



William T. James (1903-1998)

The following memorial for William T. James was presented at Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology by Roger K. Thomas.

Dr. William Thomas James, Honorary Life Member of SSPP, died July 23, 1998, approximately 6 weeks after his 95th birthday (June 9, 1903). A native of South Carolina, James was a graduate of Furman University (B.S., 1924) and Cornell University (Ph.D., 1929). At Cornell, he studied initially with Edward Bradford Titchener, one of Wilhelm Wundt's doctoral students, until Titchener's death in 1927. James also studied neurology with James W. Papez whose research on emotions led the way to the "limbic system" concept. James' dissertation supervisor was H. P. Weld, and James' dissertation might best be described as a study in human social psychology. However, he soon began to work with Howard Liddell who was fresh from learning the "new method" in Pavlov's laboratory, and James' research career thereafter involved research on conditioning and learning with nonhuman animals.

James had a distinguished research career which he finished with at least three significant bodies of published research to his credit: (1) research in behavioral

genetics emphasizing "temperament" as inferred in Pavlovian conditioning contexts using purebreds and cross breeds of dogs, (2) social learning and social facilitation in dogs, and (3) learning abilities of the opossum. His last publication, at the age of 81, was a review of the research literature on the learning ability of the opossum, much of which he had done himself. For those who may be inclined to see humor in the study of the opossum, and Dr. James had a good sense of humor and wit about his research too, he understood the fundamental importance of comparative psychological data in general and, in this example, the importance of the opossum's neuroanatomical and behavioral uniqueness. In any case, it was only one of the 10 species that James studied.

After a brief stint at the Mississippi State College for Women where he met his wife Muriel, James returned to the Cornell Laboratories for several years of research before joining the faculty at Colorado State University (1942-46). In 1946 he joined the faculty of the University of Georgia's Department of Psychology where he continued until his mandatory retirement in 1970. He supervised the first doctoral student in psychology at the University of Georgia, and he served as Department Head from 1959-1962. Dr. James lived alone and self-sufficiently following the death of his wife Muriel (1985), until February, 1998, when, following a bout with pneumonia, he was relocated to a retirement home in Atlanta to be nearer to his daughter, Martha. His other daughter, Leslie, lives in Tallahassee, FL.