

Protozoa interesting companions for zoology professor

By Mary Fastenau

He wears cowboy boots instead of dress shoes. He dresses in corduroy pants and sweater vests instead of conservative black suits and ties. He looks like a college student instead of a professor. He has protozoa for pets instead of cats.

He is John Janovy, Jr., 39, a UNL life science professor who destroys stereotypes instead of conforming to them.

Armed with quick wit, a ready laugh and a Southern drawl, the blond Janovy sits in his lab surrounded by test tubes and centrifuges. He describes himself with a range of adjectives that include handsome, intelligent and articulate. The description is followed by rounds of laughter from Janovy and his two female lab assistants.

Janovy was one of four United States scientists selected to attend a week-and-a-half work session during December in Geneva, Switzerland. The conference was sponsored by the World Health Organization.

Research into a cure for leishmaniasis, a tropical disease, earned Janovy a ticket to Geneva. He has been researching prevention of this disease which is recognized by the World Health Organization as one of six tropical diseases that are major health problems.

Janovy called the trip "a tremendous honor", but said it was not one of his goals.

"I've always wanted to study animals," the University of Oklahoma graduate said. "Going to Geneva is not one of the things

I always wanted to do."

When Janovy starts talking about "my animals" as he calls them, his enthusiasm is evident.

He goes to the refrigerator behind him and takes out a test tube filled with a reddish liquid. He explains the tube contains rabbit's blood with a culture from Khartoum, a city on the Nile, in the Sudan.

Janovy says when he examines a culture, he sees worldwide history and customs.

"I feel part of that part of the world every time I look at that," Janovy said.

He said it also is exciting to have something in his lab which is of worldwide fame.

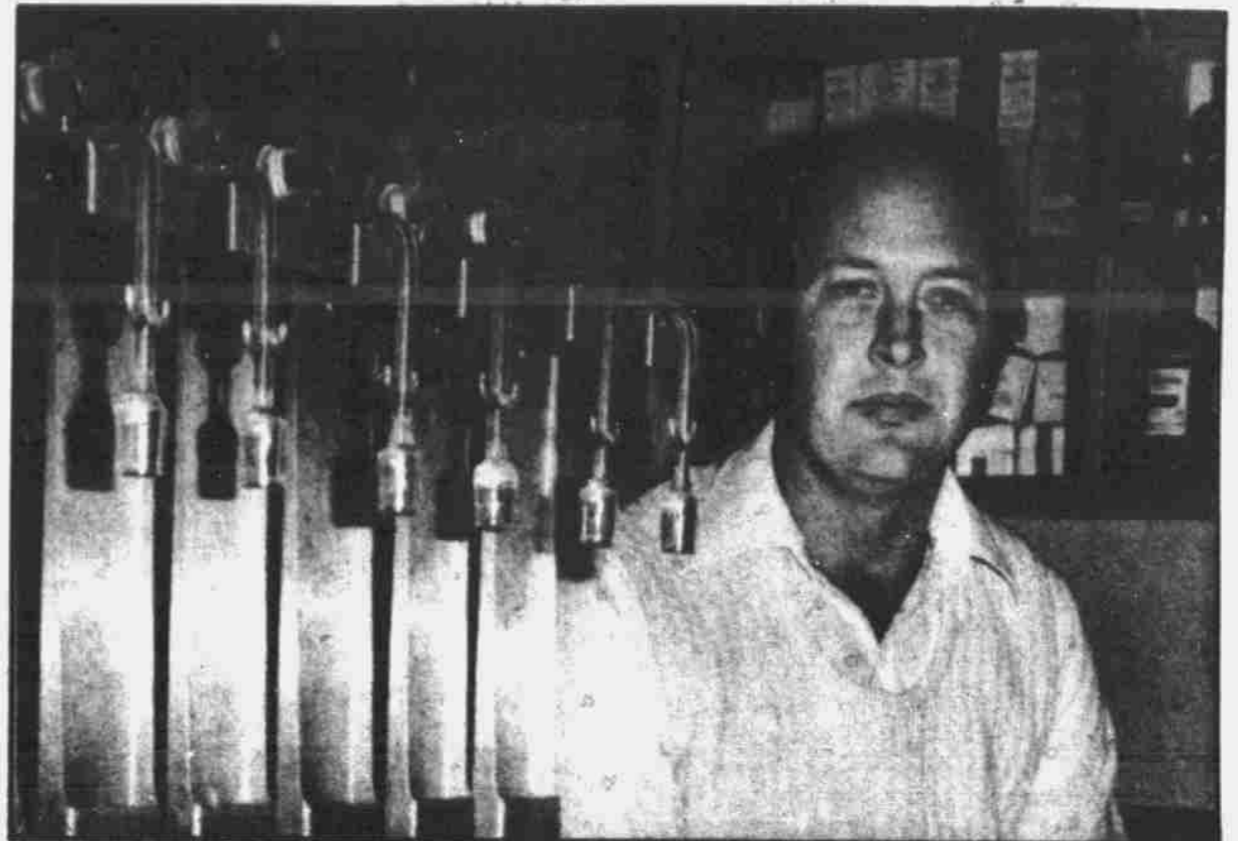
Janovy's animals are protozoa, which he says have characteristics of both plants and cells. He said they are easy to handle, interesting and in some cases "almost ideal" for lab research.

Protozoa may not be the type of animals most people choose as pets, but Janovy considers them more interesting than dogs, cats and horses. He said he enjoys working with them because they live their lives apart from human society.

"Animals that have submitted to human domestication have given up part of themselves," Janovy said.

Janovy said different strains of protozoa have individual personalities. He said they require different environments and serve different functions.

Some of the most interesting are those that rearrange their internal structure at



John Janovy, Jr., a UNL life science professor considers his pet protozoa more interesting than cats, dogs or horses.

Photo by Bob Pearson

certain times of their lives, he said.

He said one of the problems he faces while teaching is to expand the definition of animals to mean more than dogs, cats and horses. He said one of his favorite tricks is to have freshmen zoology students list a hundred animals. When students have difficulties he mentions that there are more than a quarter of a million kinds of beetles alone.

Janovy has a unique approach to his research with protozoa.

"I really don't think of it as science," Janovy explained, "but as an entertainment. It is an intellectual experience which allows you to be in contact with other humans and living things."

Protozoa are not the only animals Janovy studies. He studies fish diseases on the Platte River and snails in the western part of the state.

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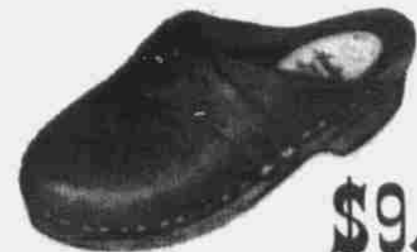
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