

## OBITUARY

**Thelma Finlayson**  
**(29 June 1914 - 15 September 2016)**

Thelma Finlayson passed away September 15, 2016. She was 102 years old, and a beloved teacher, mentor, and colleague. Born on 29 June, 1914, Thelma grew up in Trenton, Ontario. She earned her B.A. (Honours, Biology) from the University of Toronto in 1936, a certification in Taxonomy and Biological Control from ARPE in 1971, and a Doctor of Laws (*Honoris causa*) from Simon Fraser University in 1996. She was named to the Order of Canada in 2005 as “a trailblazing entomologist and a beloved teacher and advisor.” Thelma was a past president of the Entomological Society of BC and an Honorary Member and a Fellow of the Entomological Society of Canada. She was a Life Member of the Entomological Society of British Columbia and a Fellow of the Entomological Society of Ontario. Two insect species, *Anisota finlaysoni* Riotte (Lepidoptera: Saturniidae) and *Mesopolobus finlaysoni* Dogenlar (Hymenoptera: Pteromalidae), have been named in her honour.

Thelma had taken an entomology course from E. M. Walker and began her professional career in 1937 in the Dominion Parasite Laboratory in Belleville, Ontario, eight miles from her home, as a Technical Officer. She obtained her position by patiently sitting in the office of the laboratory until someone needed an extra pair of hands. Even in her early career, she was an implacable force; her first project was to rear “millions of sawflies” (her words) in the newly built quarantine facility, searching for parasites to control European spruce sawfly that were decimating Quebec and New Brunswick forests. This led to her lasting interest in the taxonomy of parasitic larvae. She was, in fact, one of the first women scientists in the federal research service, but in 1946, as a married woman, she was asked to resign because men were returning from the war. However, at that time, her husband Roy had become very ill and would soon be compelled to retire, making it necessary for Thelma to work. She challenged the request to resign by threatening to ensure that every other married woman in the Civil Service would be fired for the same reason. In due course, the Assistant Deputy Minister of Agriculture verified her right to work, saving her own job and establishing an important human rights precedent for the Federal Civil Service. In 1959, she was promoted to Research Officer (levels 1, then 2) and later Research Scientist.

In 1967, Thelma joined seven other scientists, led by Bryan Beirne, who left the Belleville Research Institute for Biological Control to expand the Department of Biological Sciences at the newly established Simon Fraser University, in Burnaby, British Columbia. There, Thelma was appointed Assistant Professor and Curator of Entomology. She helped found SFU’s Pestology Centre, later renamed the Centre for Pest Management, one of the first of its kind. The Department showed its regard for her teaching and research by promoting her to Full Professor in 1976, despite her having only an Honours-level B.Sc.—an unheard-of advancement in the Faculty of Science. She held the position of Professor Emerita from 1979 and was the University’s first Emerita.

While at SFU, she officially mentored seven Masters and Ph.D. candidates, and unofficially, countless others. Graduate and undergraduate students sought Thelma’s advice for decades. In addition to the time she devoted to students, Thelma was an advocate of entomology and education through significant financial contributions toward Pest Management fellowships. Furthermore, she financed an endowment to establish the Finlayson Chair in Biological Control in the Department of Biological Sciences, currently held by Jenny Cory.

Thelma taught courses in introductory biology and, of course, insect biology. The insect biology course was encyclopaedic, and students typically left each lecture with 30 to 40 pages of detailed notes and sketches. This course inspired many biology students to careers in entomology.

In 1971, Thelma was persuaded to be the first advisor for science in the newly formed Academic Advice Centre and, in 1983, she was appointed as Special Advisor, mostly advising students in academic difficulty and retaining that position until 2012. During this time, she advised more than 7,000 students. At age 97, she may well have been the oldest student advisor on the planet. In 2012, the centre was renamed the Thelma Finlayson Centre for Student Engagement.

Thelma's primary interest was in the taxonomy of natural enemies with application to Biological Control. She published approximately 40 papers, memoirs, and book chapters during her career. She was particularly successful in her work on the taxonomy of immature Hymenoptera, which in many ways foreshadowed the use of DNA to identify remains of parasitoids within hosts. She was also consulted on entomological questions by the RCMP, which led to the development and establishment of the internationally recognized Forensic Entomology Laboratory in SFU's Department of Criminology by her faithful friend, Dr Gail Anderson.

In the first lecture of every course Thelma taught, she told students "My door is always open for you." Those who had the privilege of being her students and of being mentored and supported by this singular woman found that statement to be true always.

**Written by**

**BERNIE ROITBERG, DAVE GILLESPIE, and PETER BELTON**