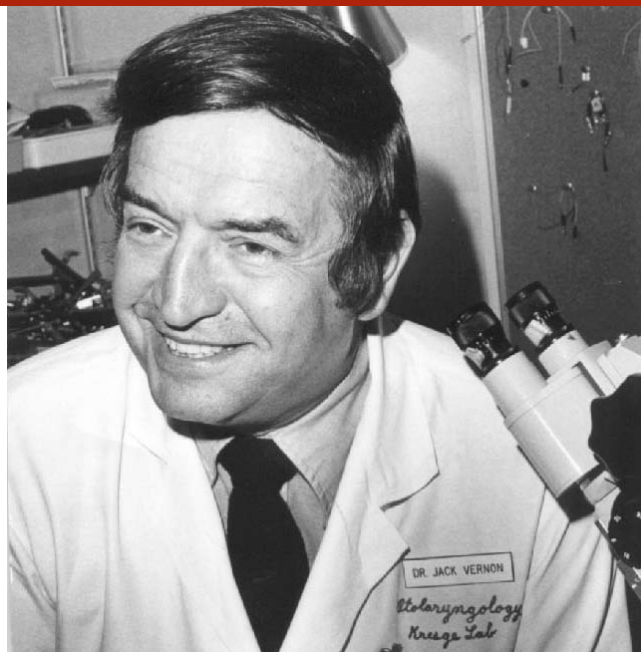


# Jack A. Vernon, Ph.D.: A Short History of a Great Man

NINA ROGOZEN, EDITOR, *Tinnitus Today*

*Notice: Please feel free to call Dr. Vernon any Friday, 9 a.m. to noon and 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Pacific Time at (503) 494-2187 (please do not leave messages). You can also e-mail your questions to Nina Rogozen, Editor, at [nina@ata.org](mailto:nina@ata.org) or mail them to Tinnitus Today, American Tinnitus Association, P.O. Box 5, Portland, OR 97207-0005.*



*Dr. Jack Vernon in his lab.*

## Jack Vernon is a natural born storyteller. And what stories he has to tell!

*We know Dr. Jack Vernon as a world-class tinnitus researcher and innovator and a man dedicated to improving people's lives. He also won our hearts by co-creating, along with Dr. Charles Unice – a California physician with tinnitus – the American Tinnitus Association. Since its inception in 1971, ATA's goal has been supporting tinnitus research. Through all these years, Jack and his wife, Mary Meikle, Ph.D., have remained involved and supportive. It is with appreciation and love that we present here some of the highlights of Jack's life and a few of his outstanding Q&As from Tinnitus Today.*

### Family Roots

Jack was born in Tennessee in 1922, the newest member of the colorful Vernon family legacy. Jack and his parents moved to Virginia a short time later. Generations before, three Vernon brothers unwillingly moved to the United States. They were English rascals who, because of their horse-stealing adventures, were given a "sentence to transportation" – an "invitation" to move to the U.S. that they could not refuse. One brother settled in Wytheville, Virg. and the others in what eventually became Vernon, Texas and Vernon, Calif. "I always thought this story might not be true," says Jack, with a big smile, "but my dad sure liked to tell it. Years later, I had a chance encounter in Texas with another Jack Vernon and he confirmed the story."

### Jack's Father – an Early Influence

"Now, I think I got my interest in science from my father, who was a pharmacist," remembers Jack. In Jack's youth, pharmacists made medications from formulas of pharmaceutical compounds, rather than primarily dispensing ready-made pills as they do today. Appreciating that his own livelihood depended on his knowledge, Jack's father told his son, "What you put up here [pointing to his head], nobody can take away from you."

Jack took his father's words seriously. Since those times, he has filled his head with significant knowledge, patient understanding and innovation in the field of tinnitus research and treatment.

### Mrs. Powell – Fierce Teacher, Excellent Role Model

All through his childhood Jack loved to play baseball. But in his senior year of high school, his math teacher, Mrs. Powell – adored by Jack, but feared by most – kept him off the field and out of the dugout. In her opinion, being a student and president of his 67-person senior class gave Jack plenty to do; he didn't need baseball too. Jack learned to prioritize and pay attention to detail from Mrs. Powell, skills that have served him well.

## Patriotism, Adventure and Good Sense

It was 1941 and Jack was eager to do his part during World War II. He already knew how to fly because at 16 years of age, Jack said he was 17 to qualify for flight training. Those flying skills helped him get into the Army Air Force. He served throughout the war as a trainer on B24s and B25s. At war's end, the B.F. Goodrich Company offered him \$10,000 to fly rubber from South America to the U.S. for post-war manufacturing. When Jack asked about their aircraft maintenance program, the answer came back: "What maintenance program?" Even as an adventurous young man, Jack knew that did not bode well for his longevity! He declined the offer. As Jack's career expanded over the years, so did the aircraft industry. "It would be fantastic to fly an aircraft today," muses Jack with a smile.

## From Graduate School to a Professional Turning Point

The evening after his Ph.D. oral exams, Jack received and accepted an invitation to join the Princeton faculty and pursue his already-respected research. In spite of an offer from this prestigious university, Jack modestly says, "I was just fat, dumb and happy and standing at the right place at the right time." (We think it was a bit more than luck!)

Over his 14 years at Princeton, Jack moved from instructor to full, tenured professor. During those years of "publish or perish," Jack's reputation and horizons grew. One year, the university's president asked Jack to fill in as speaker at a meeting for Princeton alumni. His assignment: inspire them to support the university. But, rather than talk about Princeton, Jack chose to talk about his area of research – bats, their sounds and sound reflection. The audience found Jack's talk fascinating, and event planners invited him back again and again.

The talks precipitated a professional turning point for Jack. After many of his presentations, some audience members would come up to ask him a direct and fair question: "This bat stuff is really fascinating, but what is it good for?" Jack came to realize that though he was "having a ball" with his scientific investigations – funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) – he wasn't doing anything for people's health. "I had to get out of basic science and into clinical work with

people," says Jack. This interest in and dedication to "bench-to-bed" research has allowed him to help countless people deal with their auditory problems.

## Build It and They Will Come

Jack met David DeWeese in 1965 while both men were serving on an NIH research review committee. One day, Dr. DeWeese said to Jack, "I hear you want to build a hearing research lab. I'm looking for someone to build one." Their collaboration led to the establishment of the Oregon Hearing Research Center (OHRC) at the Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) in Portland. Jack spent the remainder of his career there until retiring at 74. But Jack hasn't really retired. He is still a go-to-guy for other researchers, maintains patient consultation hours at OHSU, writes for *Tinnitus Today* and is an honorary director of ATA.



*"I had to get out of basic science and into clinical work with people."*

~ Jack Vernon, Ph.D.

## A Fountain Changes Tinnitus Treatment

Jack's affiliations and reputation as a long-time champion of tinnitus patients are global; he is regarded as one of the most astute tinnitus scientists in the world. So in 1971, Dr. Charles Unice, Jack's eventual ATA co-founder, came to Portland seeking Jack's help. One day, while visiting a city park during the lunch hour,

Jack noticed Dr. Unice standing off by himself next to a large fountain. Amazed, Dr. Unice said to Jack, "Standing by this tumbling water, I can't hear my tinnitus!" An exciting light bulb lit up in Jack's mind. He found a willing hearing aid manufacturer to duplicate the waterfall noise, and the first tinnitus masker soon followed.

### Jack on the Future of Tinnitus Research

Tinnitus investigations are becoming more numerous and gaining promise every day and ATA continues to support some of these critical efforts. Through

is a cozy nest on the Willamette River in Portland, Ore. Large windows frame red-winged blackbirds and ducks as they navigate the glistening water. Window seats, pictures and books grace a home clearly inhabited by inquiring minds that track current events and love good literature.

Jack's nearby workshop has provided him with years of personal joy. Here, he carves and creates elegant wooden sculptures inspired by the work of Oregon sculptor, Leroy Setziol, whose beautiful carvings adorn the Salishan Lodge on the Oregon Coast. One of Jack's totems stands tall in ATA's office.



*Jack and Mary at their home on the Willamette River.*

research, we have learned that human hair cells destroyed by irritants, such as loud sound, do not regenerate as they do in avians (birds). Stem cell research could reverse this limitation and Jack is very optimistic: "I believe that stem cells are the cure of the future. If we can use stem cells to improve the chances of regenerating hair cells, we will be on our way to a [tinnitus] cure."

### A Place of Peace and Restoration

Ever since reading Mark Twain as a child, Jack has had the desire to live on a houseboat. So 30 years ago he and Mary built one. Creative and modest, it

### A Long-Time Love

Jack says of Mary, "She is a scientific force in her own right." An investigator at OHRC, Mary established in 1980 a registry of tinnitus patients – a database for tinnitus research. At that time, there were no tinnitus researchers to seek funding from ATA, so Mary became our first research grant recipient. "Mary is my chief friend," says Jack. "Chasing that brain all these years has always left me in the dust." ☺☺