

Gilbert Dennison Harris

October 2, 1864 — December 4, 1952

Gilbert Dennison Harris, Professor of Paleontology and Stratigraphic Geology, Emeritus, died Thursday December fourth, 1952, at 88 years of age, after an illness of almost a year. Previous to that time he remained active, and his scientific contributions continued through the many years following his retirement from teaching on his 70th birthday, October 2, 1934. He is survived by a daughter, Rebecca S. Harris. His wife, nee Clara Stoneman, who was a real helpmeet during her lifetime, and remained a cherished memory until his own demise, died in 1932.

Professor Harris was born near Jamestown, New York, where he attended several terms of high school. By further independent study he secured the Regent's credits necessary for entrance to Cornell University in 1883. He received the Bachelor of Philosophy degree in 1886 and stayed at Cornell through 1887 as a graduate student. Between 1887 and 1893 he was a member of the United States, Texas, and Arkansas geological surveys. Part of 1894 was spent in personal investigation of the Tertiary deposits of southern England and northern France. In 1894 he was appointed Assistant Professor of Paleontology and Stratigraphy in Cornell; in 1909 he was made professor with the same title. Between 1899 and 1909 he also held the post of State Geologist of Louisiana. His theory of the origin of the Louisiana salt domes, though superseded since, was long held the most satisfactory explanation of these occurrences.

This formal outline of the life and professional career of Professor Harris needs to be filled in by much else of a personal nature in order that a true and more adequate appreciation may be had of the man and his life work. Professor Harris was above all a completely dedicated devotee of science and by competence and application became a world authority on his paleontological specialty, Eocene mollusca, and of the Tertiary stratigraphy of the Mississippi embayment area. His status in these fields was recognized by election to Fellowship in the national geologic societies of France, Germany, and Switzerland; honors, in those years, not lightly bestowed on foreigners. In America he was elected a Corresponding Member of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia; in 1936 was made President of the Paleontological Society of America, and became Vice President of the Geological Society of America in 1937.

These honors were accorded solely for scientific achievement. Although he was a genial friendly person Professor Harris deeply scorned political maneuvering and assiduous contact-making as means to attainment of fame and office, and despised the brash effrontery of those in the field of geology who sought to secure recognition

primarily by such activities. He was indulgent of undergraduate students who manifested a real interest in his courses and is known to have given grades of 110 per cent on preliminary examinations to a few outstanding pupils. From graduate students he expected the same intense devotion to their work that he himself demonstrated. He steered them toward the appropriate goals but demanded that they apply their own knowledge and talents to the attainment of those ends. The care and zeal with which he did all his work was inspiring and exerted a lasting influence on the professional careers of his students. He won their deep respect and enduring loyalty.

It was characteristic also of Professor Harris that early in his teaching career he personally acquired in succession four power launches of varying size and design. These were affectionately named for key fossils or favorite molluscs. His favorite formations, the Tertiary beds, are remarkably accessible from water routes along the Atlantic seaboard from New Jersey southward. In New York, along the then Erie Canal and the Hudson River the classic Paleozoic sections that were his teaching environment were similarly right at hand. Consequently, for a number of summers, boat loads of advanced students collected enthusiastically under the guidance of the Professor in his dual role of skipper and academic mentor. In term time these craft were used to take undergraduates on field trips along the Cayuga shores. In the early 1900's Professor Harris also conducted summer-school geologic camps in the Trenton Falls and Helderberg regions. These camps were open to all enthusiasts in the science; undergraduates and graduates for credit, amateurs, teachers, professionals. The day's work ended with campfire song led by the Professor's ringing tenor. Persons who knew him intimately said he held those days to be the happiest of his life.

It must not be thought that Professor Harris's activities were governed solely by the need of the moment. Actually he planned and built shrewdly. As early as 1895 he began publication of *The Bulletins of American Paleontology* which have continued serially to date. He had the foresight to make certain, by sufficiently large overruns of each issue, that an anticipated perennial demand for sets from institutional and oil-company libraries could be met and by such sales provide funds for continuance of the periodical.

In the same spirit he bought a flat-bed press (of which he was the chief operator) in order to reduce printing costs and permit larger editions and so insure the publication of a greater volume of paleontological material. The *Bulletins* were supplemented by a monograph series entitled *Palaeontographica Americana* which is also current. These serials were established before the numerous paleontologic journals of the present day had come into being; hence were a pioneering enterprise.

In anticipation of his retirement from teaching when he knew he would be deprived of the use of his university laboratory and collections, he founded, in 1932, the Paleontological Research Institution, and provided for its

housing with rooms for collections, photography, study, and conference. The Institution early enlisted the support of a number of eminent paleontologists; was shortly recognized and chartered as an educational institution by New York State; its building has been several times enlarged, and by gift and bequest it now has an endowment of much over a hundred thousand dollars, and valuable added collections.

Professor Harris did not cultivate wide social contacts. Modest in all that pertained to his own fame he had unfailing delight in the merited success of others. There are also many who will recall his help given in illness, in building a home, in the rescue of a business. He kept in close touch with affairs, civic and national, and his intimates found him an amiable and informed conversationalist with sound and discerning views on the problems of the times.

His monument will be the contributions he made, as researcher and author, to paleontological science, his work as editor, and the sagacity manifested in the founding of the "Institution." His Christmas Greeting in his 85th year was: "We are happiest when our hobbies and our 'life's work' become identical."

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