

North Country Living



Dr. Batra honored in Washington Post

(Editor's Note: The following is an extended obituary of an interesting man with local ties. Although Dr. Lekh Raj Batra died nine months ago, we found this story fascinating enough to tell at this late date. The information can be attributed to Mrs. Anne Tubby and reports from the Washington Post and the Greenbelt News, in Maryland. Dr. Batra's late father-in-law, Roger Tubby, served as President Harry Truman's press secretary. He co-published the Adirondack Daily Enterprise from 1953 to 1961 when President Kennedy appointed him assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs and then United States ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland.)

By PAUL HERRMANN
Special to the Enterprise

Lekh Raj Batra, Ph.D. died on May 20, 1999 in Washington, D.C. of a cerebral hemorrhage. Dr. Batra was the wife of Suzanne Tubby, Ph.D., formerly of Saranac Lake, and the son-in-law of Anne Williams Tubby and the late Roger Tubby, both of Saranac Lake. Both Drs. Batra and Tubby were research scientists at the United States Department of Agriculture's Research Center at Beltsville, Md. and lived in Greenbelt, Md.

Dr. Batra, a Hindu, was born near the Thar Desert in western Punjab in 1930 and grew up in an isolated village near the Indus River in what is now Pakistan. He and his family became refugees when in 1947 the British partitioned the Indian subcontinent into predominantly Moslem, Pakistan and predominately Hindu, India. As a result of the partition, which impoverished his family, Dr. Batra began a life long interest in mushrooms.

The young Lekh Raj Batra would forage the hills for edible mushrooms to help feed his family, which he became an expert at identifying.

This led to a career in mycology — the branch of Botany dealing with fungi. According to his May 26, 1999 obituary in the Washington Post newspaper, Dr. Batra cultured and identified thousands of unknown fungi and discovered 38 new fungus diseases in plants.

Dr. Batra received his bachelor's and master's degrees in Botany from Punjab University in India. He earned his doctorate in Botany at the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University in Ithaca. He subsequently taught Botany at Swarthmore College, a small coeducational, Quaker College near Philadelphia, where he met his wife, Suzanne W. Tubby. At the time, she was a student there in the late 1950s.

According to her mother, Anne Tubby, Suzanne met her future husband while taking a course in Advanced Botany at Swarthmore. Dr. Batra had his first long visit to Saranac Lake when Suzanne

asked her parents if she could bring Dr. Batra home from college as he had no place to go for Christmas during Suzanne's junior year in college. The Tubbys had met Dr. Batra the previous summer when he brought Suzanne home to Saranac Lake on his way to a conference in Montreal.

Anne Tubby was immediately impressed with Dr. Batra's smile and flashing white teeth.

"He was very attractive," Anne Tubby recalled.

Dr. Batra subsequently stayed with the Tubbys at their Trudeau Road home for three weeks during the summer between Suzanne's junior and senior years in college.

Early one morning during the following Christmas vacation, while Dr. Batra was sleeping in the Tubbys' den, and her father, Roger Tubby, was off to work at the Adirondack Daily Enterprise (which he then co-owned), Suzanne marched into her mother's bedroom dressed in a traditional Hindu sari (a woman's garment, worn especially in India, consisting of a long cloth wrapped around the body). With a Hindu caste spot on her forehead, she dramatically announced, "Dr. Batra and I are going to be married!"

Lekh Raj Batra and Suzanne W. Tubby were subsequently married in Delhi, India on June 12, 1960 in a Hindu ceremony with Suzanne adorned in a sari and Lekh in a white shirt and trousers. A traditional Indian honeymoon followed on a houseboat at Lake Dahl in Kashmir. However, Dr. Batra stayed in India to work for the Indian government while Suzanne returned to the United States to pursue her doctorate in entomology (the branch of zoology dealing with insects) at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

Dr. Batra soon returned to the United States and joined his wife in Lawrence, where he taught at the university and where their daughter, Mira, was born in 1967. Mira has recently graduated from medical school and is a resident physician at Saint Vincent's Hospital in New York City. After Suzanne received her Ph.D. in 1967, the Batras resettled in Greenbelt, Md. near the federal government's Agricultural Research Center in nearby Beltsville, where Dr. Batra became employed.

After the birth of their son, Persa, who is now studying for his doctorate in climatology at Pennsylvania State University, Dr. Suzanne Tubby also began work at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center.

Dr. Batra had been retired four years from the center at the time of his death. During the 10 days he was in a coma, Dr. Tubby also retired and their daughter, Mira Batra, graduated from medical school.

"His death hit Suzanne hard,"

Ann Tubby explained. "He was very intelligent, lots of fun and had a wonderful sense of humor."

"It was very different for him here," Anne Tubby continued. "He was a very kind human being."

Longtime Saranac Lake resident Elise Chapin concurred, interjecting her comments during the Enterprise's interview with Anne Tubby at the Saranac Lake Free Library. Offering coffee, she said, "He (Dr. Batra) was a hesitant man, but so happy to see people."

Anne Tubby added, "This was a foreign country to him and he had new mannerisms to learn. He was a very good father. Indians love their children. The kids thought he was great!"

Dr. Suzanne Tubby is now doing volunteer work at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. She loves to hunt, fish and garden, and often returns to Saranac Lake to do all three. She loves the outdoors, according to her mother.

Colleagues and friends crowded Dr. Batra funeral service at the Greenbelt Community Church last May in Greenbelt, Md. The Rev. Daniel R. Hamlin led the multicultural memorial service during which an oil painting of her husband by Suzanne Tubby was displayed in the sanctuary, a young Jewish woman and a young Moslem man recited prayers from their respective faiths, family members eulogized him and the altar was covered with a traditional, Punjabi, mirrored cloth. Afterward, there was a reception appropriately featuring Indian food as well as an assortment of fungi, including truffles, morels, and oyster mushrooms.

Dr. Batra's body was cremated and his ashes will be returned to India in the spring for a Hindu burial service. Anne Tubby expects there will be an emotional Punjabi funeral with moaning and wailing. Dr. Batra had two brothers and two sisters.

Anne Tubby reminisced that when her daughter and son-in-law were newly married, they gave his family a water buffalo for milk. The young Mrs. Batra could not speak to her new father-in-law until he spoke to her. She also had to cover her head before entering the Batra home.

"Everyone respected Dr. Batra," Anne Tubby said.

Evidence of this is the Washington Post's inclusion of Dr. Batra among 10 people featured in an article entitled "Passings 1999" in its Dec. 26, 1999 issue.

"They hold lives of quiet accomplishment and interest, which garner them neither fame nor reward but should be acknowledged nonetheless," wrote the Post.

The Post article recognized Dr. Batra as "one of the world's leading experts in mycology." It cited Dr. Batra for traveling the world,



Dr. Lekh Raj Batra in 1989

(Enterprise photos provided by Anne Tubby)

identifying fruit killing fungi, and writing four books and more than 130 scientific articles. It quoted a colleague, Marie Tousignant, as saying: "He was known worldwide for his work in mycology. He once translated all of the Latin scientific terms into Japanese. He was truly fascinating."

Dr. Batra's May 26, 1999 obituary in the Washington Post also recognized him for serving in the Indian Army and being fluent in six different Indian languages, and scripts including Hindi, Punjabi, Hindvi, Sanskrit and Pato.

The Post also acknowledged Dr. Batra's participation in community activities including the Beltsville Rotary Club. He also successfully opposed the sale of thousands of acres of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center to developers.

The Batras lived in nearby Greenbelt, Md., one of the first planned communities that the Works Project Administration (WPA) developed during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. Dr. Batra's Washington Post obituary cites him for volunteering on committees of the Greenbelt

Home Cooperative and the city of Greenbelt. Dr. Batra was also an advisor to the Prince George's County (Maryland) school science program and an advisor to graduates students in the Washington, D.C. area and abroad, according to the Post.

He also enjoyed entertaining children and participated in parades and other community functions. Former colleague Marie Tousignant remembered that Dr. Batra appeared in a Greenbelt Labor Day Parade dressed in jeans, plaid shirt and straw hat accompanied by a sow and 13 piglets. A neighbor of 20 years, Beth Norden, remembered Lekh volunteering to baby-sit her 3-month old daughter, whom he lulled to sleep with a lecture on botany.

After his retirement, Dr. Batra wrote a two-volume autobiography in which he described his childhood in an Indus River valley village, his student years in Lahore, Pakistan where he was the first member of his family to attend high school and college, and the devastating effect that the Indian subcontinent's partition had by creating more than four million refugees in the month of

September 1947 alone. The ensuing ethnic violence that continues to this day not only exiled the Batra family from its native village but also killed all of his mother's relatives.

Dr. Batra also became a coordinator for the food and agricultural aspects of the International Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems.

The 66-volume encyclopedia is a project of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It is a compilation of information aimed at helping developing nations.

Lekh Raj Batra and Suzanne Tubby Batra had hoped to finish his autobiography and travel together in India. They will return to India together this spring, where Suzanne will take her husband to the Ganges River. There his ashes will be allowed to float down the river following Hindu custom.

"Living well, beautifully and justly are all one thing," said the Greek philosopher, Socrates. Dr. Lekh Raj Batra — a husband, father and scientist — exemplified this. We can all learn from his example.



Dr. Lekh Raj Batra and his wife, Dr. Suzanne Tubby, in 1988



Dr. Lekh Raj Batra and his wife, Dr. Suzanne Tubby, in 1960