

Dr. Peter Witt, medical researcher

BY STEVE SWINDELL
STAFF WRITER

RALEIGH — Dr. Peter N. Witt, who became world-famous for his research with spiders and psychedelic drugs and was known in the Triangle for his exotic menagerie in Knightdale, died Tuesday. He was 80.

"He was a man of courage when it was dangerous to be so, of boldness in his experiments and of generosity with his colleagues, students and friends," said Charles Reed of Philadelphia, who worked with Witt in the 1960s and remained a friend for the rest of Witt's life.

Born in Berlin, Witt was educated in Germany and Austria and was studying medicine at the University of Tuebingen during World War II. When he was given a German army uniform and ordered to the Russian front, he burned the clothing and joined an underground group of doctors who treated civilian casualties of the Allied bombing campaigns on German cities.

After the war, he moved to Bern, Switzerland, where a *Life* magazine article drew the world's attention to Witt's work involving spiders.

He discovered that psychoactive

drugs such as LSD, psilocybin and marijuana that produce effects on human consciousness that are impossible to study scientifically caused regular and repeatable changes in the webs of a particular arachnid, the orb spider.

Although Witt's work received a great deal of attention — including some experiments that were conducted by NASA in the Skylab space station in the early 1970s — its potential for understanding of human brain chemistry remains unfulfilled, Reed said.

"To realize its potential required a much more extensive institutional commitment than he was able to put together," Reed said.

Witt came to Raleigh in 1966 and was named executive director of the North Carolina Foundation of Mental Health Research that October. Earlier that year, he was appointed director of research for the State Department of Mental Health. For 10 years, he ran a research lab on the grounds of Dorothea Dix Hospital and supervised medical research across the state.

In 1976, he decided he wanted to spend all of his time farming, which

he had done in his leisure time. He moved his family to a 35-acre farm in Knightdale, where he raised sheep, goats and a variety of exotic animals, including the guanaco, a large llama-like bird, that escaped from the farm and became a local legend.

When Witt realized that he could no longer lift a bale of hay, he bought a house in the Cameron Village area. He later built another house in the same area and cultivated a wild garden.

Among his lifelong interests were art, music and entertaining friends and neighbors at his home. He played cello and once inherited and sold a Van Gogh painting.

"He was a man interested in a great many things, his research, his art, his music, family and friends," Reed said.

Witt is survived by his wife, Inge; and two daughters, Elise and Mary.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to the Raleigh Chamber Music Guild and the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at Duke University Medical Center.

Plans for a memorial service were not complete Thursday.

DR. PETER N. WITT

RALEIGH — Dr. Peter N. Witt, died Tuesday, September 15, 1998.

He is survived by his wife, Inge; two daughters, Elise and Mary; many friends and relatives.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to the Raleigh Chamber Music Guild and the Alzheimer's Disease Research Center at Duke University.

Plans for a memorial service will be made later.