Robert “Bob” Webb, beloved emeritus professor and curator of herpetology at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP), passed away on 18 September 2018 at the age of 91 in San Angelo, Texas. He is survived by wife Patricia Ann Peden (married 1965), stepson Christopher Webb, and five grandchildren—Simon Webb, Sebastian Webb, Gunner Webb, Seth Webb, and Sawyer Webb. Bob was born on 18 February 1927 to Edward Walter Webb and Eva Berg Gravem Webb in Long Beach, California (Anonymous 1960; Henderson 2012; Anonymous 2018; Martinez 2019). Towards the end of World War II, he served in the US Navy as a seaman first-class and hospital apprentice from 1945–1946. He worked at the U.S. Naval Hospital in Corona, California and received the World War II Victory Medal for his service. He was discharged as a pharmacist mate 3rd class on 6 November 1946 (P. Peden, pers. comm., December 2018).

Bob’s academic career commenced just after the war with a B.S. degree from the University of Oklahoma in 1950, where he studied comparative anatomy and herpetology with Arthur I. Ortenburger, who became Bob’s Master’s adviser at the same institution (Adler 2007; Henderson 2012). While conveniently employed as a curatorial assistant (Anonymous 1960), Bob’s thesis work focused on the reptiles of Oklahoma, based on collections made by him and Ortenburger. Bob’s impressive thesis was 282 pages long, and nearly two decades later, this work led to his 370-page opus Reptiles of Oklahoma, dedicated to Ortenburger, who he dubbed “the Father of Oklahoma Herpetology” (Webb 1970). Following the completion of his Master’s thesis in 1952 (Henderson 2012), Bob traveled to Lake Texoma at the Oklahoma-Texas border, where he joined the famous Tulane University turtle crew as a research assistant (Anonymous 1960). Led by Fred Cagle, the crew included, at different times, Case Chaney, Clarence Smith, Richard Etheridge, Paul Anderson, Ernie Liner, Donald Tinkle (Fig. 1), Ned Lambermont, Walter Stone, Howard Suzuki, Bob Gordon, and Cagle’s teenage son, Fred Ray Jr. In 1952, the crew collected turtles from several rivers in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Alabama, and Mississippi as they meandered back to New Orleans. Webb joined the crew again in 1953, this time including Don Blair and F. C. Johnson, for a field season that sampled a wide swath from Florida to Mexico. In 1954, Webb led the crew with Tinkle in a long collecting trip across the southeastern US. Bob left Tulane to pursue his doctorate at the University of Kansas (KU), where he became a teaching assistant from 1955–1956 (Anonymous 1960; Lindeman 2013).

In his book Their Blood Runs Cold, Whit Gibbons (1996) recalled an incident with the Tulane turtle crew that highlighted the dangers of their highly successful method to collect at night. Bob had leaned over the bow and wished a small Ringed Sawback Turtle (Trachemys scripta) into the boat. When he leaned over again, he screamed in pain as a large slider turtle (Trachemys tirannus) latched onto his Adam’s apple and wouldn’t let go. “In fact, ten minutes passed before Bob was free. A surgical operation at night on the Pearl River with only a greasy pair of pliers and a screwdriver takes time.” Gibbons, who joined the turtle crew as a teenager, recalled, “I was in junior high school at the time, so was only a kid who got to tag along, but Bob always seemed quiet, shy, and a very pleasant individual. Nonetheless, he appeared to be completely unintimidated by what might be encountered in the untamed outdoors, including the southern rivers being studied. Of all of the people associated with the Tulane Field Studies at the time, Don Tinkle and others held the greatest respect for Bob Webb, both as herpetologist and individual. Bob’s legacy includes his many published papers on the taxonomy and ecology of turtles over more than a half century” (W. Gibbons, pers. comm., January 2019).

While studying at KU in the mid-1950s and early 1960s under the mentorship of Henry S. Fitch, Bob spent a lot of time with legendary turtle expert John M. Legler (Vogt 2015), and together with other herpetology graduate students, they had weekly “brown bag lunches” with Edward H. Taylor in his small office in Snow Hall (Fig. 2) (Webb 1978). Based on fieldwork in Mexico with Charles M. Fugler and other biologists associated with the university, Bob contributed 856 herpetological specimens to the collections at KU (Duellman 2015). He left KU briefly to work as an instructor for West Texas State University (now West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas) from 1957–1958, but returned to work as a research associate at the KU museum while completing his Ph.D. entitled “Recent Soft-shelled Turtles of North America (Family Trionychidae),” which he successfully defended and published in 1960 and 1962, respectively (Anonymous 1960; Webb 1962; Henderson 2012). Based on the examination of an astonishing 1849 specimens, Bob’s dissertation work became essential reading for anyone interested in North American trionychids, as one of us (EG) learned during his Master’s work with Apalone spinifera (Greenbaum and Carr 2001, 2002). In a letter to Bob dated 28 May 1962, herpetologist Philip W. Smith lauded the dissertation work by saying, “you put an enormous
amount of labor into this study, and you did a superb job. The result is a very thorough, carefully planned, beautifully written and expertly edited piece of work that ranks with the best of monographs.”

In 1962, Bob joined UTEP as a faculty member and taught several courses in the Department of Biological Sciences, including Introductory Biology (BIOL 1106), Human Physiology (BIOL 1212), Evolution (BIOL 3321), Embryology (ZOOL 3301), Lower Vertebrates (ZOOL 3476), Herpetology (ZOOL 3505), Fish, Amphibians and Reptiles (ZOOL 4476), and graduate courses in Biostatistics (BIOL 5316) and Herpetology (BIOL 5305). Bob was granted tenure in 1970 and transitioned to professor emeritus in 1992. His CV and newspaper clippings from this three-decade period chronicle several notable achievements. Bob served on the editorial board for Journal of The Ohio Herpetological Society from 1965–1967, and Journal of Herpetology from its inception in 1968 until 1971 (Adler 2016).

In 1970, Bob organized the herpetology collections at the Museum of Arid Land Biology (the precursor to the UTEP Biodiversity Collections) with the first curator of herpetology, Richard Worthington. As part of this effort, he commenced the herpetology catalog, a hefty tome in which he handwrote over 20,000 entries out of the current 21,947 specimens in the collections (C. Lieb, pers. comm., May 2019). He was appointed as a research associate in herpetology by the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History in 1975. In 1978, he became a “non-resident fellow” of The Explorers Club. That same year, based on the Oklahoma book and 65 other publications, an anonymous consultant said Bob was “among the top six in the nation and top dozen in the world in his field,” and as a result, he received the prestigious UTEP Faculty Research Award (Anonymous 1978). The following year he served as President-Elect of the Society for the Study of Amphibians and Reptiles (serving as President in 1980), and he also received funds from the Smithsonian to travel to India to complete taxonomic work on soft-shelled turtles (Anonymous 1979; Moriarty and Bartholomew 2007). In 1980, he became a member of the IUCN’s Tortoise Group for the Species Survival Commission, and in 1986 he became a member of the Herpetological Recovery Team for the US Fish and Wildlife Service Region 2 (Texas, Oklahoma, Arizona, and New Mexico).

Soon after his arrival at UTEP, Bob shifted most of his herpetological focus to Mexico, where he had been collecting since 1955. That first trip through Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, Coahuila, Mexico City, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Veracruz was made with Fugler and mammalogist Rollin Baker, who had been one of Bob’s instructors at KU before he moved to Michigan State University in 1955, where he eventually served as director of their museum (Baker 2005; Phillips et al. 2009). According to Bob’s field notes from 1955–1978, his trips to Mexico were frequent and extensive, often occurring over the entire summer. In 1957, Bob and Baker, along with several other Americans, drove from Lawrence, Kansas to Nuevo León, Coahuila, Durango, Zacatecas, Jalisco, Sinaloa, and Nayarit. Similar trips occurred in 1958 (mostly in Durango), 1959 (one trip to Sonora and another to Coahuila, Durango, and Chihuahua), 1960 (Durango, Sinaloa, Coahuila, and Chihuahua), and 1961 (one trip to Chihuahua and Sinaloa, and another to Durango, Sinaloa, Nayarit, and Tamaulipas). Starting in 1962, Bob’s position at UTEP was an ideal location for additional expeditions, and he made annual trips, sometimes twice per year, which were focused on northwestern Mexico.

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Fig. 2. Robert G. Webb (left) and Edward H. Taylor behind Snow Hall, University of Kansas, ca. 1969. This photograph was first published in an obituary for Taylor by Webb (1978).

Fig. 3. A whimsical fieldwork award bestowed upon Robert G. Webb on 3 September 1970 by mammalogist and long-term field companion Rollin Baker.
After years of fieldwork together, Baker bestowed Bob (aka “Webby,” Baker’s nickname for Bob) with his whimsical “International and Benevolent Order of the Sigmodon” (Fig. 3), a likely nod to the former man’s childhood fascination with cotton rats in suburban Houston (Baker 2005). According to a series of letters, Bob, Baker, and his wife Mary decided to buy land at Playa Azul (Durango, Mexico) where they collected repeatedly in the 1970s. The purchase was facilitated in 1971 after at least two years of negotiation with their friend Rodolfo Corrales (Fig. 4), but the complex international deal required sharing of the deed by several people, including Rodolfo’s son Luis. By 1980, visits to Playa Azul were tapering off, and shortly before Luis died in 1980, everyone decided to sell the land. The sale was hastened when crops of illegal drugs were found on some of the property and the Mexican government threatened to confiscate it (J. Johnson, pers. comm., February 2019). Starting in 1973, many of Bob’s collecting trips were made with the late Ralph W. Axtell (1928–2016) of Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville. Axtell’s interests in the lizard faunas of the southwestern US and northern Mexico were well-matched to Bob’s, and the two made summer trips together virtually every year from 1980 on, well into Bob’s retirement in the mid-2000s (C. Lieb, pers. comm., May 2019).

Bob was the major adviser for several Master’s students at UTEP, and served on the thesis committee for many others, including William L. Roueche III (1971), Robert M. Kinniburgh (1972), James R. Koschmann (1972), John K. Korky (1972), Jerry D. Johnson (1975), George M. Ferguson (1982), Leroy H. Banicki (1982), David A. Kizirian (1992), Christopher R. Harrison (1992), Travis J. LaDuc (1996), and Alvaro Dominguez (2000). Korky recalled his adviser’s warm personality and impressive energy for fieldwork. “I earned my M.S. in December 1972 with his guidance, advice, and care. Dr. Webb went to Mexico for field work [in the summers], and he graciously took me along [on a trip] 1,000 miles south of the US border. The tadpole specimens obtained were the basis for my thesis, and a subsequent peer-reviewed publication [Korky and Webb 1973]. Keeping up with him in the field was an effort, as he worked day and night chasing amphibians and reptiles. We camped out, cooked out, and wrote field notes, and curated specimens [in the] evenings. He nurtured my scientific curiosity, ‘showed me the ropes,’ and had a fine sense of humor. He was a very fine educator and researcher, I am forever indebted to him, and feel privileged he was my adviser” (J. Korky, pers. comm., February 2019).
Travis LaDuc described multiple aspects of Bob’s demeanor and personality. In response to a question, “he would pause, scrunch up his face and simultaneously shrug his shoulders to his ears while saying, ‘well…I don’t know much about that but...’ and then he would go into fine detail about a given publication directly related to your question, the range of years it was probably published, and a personal anecdote about the author or his experience with the taxon in question. Sometimes he’d include something completely random in his story such as, ‘you know he liked Mexican food’ or ‘that guy really liked college basketball.’ During my tenure as a grad student, he would be working behind a dissecting scope five or six mornings a week. Usually with his transistor radio softly playing jazz in the background. If you listened long enough, or if he forgot you were in the room, sometimes you’d hear him talking to himself (and sometimes not talking to himself politely either!). Dr. Webb was incredibly humble about his science and contributions to herpetology, usually deflecting attention towards others he felt more deserving of accolades. He was a marvelous teacher, both in the classroom and in the field. The world is a better place having had Dr. Robert G. Webb in it. And I’m certainly a better person for having known him” (T. LaDuc, pers. comm., March 2019).

Remarkably, the vast majority of Bob’s publications are single-authored (see his complete bibliography on website provided below). His first peer-reviewed paper was a range extension for the Chicken Turtle (Deirochelys reticularia) in Oklahoma (Webb 1950), and he continued publishing with few interruptions until 2014, when he coauthored an account of the Indian Flapshell Turtle (Lissemys punctata) for the book Conservation Biology of Freshwater Turtles and Tortoises (Bhupathy et al. 2014). Included in his impressive six-decade publication record, Bob described one salamander (Ambystoma silvense), three frogs (Eleutherodactylus saxatilis, Rana psilonota, and R. zweifeli), and 11 valid species of reptiles, including three turtles (Sternotherus depressus, Fig. 5; Pelochelys signifera, and Trachemys yauqua), one kingsnake (Lampropeltis greeri, Fig. 6), and seven lizards (Crotaphytus antiquus, Emoia rufilabialis, E. taumakoensis, Lepidophyma tarascae, Sceloporus insignis, Xantusia bolsonae, and X. extorris) (Frost 2019; Uetz et al. 2019). He also named one subspecies of Indian Flapshell Turtle (genus Lissemys) and four subspecies in the genus Apalone, but molecular phylogenetic analyses that included these taxa suggested they do not warrant recognition as valid species (McGaugh et al. 2008; Praschag et al. 2011; van Dijk 2011; Turtle Taxonomy Working Group 2017). On occasion, he illustrated the species he encountered, and the June 1991 cover of Southwestern Naturalist featured an illustration of Bogortophis subocularis that was drawn by Bob and his wife Patricia, who he married in his late 50s (Fig. 7).

While working on Lissemys, Bob corresponded by mail with Roger Bour, who would eventually become curator of the turtles and tortoises collection at the Muséum national d’Histoire naturelle in Paris. Bour recalled his impressive command of the taxonomic literature. “For me he will be the great ‘softshells’ man forever. I remember that he was immediately confident with me, although he was already a professor, but I was not yet even appointed. He sent me a draft of his work. I suggested a specimen (collected by Alain Dubois) to make a holotype for his new Lissemys puntata andersoni; the final paper was published in France [Webb 1980] and as editor I dared to slightly enhance his sketch of the Lacepède Testudo punctata (with his agreement, of course). Several years later he asked about a catalogue of the MNHN type specimens of softshell turtles—actually he knew virtually all of them. I wrote one, with Alain Dubois’s help, and we included him as co-author [Bour et al. 1995]” (R. Bour, pers. comm., February 2019).

Other colleagues had similar praise. John Iverson remarked, “Bob was a wonderful and valued colleague of mine since the 1970s when I first met him at the annual herp meetings. He was always generous with his time and information, even when I was a lowly grad student. I always looked forward to seeing him at the meetings, and our shared time talking about turtles was greatly appreciated. He and Henry Fitch and Hobart Smith were my earliest mentors. Perhaps the most valuable lesson I learned from him was the importance of starting your systematic studies by examining the type specimens, an approach that is, unfortunately, increasingly rare today” (J. Iverson, pers. comm., March 2019). Peter Meylan recalled, “When I started working on softshell turtles in 1981, Bob Webb was the trionychid guru of North America. I made extensive use of his review of the North American forms and other papers on softshells of
which there were already more than a dozen by the mid 80s. I had first met him with his sidekick, Ralph Axtell, at UF in 1977 during ASIH meetings. From the beginning he was very supportive of my work on softshells, although he did not always agree with my taxonomic conclusions. We maintained an active correspondence through 1990. He provided the most complete feedback of any of the readers of my dissertation and his comments greatly improved the published version. It was in that correspondence that he suggested that we work together on a paper to resurrect Rafetus swinhoei (Meylan and Webb 1988), which at that time was buried in the synonymy of Pelodiscus sinensis. I enjoyed working with Bob who should be recognized as a major contributor to the understanding of the family Trionychidae” (P. Meylan, pers. comm., March 2019).

Most of Bob’s work focused on northern Mexico and the US-Mexico border region (Fig. 8), but he did some fieldwork in other areas of the world, and published several papers on amphibians and reptiles from several different continents. Along with several collaborators, Bob published studies on the herpetofauna of Chile and Korea (Webb et al. 1962; Webb and Greer 1969). Over the course of two decades, he systematized the herpetofaunas of Africa, Cyclanorbis, Chinese Pelodiscus, and Papuan Pelochelys softshell turtles (Webb 1975, 1985, 1995). He published a series of four papers with Korky on the biology and conservation of two frogs, Rana temporaria and Epidalea calamita, in Ireland (Korky and Webb 1993, 1996, 1999, 2001). Colleague Anders Rhodin recalled, “I worked with Bob on the softshell turtles of New Guinea and also traveled with him to Roti and Sumba in Indonesia in search of other turtles. He was one of the very best morphology-based softshell turtle taxonomists of our times and his expertise and contributions to the field will be sorely missed” (A. Rhodin, pers. comm., February 2019).

In 2005, Robert B. Bryson Jr., David Lazzaro, and James R. Dixon, a long-time colleague, honored Bob by naming a spectacular new species of kingsnake (Lampropeltis webbi, Fig. 9) for him (Bryson et al. 2005). In the latter years of his time at UTEP, Bob corresponded extensively with fellow herpetologists and friends, including Hobart M. Smith, Ernie Liner, and Ralph Axtell. Affectionately known as “Bobbie scale” by some UTEP colleagues for his interest in scaly reptiles, Bob was shy and often “talked to the chalkboard” while delivering lectures for his classes. He was an enthusiastic fan of the university’s basketball team and regularly attended their games (mostly listening to music). Bob and I went on season ticket seats together from 1977 until 2016 or so for UTEP football and basketball games. Bob could play the piano quite well and really liked jazz, especially Dixieland; we were supporters of the university’s basketball and baseball teams. Bob was a great companion and travel partner, and we did a lot of traveling together. He was a huge fan of UTEP football and basketball games. Bob could play the piano quite well and really liked jazz, especially Dixieland.)

Acknowledgments.—Special thanks to Bob’s wife Patricia Ann Pedder for crucial information about Bob’s military career. Numerous colleagues at UTEP provided recollections, documents, and information about Bob’s academic career, including Carl S. Lieb, Jerry Johnson, Art H. Harris, Cindy Crews, and Lillian Mayberry. We are grateful to David T. Flores, archivist in the C. L. Sonnichsen Special Collections Department of the UTEP library, who scanned several of the photos. Special thanks to Bob’s colleagues and students for providing their thoughts, photos, and documentation, including Whit Gibbons, Anders Rhodin, John Korky, Roger Bour, John L. Carr, Peter Meylan, Robert Hansen, John Iverson, H. Bradley Shaffer, Peter Scott, and Kraig Adler. Robert Hansen kindly provided the photographs and taxonomic commentary for the kingsnakes shown in Figs. 6 and 9. Kraig Adler and John L. Carr provided numerous comments and corrections to an early version of the manuscript.

Literature Cited
