

O B I T U A R Y

Hymen Marx
(1925–2007)

Hymen Marx, Curator Emeritus at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, Illinois, died on 25 January 2007 in Sun City, Arizona. During his 42 years at the Field Museum, Hy contributed much to the field of herpetology through his own research and through his unique, lively, and supportive personality.

Hymen “Hy” Marx was born 27 June 1925 in Chicago, Illinois. He lived in the Chicago area until his move to Arizona in the early 1990s. His father, Phillip Marx, was a butcher and his mother, Minnie Serota Marx, was a homemaker. Hy was drafted into the U.S. Air Force in 1943. He served as a radar mechanic and was stationed in the U.K., where he worked on a ground crew of the 8th Air Force maintaining the radar systems of the famous “Flying Fortresses.” Like so many others, Hy went back to school in 1945 under the G.I. Bill and graduated in 1949 from Roosevelt University with a B.S. degree and a major in biology. That marked the end of Hy’s formal education, and from then on he depended on colleagues and his own intellectual curiosity to fuel his career development. In Hy’s case — and to his great credit — that was enough. While in school, Hy met Audrey Elaine Greene and they married in 1950 and had two children.

In 1948, while he was a student at Roosevelt University, Hy began volunteering in the Division of Amphibians and Reptiles, working as an assistant to Karl P. Schmidt. Hy referred to Clifford H. Pope and “K. P.” Schmidt as his “academic papas.” Hy joined the Division in 1950 as its first full-time assistant. For the next ten years, he served as “Collection Manager,” and oversaw the collection through significant growth and reorganization, including a major move from the third floor to the ground floor in 1952–53. This period of intensive collection growth was marked by the arrival, in 1954, of 35 five-gallon milk cans containing 77,000 frogs and toads that were sent by the Institut des Parcs Nationaux de Congo Belge to Karl Schmidt for identification. This huge shipment almost matched the number of specimens (85,000) in the entire collection at the time, and a significant number of these specimens were deposited at the Field (Bauer 1954). This period also was marked by the Division’s single most significant purchase, that of the Edward Harrison Taylor collection of 35,000 specimens, which was accessioned beginning in 1959. That collection, which is extensively cited in the herpetological literature, includes many type specimens, caecilians, and skeletons. Its geographic strengths include Mexico, Costa Rica, Liberia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. During these ten years, Hy also published 16 papers, which led to his promotion to the curatorial ranks. He was promoted to full curator in 1973.

For roughly 40 years, Hy’s career at Field Museum overlapped with that of Robert (Bob) F. Inger. Hy and Bob collaborated on several publications, but the most notable was their monograph on the snakes of the colubrid genus *Calamaria*

(Inger and Marx 1965). This monograph embraced many of the newest methods and approaches of that time and it remains a landmark work on that group of snakes today.

In addition, Marx’s research interests also included the herpetofauna of Egypt, the systematics and zoogeography of the vipers, the phyletics of morphological characters, the application of phyletic character analysis to convergent snake species, and the application of Sharrock and Felsenstein’s combinatorial method to phylogenetic studies. To facilitate his NSF-supported collaborative research with George Rabb, over five hundred snake skulls were removed from preserved specimens and prepared for character analysis. These skulls, comprising over 235 genera, form a subset of the osteological collection that is well used by researchers. This work resulted in their “50 characters volume” (Marx and Rabb 1972) that still is of great practical use to students of squamate systematics.

Following this time, one of us (HKV), had the privilege of collaborating with George Rabb and Hy on a project involving character analysis (Marx, Rabb, and Voris 1977). During the two years that we worked on this project, the three of us had many stimulating and heated discussions. Those readers who knew Hy will understand us when we say that Hy provided us with plenty of aggravation and entertainment. He often referred to his two co-workers, not as his esteemed collaborators, but rather as his “close enemies.”

Hy’s research interests were varied, but the subject that interested him most was the evolution of venomous snakes in the family Viperidae. But Hy did not fit any stereotype of a dusty, dry museum curator — if you met Hy, even briefly, you immediately learned that he was exceptionally gregarious! This was true in both his personal and professional life. In his professional life, this took the form that most of us call collaborations,



Hymen Marx releasing a male Common Basilisk (*Basiliscus basiliscus*) prior to determining its running speed (photograph © 1966, courtesy of The Field Museum. Z89606).



Hymen Marx holding a preserved specimen of the common European Viper (*Vipera berus*) that was cataloged as FMNH 200,000 in September 1975 (photograph © 1975, courtesy of The Field Museum. GN82282).

but Hy referred to it as “sharing our sandbox.” He was a great collaborator, but this activity was not for the weak of heart! He was sharp, witty, insightful, and prone to wander far off the subject. A lively discussion might initially address the shape of the dentary bone in the Gaboon Viper (*Bitis gabonica*) and then inexplicably shift to Hy providing a review of “Sleeper,” Woody Allen’s latest movie at the time. This was vintage Hy Marx. No collaborator could expect to evade one of Hy’s practical jokes — that was the cost of doing business. Karel Liem, Henry Bryant, Bigelow Professor of Ichthyology at Harvard University, and George Rabb, now President Emeritus of the Chicago Zoological Society, and several others know this only too well!

Hy contributed greatly to the academic and administrative life at Field Museum. He served as the Head of the Division of Amphibians and Reptiles from 1970–79, and from 1985–90, and over the years served on more than 20 Museum committees. Hy fully understood the importance of encouraging young people in their interests, and for that reason, he was an active contributor to Members’ Nights at the Museum, when doors were opened for members to view the work that goes on “behind the scenes.” Hy also had many unofficial roles at the Museum, and he served as a sort of social guru to the entire staff. In this regard, Hy referred to himself as a “social butterfly,” and enjoyed organizing both intellectual discussions on character analysis as well as recruiting teams and scheduling times for doubles tennis matches.

During Hy’s 40 years of service at Field Museum, he also served on the Committee on Evolutionary Biology at the University of Chicago. In this capacity, he did not teach formal classes, but rather he informally guided both master’s and doctoral degree students in their research programs. On this, one of us (HKV) can speak from first-hand experience. Hy helped me choose a Ph.D. research topic on sea snakes that shaped my entire professional career. He freely gave his time and expertise to help many young visiting scientists prosper in their special fields of study. One of the “official” activities of visiting researchers and students was to visit Hy’s office and kibitz about their research. For this we are all very grateful.

Hy was not a man who tried to impress others by putting on airs. Instead, he was equally friendly to the Museum’s house-keeping staff and the top administrators of the Field Museum and other lofty institutions. He was not impressed with administrative rank and academic credentials, and he applied uniquely Marxian methods to make this evident. In his assignment of nicknames, no one received much respect and no one could hide! For example, Robert K. Johnson, Chairman of the Zoology Department, was “Bunky” or “El Bunko Grande,” James P. Bacon, Curator of Reptiles, San Diego Zoo, was “Bakey,” and George Rabb, Director of the Brookfield Zoo, was “Georgy Porgy.” Of course, behind each of these nicknames was an endearing story that showed how Hy paid attention to the human beings with whom he lived and worked. We were individuals, not Directors, Curators, and Chairmen. In the end, that is why so many at the Field Museum and in the field of herpetology counted Hy Marx as a close friend, a great colleague, and a real human being. Hy Marx was truly one of a kind, absolutely unique, an amazing rare bird, and irreplaceable. All of our lives have been immensely enriched by knowing Hy Marx, and we will miss him greatly.

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