

## MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

### GEORGE SPRAGUE MYERS (1905 – 1985)

George Sprague Myers, Professor Emeritus of Biological Sciences, died on November 4, 1985 at the age of 80 at his home in Scotts Valley, Santa Cruz County, California, after a short illness. Myers was one of the most influential systematic ichthyologists, herpetologists, and biogeographers of his time. His more than 600 publications and his many graduate students, most of whom have achieved positions of significance and distinction in universities and museums throughout the country, are legacies to this and future generations of evolutionary biologists few of us can hope to emulate.

George Myers was born in Jersey City, New Jersey, on February 2, 1905 to Harvey Derwood and Lily Vale Sprague Myers. He attended public elementary and high school in Jersey City, interrupted by a year at St. John's Military School in Ossining, New York (1919-1920). Even as a youngster, he was a consummate naturalist and biologist, with an abiding interest in fishes and amphibians. In 1920, at the age of 15, he published the first of four papers in the field that was to dominate most of his adult life, ichthyology. Three appeared in the journal Aquatic Life and contained observations on tropical aquarium fishes and one, a 16 page circular published by the Hudson County Aquarium Society, was filled with recommendations on how to set up and maintain an aquarium.

The American Museum of Natural History in New York City was one of George Myers' favorite haunts. There he met the eminent herpetologist Gladwyn Kingsley Noble and his young assistant, Karl Patterson Schmidt, who himself went on to a distinguished career at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago. From 1922-24 Myers worked part time as a volunteer assistant in Dr. Noble's laboratory and was well on his way to becoming a scholar in his own right, having already published at least 30 papers, mostly on fishes. In 1924 he met Dean Carl H. Eigenmann of Indiana University, then a leading student of fishes. Eigenmann encouraged Myers to enroll at Indiana University and he offered to help him cover his expenses with a part-time job as curatorial assistant in IU's fish collections.

Shortly after Myers arrived at Indiana, Eigenmann became ill and could no longer continue his work at the university. David Starr Jordan, Stanford University's first President and himself a renowned ichthyologist, knowing of Eigenmann's illness and young Myers' promise, suggested that George transfer to Stanford. Myers did so in the fall of 1926 and became closely associated with Jordan and with Professors C. H. Gilbert, J. O. Snyder, E. C. Starks, and W. H. Rich. In this new setting, Myers immersed himself in ichthyology and herpetology and in June 1930 received his A.B., seven years after he had entered Indiana as a freshman. George's degree was long delayed because he rarely had time for "general studies" courses, most of which distracted him from his ichthyological pursuits. In his biographical sketch of George Myers, Lionel Walford records that an objection was raised to granting Myers his bachelor's degree because he had not taken the required number of English courses. On hearing this, J. O. Snyder, George's "major professor" in undergraduate ichthyology, produced a "handful of the

publications the young Myers had produced since he entered college," (by this time George's bibliography contained ill titles!), whereupon the requirement was considered as having been met.

As a graduate student with Willis H. Rich, George completed both his A.M. and Ph.D. degrees in three years, a rare feat then and now. His dissertation was entitled "The classification of the African cyprinodont fishes, with a discussion of the geographical distribution of the Cyprinodontidae of the world," indicative of his early interest in biogeography.

For his first academic job, Myers went to the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington where he was appointed Assistant Curator in Charge, Division of Fishes. He worked at the Smithsonian for three years, spending an inordinate amount of time in routine curating of the fish collections, which had suffered over 40 years of benign neglect. The Depression did not lighten the task. Nevertheless, he published a substantial number of papers in those years, so that by the time he left to return to Stanford, in 1936, his list of publications, mostly as sole author, exceeded 200.

In 1936 Myers was invited to return to Stanford and given a joint appointment as Associate Professor in Biological Sciences and Curator of Zoological Collections. George quickly launched a program in systematic ichthyology which became a model for similar courses elsewhere, and attracted the first three of the many graduate students he was to train during his 34 years on the Stanford faculty. In addition to ichthyology, Myers developed advanced courses in vertebrate paleontology, biogeography, and systematic herpetology. In 1938, at the age of 33, and only two years after his arrival at Stanford, George Myers was promoted to full Professor -- a scant five years after receiving his doctorate.

Myers was a keen student of biogeography. He was fully aware of Alfred Wegener's "drift hypothesis" and equally aware how unpopular it was for an American scientist to accept anything that controverted the conventional wisdom of the time -- permanence of the ocean basins and fixity of the continents. This had been made crystal clear a few years earlier at the American Association of Petroleum Geologist's symposium on "The Theory of Continental Drift" (1927). Yet, ever thoughtful of the evidence, Myers challenged the establishment when he wrote: "despite the fulminations of those opposed to the theory of continental drift, there is a considerable body of weighty evidence in favor of it, and I for one would not be surprised to see it finally prevail" (Annual Report, Smithsonian Institution, 1938: 340-341). Another Stanford University faculty member, Professor Emeritus Douglas Houghton Campbell, the first professor of botany in 1891, had come to similar conclusions about continental drift on the basis of plant distributions. Dr. Campbell could not get his ideas published in a journal, and resorted to publishing his work privately in December of 1943 under the title "Continental Drift and Plant Distributions." It would be interesting to know if George Myers and Douglas Campbell ever compared notes!

The years of World War II and the depression that preceded them disturbed universities in a way that only a few can recall. Myers spent nearly two and a half years in Brazil on U.S. State Department funds to aid Museo Nacional and Divisao de Caca e Pesca--a program to maintain good U.S. relations with Latin America. This led eventually to George's service in the local office of the U.S. Coordinator of Inter-American affairs. While in Brazil, Myers found

time to collect and study fishes and frogs, and he quickly established himself as a leading authority on South American ichthyology, herpetology, and biogeography.

Immediately after World War II, the Stanford student body doubled to about 8,000 students and for the next 25 years a steady flow of students came to work with George. In all, he supervised at least 25 Ph.D. students, an equal number of A.M. students, and sat on the committees of many other graduate students in Biological Sciences. At all times his group was very active, cohesive, and constantly learning from him and from each other. He involved them in all aspects of museum activities. Within the museum, all were treated as equals, and all worked for the benefit of the museum. The students participated in the teaching of courses and seminars, even as undergraduates. They worked together, partied together, and argued together. All were encouraged to publish, nearly always solo, so that rarely did any students emerge with doctorates without at least a half dozen titles already to their credit. At the weekly evening seminars, held in the "back room" of the museum, the students presented their latest findings, which were then discussed, sometimes rather heatedly, among those present. Following the seminar, they adjourned to "Carlins," a beer hall, since replaced by a motel, just across the creek from Stanford in Menlo Park, or the Heidelberg, a little south on El Camino, and Myers would come along. It was at these informal, post-seminar sessions that much serious discussion about fishes, amphibians, reptiles, biogeography, and one of George's favorite topics, the history of systematic biology, took place. All his students had a remarkable loyalty and devotion to George.

Over the years Myers amassed an extensive library on ichthyology, herpetology, biogeography, the history of biology and exploration, and as a sidelight, the Civil War. His library was always available to his students and in many critical ways supplemented the University's holdings. George Sprague Myers published more than 600 papers during his distinguished career. He was also much in demand as a reviewer for various journals and books. He edited the Aquarium Journal from 1952-1954. In 1938 he initiated the Stanford Ichthyological Bulletin and served as its editor through all eight volumes. In 1956 he started the Occasional Papers of the Stanford Natural History Museum (the name was later change to Occasional Papers of the Division of Systematic Biology and saw it through 10 numbers.

Although Myers received many honors during his lifetime, the one that pleased him most was the Fellows Medal of the California Academy of Sciences, an institution with which he had long been associated as a member of its Council, as Vice-President, as a Research Associate in Herpetology and Ichthyology, and as a Fellow for more than 50 years.

Upon his retirement at the age of 65, on August 31, 1970, former students and colleagues honored him with a "Festschrift for George Sprague Myers in honor of his sixty-fifth birthday," published as Volume 38 of the Proceedings of the California Academy of Sciences, a volume that ran to 444 pages. The first paper by his long-time friend and colleague, L. A. Walford, was appropriately entitled "on the natural history of George Sprague Myers." The second is a bibliography of George's writings. These two give a much more detailed account than is possible here.

Shortly after Myers retired from the Stanford faculty in 1970, the University discontinued its program in systematic ichthyology and thus allowed one of the most distinguished and significant traditions in the world in teaching and research in systematic ichthyology to die.

However, Myers did not die with it. He was appointed Henry Bryant Bigelow Visiting Professor of Ichthyology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. George Myers thus fulfilled one of his lifelong dreams, that of following in the footsteps of Louis Agassiz (Harvard), Spencer Fullerton Baird (Smithsonian), and David Starr Jordan (Stanford), by being employed at the three institutions he most admired as centers of research in systematic ichthyology. For several years Myers spent half the year at Cambridge and the balance at his newly built home in Scotts Valley, in the Santa Cruz Mountains, a few miles east of Santa Cruz.

George Myers married Martha Ruth Frisinger in 1926. Their eldest son, Thomas Sprague Myers, was born in 1935 and the younger, John William Myers, in 1937. George's marriage to Ruth ended in divorce. For several years in the late 1950's and early 1960's George and Irma Zimmerman were married. In 1966 he married Frances E. Felin, who had received a Ph.D. in 1940 from Stanford, having worked on the limnology of Searsville Lake under the direction of Professor Willis H. Rich. Frances died on August 1, 1985, after a long illness.

George Myers' personal and professional papers are today preserved in the archives of the Smithsonian Institution where they are held in trust with the archives of other distinguished scientists for the benefit of historians of science, scientists, and other scholars of future generations. His extensive portrait and biographies of naturalists' files were donated to the California Academy of Sciences several years ago, and more recently he directed that his substantial reprint library, consisting of nearly 7,200 titles in herpetology and perhaps double that number in ichthyology, likewise be given to the Academy. Even in his final moments, George Sprague Myers was concerned with his science and with those who practice it today and will practice it tomorrow.

Alan E. Leviton (California Academy of Sciences)  
David C. Regnery  
John H. Thomas, Chairman