harry had sailed a boat in High school and the knack returned very quickly. After Harry and his sons departed on Sunday for New Orleans, Jack stayed in Mobil Bay for a while. He continued his journey to New Orleans a few weeks later.

Unfortunately, he did not pay much attention to the weather forecasts. He sailed into a strong storm on the way to New Orleans; he had to tie himself to the mast so he would not be blown overboard. He finally sailed up the Biloxi River to get out of the storm. Eventually, he made it to New Orleans.

At first Harlan moored his boat at the West End facility near the Jefferson Parish line, but it turned out that the facilities were far from adequate. The public shower, for instance, did not even have a shower curtain. So, after a few weeks Harlan moved to a marina in Slidell, east of New Orleans where he remained for several years. He settled in and got to know the other people living there. Surprisingly, there are quite a few retired people who live on boats year-round. Harlan did not fish, but he had a Mercedes which he drove to town to shop for his daily needs. His family in New Orleans would drive out to Slidell to see him fairly often.

JRH lived on the boat in Slidell, east of New Orleans, for a couple of years. He was talking with the other mariners at the marina and he began to get an idea for a trip to Mexico from New Orleans. What he wanted to do was to work his way around the edge of the Gulf across the Texas coast and sail down the east coast of Mexico to the Yucatan peninsula. He would then sail across to the Caribbean islands, and maybe spend the rest of his life there. So, one day he left the safety of the marina in Slidell and sailed around the Gulf towards Texas. He passed part of the way through the Intracoastal Waterway system along the coast of Louisiana and Texas. Eventually he made it to Brownsville, Texas and spent some time with some friends. Then he headed on down the coast of Mexico. Again, he was hit by a very strong storm from the north. He tied himself to the mast again, and this time the end of his little finger on his right hand got

tangled in a chain and was so damaged that it was eventually amputated. Now, in immense pain, Harlan struggled controlling the Quartet. Finally, the storm wrecked his boat on a desolate beach. When he climbed out of the wreck the next day, he could see no one. He was now somewhat dazed, and he walked north for about 4 hours. Finally, he saw a couple of fishermen on a boat. His Spanish was good enough that he could talk to them about what happened. **(see below)** They took him back to his boat. It turned out that there was a village about a mile south of his boat, and some people from that village looted everything off his boat, including his passport. He had enough money in his pocket to take a bus back to the US border and, as he related later, “crossed with the immigrants.” He called Harry from the airport in New Orleans, who then picked him up and brought him to his house. And, that was the end of Jack Harlan’s boating life. [REH]

Harry heard a different story about the fishermen: My father told me, several times, that he walked north from the boat and after 4 hours he saw a pirogue coming the other way parallel to the shore. Harlan flagged him down and they started talking. The man was a Cajun and he was running away from his wife and, “Oui”, he could take Harlan back to his boat. Everything else in the story is about the way I heard it [HVVH2]

## **New Orleans: the good life**

So, one day Harry was at work on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the Executive Tower in Metairie west of New Orleans and his father called from the airport asking to be picked up. Harry hurried to the airport and got his father who had, literally, nothing but the clothes on his back. Harry took him back to his house in New Orleans and got him settled. Jack stayed with them for a few weeks until he could find an apartment.

Jack Harlan rented a studio apartment on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans for a couple of years. Then he bought a condo, also on St. Charles, and lived there for a long time. We used to have Mardi Gras parties there, because St. Charles Avenue is along the main parade route.

He really enjoyed doing crossword puzzles. He told Richard that he started each day with a “One Across” crossword puzzle. He enjoyed eating out, and spending time with Harry and Richard and their families. He also enjoyed heading to the French Quarter. He continued to do some traveling, including trips to Argentina in 1991, Portugal in 1992, and Egypt in 1994. This last one has been counted as an Expedition (No. 17) in which went on site at an archaeological excavation in Egypt and attempted to sort through some very black charcoal in search of seeds. This was just not what he was trained to do, and it is not clear if he ever found any seeds.

Through the suggestion of his son, Richard Harlan, who was a professor at Tulane University School of Medicine, Jack became an adjunct professor at Tulane University.

### **Family Reunions**

As was mentioned in Chapter 7, Jack Harlan flew his entire family to Rome for their seventh Family Reunion during Christmas time of 1989. Again in 1991 he flew the entire family to Banff, Canada for their eighth family reunion. In 1993 the family gathered in Spain for a week or so. After most of the family left, Jack, Richard and his daughter, Lydia, took a side trip to Spain, Portugal and Morocco before returning to Madrid and flying home to the USA. The family met again in the Taos/Santa Fe New Mexico area in 1995. The last time Jack was able to meet for a family reunion was in Asheville North Carolina, in 1996.

A symposium was held in honor of Jack R. Harlan in Aleppo, Syria in 1997. However, he was too frail at the time to attend the meeting. He wanted to go. He was planning to go, but his doctor found out about it and told him this would be a very bad idea. If something happened and he needed immediate medical attention, he might not be able to get the kind of care he would be able to get here in the United States. So, he recorded a message and sent it to Aleppo instead of going.

Jack Harlan continued to publish many scientific articles even after he retired in 1984. Between then and 1997, he published more than 30 articles, and one book: *The Living Fields, Our*

*Agricultural Heritage*, Cambridge University Press, 1995. Dr. Harlan told this author that his friend Meg Brooks came up with the title for the book as it was a contrast to the killing fields in Cambodia in the 1970's. *The Living Fields* offers an outstanding summary of the life and work of this great man, who lived during a time of great transition in this world. He saw the old ways and marveled at the new ways. Unlike his earlier books, *the Living Fields* contains very few references to other books or scientific publications. This is just the summary thoughts of a great man who spent his entire life in pursuit of the foundations of the agricultural systems that feed the world.

The following is copied from the last two paragraphs of Jack Harlan's last book, *The Living Fields*:

But there are other things to share: understanding, respect for other cultures, admiration for the arts, lifestyles and customs of other lands and other times. The music, dance, poetry, ceramics, weaving, painting, basketry, carvings, costumes, cuisine, the beverages, rites, ceremonies and festivals. If not fully shared can at least be appreciated. I have been so fortunate as to feast in the rich tapestry of human diversity. I was there before the great homogenization set in, before the taped music, the Big Mac and Kentucky Fried Chicken penetrated the Orient. I have seen the great bazaars of the Near East – Istanbul, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Tehran – when they represented cultures now nearly gone. Of them all, the old bazaar of Istanbul before it was burned down was the most romantic and picturesque.<sup>1</sup> People were born, lived out their lives and died in this place. The lofty, vaulted ceilings seemed to disappear in the sooty gloom from fires kindled for winter warmth. Camel caravans plodded among the stalls, with huge jars, one on each side; olive oil, they told me, but each was large enough to hold a man as in Ali Baba and the 40 thieves. There was an elegant restaurant upstairs with windows looking out on the Golden Horn and heated in winter by great brass braziers of charcoal.

All this is now gone. After the great fire, the bazaar was never replaced, and the current markets are lit by neon and modern glitz. This can be verified on-line, for a modern photo of

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<sup>1</sup>Harlan may be referring to the fire of November 27, 1954 which destroyed 1666 shops [HVVH2].

one of streets, see (open in a new window):

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand\\_Bazaar,\\_Istanbul#/media/File:Kapali\\_Carsi-Grand\\_Bazar-Istanbul-Sep08.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Bazaar,_Istanbul#/media/File:Kapali_Carsi-Grand_Bazar-Istanbul-Sep08.jpg).

Jack continues: One can travel over Turkey today and seldom see a camel or a threshing floor. I appreciated the old ways and was lucky to have seen them, but the homogenization of modern cultures may have value in the long run. Perhaps we can be less divisive; perhaps there can be less conflict, less hatred, less ethnic pride. Current headlines are not encouraging, but in the end, we may find fewer things to quarrel about and a more universal feeling of brotherhood and commonality. Peace on earth and good will toward men!

### **New Orleans: the bad life**

REH continues: While he was living in his studio apartment, fairly early in his life as a landlubber, Jack Harlan was diagnosed with malignant melanoma. The lesion was on his chest, right about where his skin would have been exposed to the sun by an open-necked shirt. He had spent many years in the sun without the benefit of sunscreen, and this undoubtedly contributed to his condition. He had surgery to remove it but did not bother with any medical follow-up after the surgery.

At some point in his New Orleans life, he began seeing Meg Brooks, who had been his first graduate student at OSU. They were about the same age, as Meg had started graduate school later in life. Her husband had recently passed away, and like Jack, she was lonely without her spouse. Meg lived in Memphis, where most of her children and grandchildren lived, so Jack and Meg would take turns visiting each other, or would meet somewhere in the middle and travel throughout the Southeast together by car. On one of these trips, in Alabama, Jack was taken with “the worst attack of heartburn I had ever had.” A trip to the ER in Birmingham and a cardiac angiogram showed that he had suffered a heart attack and was in need of cardiac bypass surgery. Further tests once he returned to New Orleans confirmed this diagnosis, and also indicated that one of his heart valves needed to be replaced. He underwent



triple bypass surgery and the replacement of one heart valve with a xenograft from a pig<sup>2</sup>. The surgery was a success, but unfortunately, he developed an immune response to the pig valve and had to be re-operated for the insertion of a mechanical heart valve. He was never quite the same after that [REH]. This operation left him in great pain. Jack Harlan was a classic stoic and never allowed himself to reveal that he was in pain; but this one must have really hurt, because he let those around him know that he was in serious pain [HVH2].

His life became more and more sedentary, and he suffered from spells of unconsciousness, although he did not mention this to his family. One of these episodes resulted in an automobile accident. He was the only one injured, although his car was a total wreck and that marked the end of his driving days. He was taken, unconscious, to Charity Hospital in New Orleans, and, as his wallet had gone missing after the accident, he had no identification. Because of this, he was registered in the emergency room as “Unknown Jamaica.” Apparently, they went down the alphabet in the ER and assigned the unidentified a moniker based on this. Jack eventually regained consciousness and Richard was notified of what had happened.

Harlan also broke one of his legs in the accident and during his recovery Harry encouraged him to start walking on before it had completely healed, and the lower leg bone got a bend in it. He never complained about any pain in that leg. He just looked like he had a bow leg.

Jack was not badly injured, but at that point an MRI was done on his head which showed many small lesions in his brain. There was initially some confusion about the cause of this, as Jack was taking an anticoagulant due to his having a mechanical heart valve, and the doctor thought he might be bleeding into his brain from that. After this episode, Jack moved into an assisted living facility, as he could no longer live on his own. He was not happy living there, having been a man used to roving the world, rather than sitting in a small room all day. Occasionally, he would bust out of the joint and take a cab to the French Quarter, where he

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<sup>2</sup> That is, they transplanted a heart valve from a pig into Jack Harlan.

would revisit his favorite haunts. After one of these outings, he forgot he was living in the facility and had the cab driver take him to his condo on St. Charles Avenue. He was MIA from the facility for several days before he was located. All of this was a symptom of his worsening physical and mental condition. Finally, he had a seizure that was witnessed by someone at the facility, and another MRI showed more lesions in his brain. At that point, it was remembered that he had had a melanoma, and the diagnosis at that point became metastatic melanoma. The aggressive skin cancer had migrated to his brain. At that time, there were no treatment options, and he went steadily downhill. Harry was with him at the time of his death, August 26, 1998.

## **The Legacy of JRH**

It is difficult to fully appreciate the legacy of a person, especially one who was involved in so many different activities. The following is an interpretation of the legacy of JRH.

Jack R. Harlan collected many plants/seeds from around the world, many of which had a huge economic impact. It has been estimated that he collected more than 12,000 accessions from 45 countries (Hymowitz, *Biographical Memoirs*, volume 82, 2003; National Academies Press). Many of the seeds remain in seed banks all over the world.

He produced a big-picture view of the origin of cultivated crops, with the concept of centers and non-centers of biodiversity. He realized that the exact origins of cultivated crops may never be known, but that centers (and non-centers) of biodiversity are critical to the understanding of where crops were domesticated, and for the potential salvation of crops due to the current lack of genetic diversity.

Harlan and de Wet innovated a system of primary, secondary and tertiary gene pools for crops, which is still in use by many people.

He created the Crop Evolution Laboratory at the University of Illinois, which is still in existence. Although the CEL Herbarium was ignored after JRH retired, it has recently been revived and is under the stewardship of Dr. Chance W. Riggins (see Chapter 7).

Jack Harlan emphasized the importance of ecological and crop diversity. He realized and publicized the loss of biodiversity due to modern farming techniques.

He developed a concept of weeds, which, although has not been widely accepted, makes a great deal of sense. The common definition of a weed is a plant that is not wanted and is growing in competition with plants that are wanted. However, what happens if one person wants a certain kind of plant and another person does not like that kind of plant? Does the person who does not like the plant get to declare it to be a weed? Some people argue that a weed is a useless plant. However, JRH noted that “weeds” were likely to have been the predecessors of today’s cultivated plants because they share much of the same germplasm, and they grow well in areas that are disturbed, such as by farming. Indeed, JRH defined a weed as an organism (not just a plant) that thrives in a disturbed environment. He also found that some weeds cross with crop plants and, thus, harbor some genes which might be beneficial to the crop plants. The same could be said for wild plants growing near the cultivated fields. They too might have valuable genetic material useful for the development of crop plants.

Even in retirement Dr. Jack R. Harlan kept receiving awards. One was presented to him in March of 1996 by the Board of Trustees of the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) “In recognition of your outstanding contribution to the conservation and use of genetic resources worldwide.”

Jack Harlan died from skin cancer which migrated to his brain. This was a great irony. Jack Harlan’s greatest asset was his brain. He trained his brain and he learned to use his brain in many ways in his scientific endeavors. It was his greatest asset, and yet it was the brain that came under attack and which finally became his doom. But, note that the brain cancer

originated as skin cancer, which he acquired after spending many, many hours working in the hot tropical sun, trekking across mountain passes, jungles and river valleys, and through making countless crosses, always searching for the answers to the puzzle that was the great question of how mankind's life-giving domestic crops were derived from wild plants. This was the great cause of his life. This is what he fought for and this is how he died. So, we can safely say that Jack R. Harlan gave his life for his cause. And need we add that in doing so he pioneered in something which he really did not intentionally strive for and that was crop biodiversity? This field grew out of the seeds planted by Dr. Harlan and many others; but we can safely say that Jack Harlan was a godfather of the modern crop biodiversity movement.

He was also an outstanding husband, father and grandfather. He is missed in this life but his legacy lives on. [HVH2]

### **Some Final Thoughts**

Jack Harlan lived a most extraordinary and adventuresome life and he made a significant contribution to our scientific understanding about the origins of domesticated plants, but he was not perfect. None of us are perfect. There has been only one who lived his life on planet Earth without sin. His name was Jesus. He lived about 2000 years ago. The world hated him because he was perfect, and they killed him on a Roman cross. He paid the required price for our sins. Because he was sinless, he was able to take our sins on his shoulders and he died for our sins. He was buried and three days later He rose from the dead. He appeared to many witnesses and then He ascended into heaven to take His seat on the right hand of God. He offers Himself to you, right now, to be your Lord and Savior. Those who would receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior will be saved and go to live with Him in heaven when they die. Those who do not know Him as their savior will go to a place of eternal torment when they die. The decision is up to you. This invitation is open to all. We are all sinners deserving of a burning hell, but there is a way out. His Name is Jesus. He made a way for you and for me. When you receive Him into your life you will be changed and a whole new future awaits you. Will you say "Yes" to Jesus? HVH2