



## Remembering Erle Verdun Leichty, 1933–2016

BY GRANT FRAME, PH.D.

**D**octor Erle Verdun Leichty, Curator Emeritus of the Babylonian Section of the Penn Museum, Clark Research Professor Emeritus of Assyriology at the University of Pennsylvania, and resident of Media, Pennsylvania, died September 19, 2016 at age 83.

Though Erle was highly regarded by his fellow Assyriologists, University and Museum colleagues, and students, he was a very modest man. The only way we could persuade him to allow a celebratory lunch on his 80th birthday in 2013 was to hold it at The New Deck Tavern, where he went for lunch every day, and to promise that there would be no tributes to him. He threatened to get up and leave if anyone started to praise him. So Dr. Roger Allen, his long-time colleague in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, simply stood up at the start of the lunch, in front of about 20 friends and colleagues, and said “We all know why we are here,” and then sat down. Erle deemed this acceptable and stayed for the remainder of the lunch. Erle’s manner as well as his scholarship will be greatly missed by his colleagues and friends.



Erle was born on August 7, 1933 in Alpena, Michigan and received a B.A. in Arabic and Islamic Studies and an M.A. in Islamic Art from the

University of Michigan. He received his Ph.D. in Assyriology from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in 1960, after only three years. Following three more years working on the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary and five years on the faculty of the University of Minnesota, he joined the University of Pennsylvania in 1968 as Associate Professor of Oriental Studies, teaching Akkadian Language and Literature. He was also Curator of the Penn Museum’s Babylonian Section, which holds over 25,000 cuneiform tablets. Erle was particularly interested in advancing the work of the Babylonian Section. Upon his arrival at Penn, he immediately set about turning the Section into a major Assyriological research facility and making its collections accessible to scholars and graduate students from around the world. When he retired, he donated his personal library of approximately 1,200 volumes to the Babylonian Section. He also established an endowment to advance the work of the Section.

Erle was well known for his expertise in reading cuneiform documents from a wide range of periods and genres. This was the result of working for many years as Curator in the Babylonian Section as well as spending almost every summer in the Student Room of the Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities (now Ancient Near East) at the British Museum. While working in the Student Room, he was always helpful to any student or scholar who came to him for aid. He was happy to go off to a pub for lunch with those he met there, regaling them with stories about the earlier great Assyriologists whom he had known or about the Penn Museum’s tablet collection and its history.

Dr. Leichty was the recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and election to the Honorary Council of the International Association for Assyriology. He played a major role in the success of the Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary project. Erle edited the *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* for 19 years, and wrote numerous books, articles, and book chapters. Erle was Editor of *Expedition* magazine from 1971-73. Dr. Leichty is survived by three children and many grandchildren and great grandchildren. His wife, Annette Sherman Leichty, passed away five days after his death. A memorial service is planned for Dr. Leichty on February 10, 2017 at the Penn Museum. •