

by anyone. Any and all who happened to come by the Natural History Reservation were heartily welcomed by Henry and his lovely wife Virginia, and that seemed to happen frequently.

My formal association with Henry began in July 1972 when I came to KU to begin a Ph.D. program. I found it difficult to believe I had the opportunity to work with such a professional giant. I remember standing in awe as we spoke about potential research projects and thinking that since Henry was 64 at the time, I just might be his last student before he retired (wrong! I only missed by about 30 years). Henry was THE man as far as snake ecology was concerned and I assumed my dissertation would become yet another monograph of a Reservation snake species. But then he suggested we go down on the “Kaw” (Kansas River) to look for softshell turtles. I was fascinated by the sandbars, the softshells, and Henry’s nonstop fountain of knowledge about them – talk about information overload! But what I remember most about our inaugural softshell trip was this 27-yr-old kid in the prime of life trying desperately to keep up with an aging 64-yr-old walking (more like running) on the soft sand as he talked. I looked for a red “S” on his chest.

Henry once had a guest at the Reservation, a gentleman from the Bombay Natural History Society, and because India is near the center of softshell diversity, Henry asked me to take the gentleman out on the Kaw and show him our American softshells. By that time, I had captured hundreds of *Apalone mutica* and I assured Henry that it would be no problem seeing numerous softshells. Any field biologist could probably guess what happened. After working hard for a couple of hours, we saw maybe two or three juvenile softshells. I learned that day that one should never make such rash statements regardless of how confident he is about seeing animals in the field. Henry was apologetic to the gentleman and I was embarrassed, but Henry never said another word about it to me.

Henry frequently encouraged his students to do “interesting” side projects along with their thesis or dissertation work. He suggested a project on softshell glands in the summer of 1972 that would fit in “nicely” with my ecological Ph.D. work. Being a swamped and overwhelmed new grad student, I wasn’t terribly interested in his suggestion at the time, but I never forgot it (probably because of who suggested it). Well Henry, you would be pleased to know that I finally did do the project and it was published in 2009 just before you left us. Sorry I’m so slow; it only took 37 years. Thanks for the treasured memories.

Henry Fitch as a Mentor and Teacher

Richard A. Seigel

Department of Biological Sciences, Towson University
Towson, Maryland 21252 (rseigel@towson.edu)

Most herpetologists today know Henry S. Fitch only as a name on his classic papers and monographs (e. g., *Autecology of the Copperhead*, *A Kansas Snake Community*). In this remembrance, I would like to give my perspective on Henry in the roles I knew him best, as a mentor and teacher.

In 1979, all I knew about Henry Fitch was his outstanding publication record. I had been accepted to the Ph.D. program at the University of Kansas for the fall 1979 semester, and, through a series of letters, Henry had tentatively agreed to accept me as his doctoral student. However, he had cautioned me that he was retiring in 1980 and that I might want to reconsider coming to KU as his final student. Thus, in June 1979, my wife Nadia and I drove to Kansas to meet Henry and his wife Virginia for the first time. Little did I know that this initial meeting would lead to a 30 year relationship with Henry and Virginia and that my appreciation and respect for them would go far beyond anything I might have expected.

As we drove on the unpaved entrance road leading to Henry’s house on the KU Natural History Reservation (now the Fitch Natural History Reservation), I saw numerous metal coverboards (“shelters” in Henry’s ter-

minology) and drift fences scattered at what appeared to be random intervals along the road. As soon as we reached the small, incredibly modest house where the Fitches lived on the Reservation, Henry and Virginia were out the front door to greet us. Almost immediately, I gained an insight into Henry’s character: Knowing what to call your presumptive major professor is always a delicate proposition for a new student (“Dr. Fitch?” “Professor Fitch?”), but Henry dealt with that by holding out his hand and introducing himself as “Henry Fitch,” and we were on a first name basis from then on. Virginia went even further and gave Nadia and me a huge hug, inviting us in for lunch.

Feeling much more at ease, we only got to the Fitch’s front porch when I saw that there were a large series of jars, cans, and snake bags, all holding various live herps. Asking Henry where these came from, he proceeded to tell us that was today’s catch and then tell much more about the ecology and natural history of his “finds” than four years of field work and reading had provided me so far. I was struck especially by the detailed notes Henry took on each find and how much data he was extracting from each individual.

After lunch, Henry suggested that we do “a round” of his traps and shelters, and the two of us set off up the hillside by the house. Within minutes I discovered that this 69-year-old man was in better shape than most grad students, as he went up the hill on what felt like a trot. As we went, he began to tell me a detailed history of what felt like every tree and critter we saw. Phrases such as “I am hearing a Yellow-billed Cuckoo” were thrown out casually, leading to two thoughts I dared not express: “I thought this was a herpetologist” and “I am glad YOU are hearing this, since I surely don’t!”

I was thrilled when we came to the first series of shelters at what was known as Quarry Field, since the pace finally slowed down and Henry said this was the best place to see Copperheads. Sure enough, there were two gorgeous Copperheads curled up under the first shelter we flipped and they were right in front of Henry. Problem was, there were also four Ringneck Snakes right in front of me, and, while I had eyes only for the Copperheads (and did



Henry Fitch used funnel traps and drift fences to capture many of the snakes on the Natural History Reservation.

not see the Ringnecks), Henry did exactly the opposite. Thus, I went for the Copperheads in front of Henry with my hook and Henry bent down to get the Ringnecks in front of me (thinking, I am sure, “who is this dummy who does not see snakes right in front of him?”). As we bounced off of each other, Henry stumbled forward, putting his foot right in front of the Copperheads, one of which immediately struck his boot! I could see the headline now: “Famed herpetologist killed by venomous snake; new grad student to blame.”

Fortunately, the snake managed only to clip the front of Henry’s boot, and we quickly captured both Copperheads and at least some of the Ringnecks. After flipping a few more shelters, we had a total of four Copperheads, three of which were marked individuals, one as long as nine years ago. I found this nothing short of amazing, having only recently read that high recapture rates were impossible for snakes, and said as much to Henry. He shook his head and said: “If I had just a few more fences and more shelters, I’d have a 100% recapture rate.” I glanced at Henry, trying to decide if he was saying this in jest or if he was angling for a compliment. I quickly realized that neither of these was true; he genuinely felt that he had simply not worked hard enough and needed to do more to satisfy his own standards. What a great example for a new Ph.D. student!

A few years later, I got to see a second example of Henry’s genuine humility regarding his fieldwork when the noted lizard ecologist Laurie Vitt visited the Reservation. Knowing that Laurie was especially interested in lizards, Henry made sure to check the shelters where he knew Slender Glass Lizards could be found, and we quickly got several of them. When Laurie said something to the effect of “are you going to publish anything on these?” Henry indicated that the sample size was still too small for a solid publication. Laurie asked: “How many of them have you found?” thinking (I am sure) that the answer would be a hundred or so. Henry’s response floored us: “About 1,500 so far,” he said rather casually. When we tried to convince Henry that 1,500 glass lizards was nothing short of phenomenal and far more than anyone else had, he just shook his head and said he needed more data! By the way, Henry did publish a monograph on these lizards in 1989; the sample size was 2,216 individuals captured 3,353 times! (Fitch 1989).

In addition to doing field research with Henry, I was also lucky enough to be his TA for the last two courses he taught at KU, Vertebrate Natural History and Animals of Kansas. Both courses were combined lecture/field trip formats and my main role was driving students to and from the field sites and helping in the field any way that I could. Although Henry’s lectures were detailed and comprehensive, the fun part of both classes was the field trips. Students enjoyed trying to “challenge” Henry by bringing him whatever odd insect, snake skin, or mammal dropping they found, then having him act as a living version of Wikipedia and proceed to lecture them on everything that was known about the species under question. One of my favorite memories was when a student found a newly hatched Five-lined Skink and asked Henry how much the tiny lizard weighed. Henry held the lizard for a few seconds and then replied: “1.15 grams.” The class immediately burst out laughing at the absurdly precise answer. So, the whole class walked over to the old, dilapidated building that Henry called his “lab” and we proceeded to weigh the skink on an old triple-beam balance. Sure enough: 1.15 grams! Somewhat awed, one of the students asked, “How could you possibly know that?” Henry’s response was typically low-key: “When you have processed over 5,000 of something, you know their weights pretty well!”

Given Henry’s low-key approach and humility, it would be easy to conclude that he was not competitive and that he would let his grad students get away with things. Neither conclusion would be true. I recall quite well the first time Henry came to my study site in northwestern Missouri where I was doing mark-recapture studies on snakes. After catching our first snake of the day, I marked it using scale-clipping (no PIT tags in those days) and proudly showed it to Henry. “Oh,” he said, “I guess you don’t want to be able to recognize this snake if you capture it again?” This was Henry’s way of telling me I was not marking properly, and the message was delivered loud and clear. To this day when I scale clip snakes, I follow Henry’s methods and can tell you, they work extremely well.

Henry’s competitive nature may be illustrated by something only a select few got to experience, something called “Fitchian Basketball.” Henry always had a grass/dirt basketball “court” set up outside his front door and during the spring of 1980, his current students got a taste of how competitive Henry Fitch could be at times. There were eight of us that day, three women (Nancy Zushlag [Henry’s master’s student], my wife Nadia, and Jim Knight’s wife, Karin), and five men (Henry, myself, and three of Henry’s other students: Larry Hunt, Luis Malaret, and Jim Knight). When the time came to play, Henry started explaining the “rules”; first, there were two hoops, one at 10 feet, the other at 8 feet. The 10-foot hoop was for the guys, the 8-foot hoop for the women. Next, there were odd but very specific rules about the men and women taking the ball out separately, whether the women could be guarded, and how the points were tallied. What we all found most amusing was how new rules suddenly appeared whenever someone scored against Henry’s team. My personal favorite was “no jump shots from the corner,” which just happened to be my best place to shoot from. Needless to say, we all spent more time laughing than we spent playing, as watching Henry morph into this competitive jock was something none of us had seen before.

Basketball finished, we then got to see a fine demonstration of Henry’s character. Henry was due to retire that year and it fell to our group of graduate students to find an appropriate way to celebrate Henry’s many achievements. With the help of Joseph Collins, Bill Duellman, and many others, we organized a symposium at the 1980 herp meetings in Milwaukee, with many of Henry’s former students presenting papers. We also planned to publish a volume based on that symposium, which appeared in 1984. After lunch, we sprang all this on Henry, including a plaque made especially for the occasion. Henry was deeply moved (Virginia was in tears), but I could tell that while he was clearly touched, part of him was saying to himself: “I need to get out there and check the shelters...”

No discussion of Henry could possibly be complete without mentioning Virginia. Her pride in Henry’s accomplishments and her irreplaceable role in his life cannot be overestimated. Watching her beam from ear to ear during our symposium honoring Henry in 1980 was a joy to watch. For me (and Nadia), Virginia was more like a grandmother than the wife of my major professor. From giving us furniture when we were starving grad students to giving our son his first tricycle, her warmth and devotion to Henry and his students was truly remarkable.

As I think of Henry now, I see him heading off to do another “round” at the Reservation. May he always have as many shelters to check as he could ever want, and may his traps always have many marked snakes. When his morning rounds are over, he’ll be headed back home, where Virginia has lunch waiting.

Henry Fitch: The Twilight of an Incredible Career

George R. Pisani

Kansas Biological Survey, University of Kansas
2101 Constant Avenue, Lawrence, Kansas 66047 (gpisani@ku.edu)

I first met Henry Fitch in 1968, forty-one years ago, while visiting a friend in Lawrence. I’d read many of his papers in the course of my studies, and when I met him again in 1970, I was again impressed by two things beyond his vast store of knowledge. At age fifty-nine he could, while making a round in the field, walk the legs off many people far younger. And, for someone whose many papers had essentially established the field of snake ecology as we now know it, he was incredibly unassuming and reserved (except when playing the, ummm... *rules-modified*, basketball games that then were a Reservation feature event).

Many herpetologists accompanied this remarkable man into the field in the course of his long, distinguished career. It was my distinct privilege