

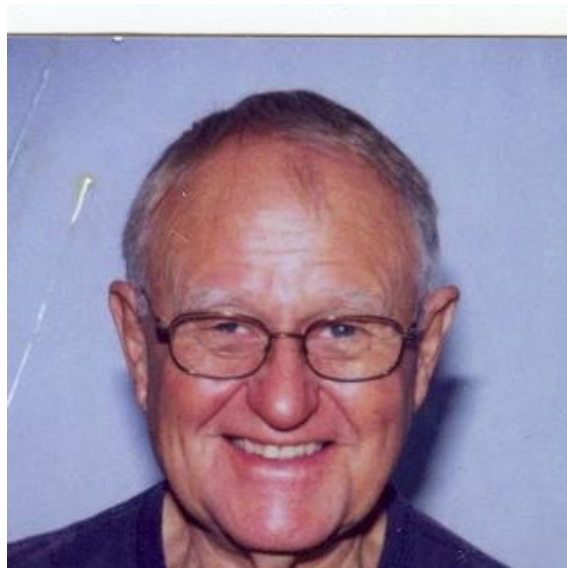


In Memoriam

Delbert D. Thiessen (1932-2022)

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Delbert D. Thiessen, a prominent comparative and evolutionary psychologist, passed away on February 9, 2022, at the age of 89. Thiessen's major contribution to comparative psychology was the development of the Mongolian Gerbil (*Meriones unguiculatus*) as a model system for the study of olfactory communication, social behavior, and behavioral endocrinology. His initial experiments focused on territorial marking with the large ventral sebaceous scent gland that gerbils rub against protrusions in the environment as they navigate their territory (Thiessen et al., 1968; Thiessen & Rice, 1976). Thiessen later investigated the functional significance of the gerbil's Harderian gland, which is a smaller gland around the eye. Exudates of the Harderian gland are secreted through the nose and are spread on the gerbil's head and fur during grooming. Thiessen examined the function of the Harderian gland in olfactory communication, grooming, maintenance of the gerbil's pelage, and thermoregulation (e.g., Thiessen, 1983; Thiessen & Harriman, 1986).

Thiessen published more than 250 research articles, book chapters, and numerous books. His research on scent marking in the gerbil was summarized in a book titled *The gerbil in behavioral investigations* (Thiessen & Yahr, 1977). This book was co-authored with Pauline Yahr, who obtained her Ph.D. degree with Thiessen and then became a prominent scientist and professor at the University of California at Irvine. Thiessen was an early proponent of the emerging field of evolutionary psychology. His last academic book, *Bittersweet destiny* (1996), described his views on evolutionary approaches to the understanding of human behavior.

Keywords: gerbil, Harderian gland, ventral scent gland, scent marking

Thiessen was born in Julesburg, Colorado, on August 13, 1932, and served in the Army during the Korean War. He began his college education at the University of Denver but transferred to San Jose State College where he obtained a B.A. degree in psychology in 1958. He then went to the University of California at Berkeley, where he earned his Ph.D. degree in psychology in 1963. After doing postdoctoral work at the Scripps Clinic and Research Foundation in La Jolla, California, Thiessen was hired as Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Texas Austin (UT-Austin) in 1965. Thiessen's recruitment was part of a major effort to create a center of excellence in behavior genetics. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1968 and Professor in 1971, a position he held until his retirement and appointment as Professor Emeritus in 1997. Throughout his career, his research was supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health.

Thiessen was a gentle, kind, and supportive mentor and colleague. But, his most notable trait was that he was always thinking and trying new things. He was instrumental in creating the Biopsychology Program in the Department of Psychology at UT-Austin. This graduate training specialization soon morphed into what is currently the Behavioral Neuroscience Program. Thiessen was also one of the founding members of the Institute for Neuroscience at UT-Austin. His early contributions to the study of genetics in selectively bred lines of mice is reflected in the extensive use of genetically engineered mouse models in contemporary neuroscience research. Thiessen's interest in scent marking and olfactory communication was part of his broader interest in comparative psychology. He was instrumental in creating the Southwest Comparative Psychology Association, which hosted an annual meeting and provided encouragement for students interested in developing careers in animal behavior and comparative psychology. Towards the end of his career, Thiessen also helped to create the Evolutionary Psychology Ph.D. specialization, which remains one of the core graduate training areas in the Department of Psychology at UT-Austin.

In addition to supervising numerous graduate students who went on to major academic careers, Thiessen taught undergraduate courses in Biopsychology, Comparative Psychology, and Evolutionary Psychology. He was an inspiring teacher, sometimes getting a standing ovation from his students at the end of the semester.

Thiessen was a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, a member of the Association for Psychological Science, the National Association of Scholars, Human Behavior and Evolution Society, Southwestern Comparative Psychological Association, the Society for the Study of Social Policies, International Society for Research on Aggression, the European Sociobiological Society, and the Behavior Genetics Association.

After retirement, Thiessen continued his writing and published books on a variety of topics, sometimes using a pseudonym first name Wolf. His books ranged from his book on diet and exercise, *Survival of the fittest: The Darwinian diet and exercise program*, (Thiessen, 1998), to a Haitian voodoo murder mystery titled *Night of the dagger* (Thiessen, 2005), and a book on psychopaths who were major historical figures, *Psychopaths Rising* (Thiessen, 2014). His most popular book, *Mind over billiards* (Thiessen, 1988), combined his interests in psychology with his expertise in playing pool.

Thiessen's restless mind led him into various novel areas of activity during his retirement. He and his wife, Denise Stokes, purchased a small ranch near Bastrop and devoted a great deal of effort to make the ranch self-sustaining, enabling them to live "off the grid" by generating their own electricity using solar panels and wind turbines. They also created an extensive rain water collection system, making their ranch a demonstration project for sustainability. Thiessen loved the donkeys, guinea fowl, chickens, and other creatures that lived with them on the ranch. In his spare time, he signed up for harmonica lessons and played in local restaurants. He then took up drawing and painting and created his own genre called "concept art" that depicted historical and mythical persons and events.

Thiessen is survived by his wife and companion of 41 years, Evelyn Denise Stokes, his daughter Kendell Simon, and grandsons Brandon Mayfield, Justin Elrod, and Matthew Simon.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Del's wife, Denise Stokes, for her assistance in preparing this obituary.

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