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County official Alexander dies

By Nechama Bakst
staff writer

R.J. "Alex" Alexander didn't teach in a classroom, but to officials at the Southeastern Michigan Council of Governments, he was a teacher all the same.

Born Jan. 15, 1907, in North Star, Ohio, Alexander died Aug. 16 in a nursing home in Allen Park, after a long illness. He had served Oakland County, on the local and county levels, as an elected official and appointed employee, for more than 30 years.

"All of us looked at him as one of the sages of the region," said John Amberger, executive director of SEMCOG. "He had a great deal of wisdom and could put things into

perspective."

"He is a real loss," added David Sanders, associate director of Metropolitan Affairs Corp., a division of SEMCOG. Sanders worked closely with Alexander while Alexander served as director at the Oakland County Department of Public Works during the 1970s.

"There aren't a lot of guys around with his mixture of experience and ability to deal with others," Sanders said. "Age didn't narrow his thinking whatsoever."

Alexander was active in SEMCOG in one capacity or another from its inception to 1988.

In 1984, he received the Regional Ambassador Award, the organization's highest award.

He served on the Oak Park City

Council from 1953-59 and as mayor of Oak Park from 1959 to 1965.

He also was a member of the Southeastern Michigan Transportation Authority Board, now the Suburban Mobility Authority for Regional Transportation, from 1977 to 1986.

Alexander, a civil engineer, worked for Oakland County for 18 years, retiring as director of the department of public works in 1975.

"A whole generation of our staff learned about how water systems work from R.J.," Amberger said.

"He knew what drains looked like and how they worked," Sanders remembers, adding that Alexander also knew "just about everybody in water quality management."

Sanders described Alexander as "someone who felt he could make a difference. He didn't want to know why he couldn't do something. He wanted to know how he could do it. He was tough-minded, sometimes profane. But he had a great laugh."

Alexander is survived by his wife, Gladys; children, Mary Ann Bojan, Daniel Alexander, Cathy Hanson, Jane Soave, Joan Roberts, Donna Gordon and Carol Alken; a sister, Romana Hemelgarden; 14 grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

Funeral services were held at the A.J. Desmond & Sons Funeral Home and the Church of St. Owen.

Contributions may be sent to the Michigan Cancer Foundation.

Chipmunks use nature's 'tools'

WALKING along Deer Run Trail at Kensington Metro Park one day I heard a sound that I could not positively identify — short bursts of sound which were very penetrating and quite loud.

It was the intensity of the sound that perplexed me. The sound was so loud that I anticipated seeing the animal right around the next tree. Yet, it was even too loud for that situation.

I do not remember how far away from the source I actually started hearing the sound, but it was much farther than I would have heard a normal chipmunk calling. Yes, my mystery caller was a chipmunk, which I have heard many times but no like this one.

This chipmunk was in the hollow of a large tree which opened in the direction from which I had been walking. There, perched in the opening near the bottom was the resounding vociferator. By positioning itself in the hollow, the cavity

served as a reflector and resonating chamber, which amplified the sound.

CHIPMUNKS CALL to warn others of danger and to establish territories. This individual apparently discovered that the hollow of a tree intensifies the sound, which could help in communicating to others.

Though I did not return to see if the animal used this location regularly, or to see if it used other hollows, this animal could be defined as a tool user. It was using an object to help it perform a necessary function.

Actually, tool using in animals is not extremely rare. Everyday I watch woodpeckers take sunflower seeds and wedge them in the crack of a wooden pole. Once securely wedged, they hammer at the seed to break open the husk and extract the seed. Behavior like his reminds me of when I use the vice on my bench.



nature
Timothy Nowicki

Herring gulls have been observed dropping clams and snails on hard objects in order to break open the hard shells. They did not use just any hard object, they repeatedly returned to one specific place.

Animals have both physical and

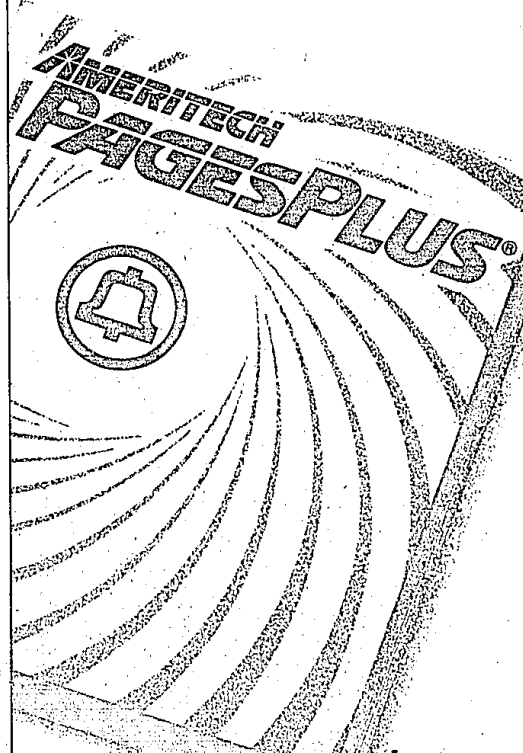
behavioral adaptations to their environment. In combination, they enable animals to adapt to changing conditions.

The writer is a naturalist at Independence-Oaks Park in Oakland County.

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