

EDITORIALS and ANNOUNCEMENTS  
Non-Peer Review Section

**HOBART M. SMITH TURNS 100**

*DAVID CHISZAR*

*Department of Psychology, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0345, USA*

Hobart Muir Smith, the great taxonomic herpetologist whose collecting expeditions in Mexico began in 1932, recently got a call from colleague David Wake. He had a student in Mexico who was trying to track down a locality for a Plethodontid salamander that Hobart reported in 1938. At 99 and no longer possessing his library, Hobart required only a few minutes to direct the student to a dusty spot six miles north of Santa Anita in the state of Hidalgo. Always modest and soft-spoken, Hobart just smiled. Of course he remembered. Why wouldn't he?

Slightly built but wiry strong, much younger colleagues who accompanied him on trips marveled at Hobart scrambling over escarpments toward his objective. One was reminded of the lively codger played by Walter Huston in the classic movie, "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre," only it wasn't gold Hobart was after. It was amphibians and reptiles.

Herpetologist Howard K. Gloyd became a friend and mentor to Hobart and redirected his intellectual curiosity to amphibians and reptiles. Furthermore, Gloyd encouraged Hobart to get advanced training in herpetology at the University of Kansas under the colorful Edward H. Taylor, one of the greatest taxonomic herpetologists of his time. Graduate study started in a uniquely Tayloresque manner. On the day of Hobart's graduation from KSU in 1932, Taylor was waiting on that campus for Hobart with a 1926 Chevy sedan packed and ready for Mexico. Off they went, not to return until over 5000 specimens had been collected and classes started for the fall semester at KU. Thus began the Smith and Taylor exploration of the herpetofauna of Mexico.

The vast diversity of species was not yet understood in 1932, although it was hinted at by a number of scholars, starting with Francisco Hernandez in the 16th Century and continuing with Ferdinand Deppe and many others in the nineteenth century (Wiegmann, Dumeril, Bocourt, Peters, Boulanger, Cope and Duges). Thus, fairly large

museum collections were assembled (U.S. National Museum, American Museum of Natural History and the British Museum), but none of these institutions had herpetologists devoted specifically to the Mexican material until Hobart received the Walter Rathbone Bacon Fellowship that funded additional collections over a two-year period and a year at the Smithsonian Institution working on the new material plus specimens already present. Based partly on papers published by others and partly on the intuitions of Smith and Taylor, it was reasoned that every ice age (glaciations) drove North American animals into southern areas, including Mexico. This almost certainly would give rise to radiations in Mexico that otherwise would not have occurred, leading to spectacular herpetological diversity, as well as diversity in other groups of vertebrates and invertebrates. This was a hypotheses held by at least a few researchers, and it was the idea that Smith, Taylor and others tested over the years in their collective efforts.

Trips to Mexico of varying duration occurred in 1932, 1935, 1936, 1938 1939 and two others in the 1990s when Hobart was in his 80s. Numerous companions accompanied him on those trips and they are listed in Chiszar and Smith (1982).

His forays ranged across most of Mexico "as far as the roads would take us," resulting in some 30,000 specimens collected and over a thousand publications, including the famous Handbook of Lizards. And a few stories that weren't published, like the tale of the hungry jaguar and the story of his herpetological honeymoon.

Hobart's memory easily slides back to those years on the Mexican roads and outback. He recalls staying with a rancher in Campeche who wanted to discourage him from going into the jungle at night, so he told Hobart the tale of a jaguar that killed an ox - still in harness - then dragged not only its prey but also the harness and the wagon into the jungle. From Hobart's point of view it was quite impossible to avoid collecting at night as this

would vitiate the project. You simply cannot sample a fauna by doing so in a way that systematically eliminates a large segment of the underlying population - that of the nocturnal. Much to the distress of the Campeche rancher, Hobart continued his nightly forays, although he wore a sidearm. This may have given some comfort to the rancher, but the gun was a .22 caliber loaded with dust shot, ineffective against any large mammalian predator.

At another time, Taylor lost his rifle to bandits. "We parked the car off the road and locked it, and then went off to some herping. Upon arriving back at the vehicle, we were aghast to learn that the rear window of the sedan had been smashed in and the gun was stolen. Taylor insisted that a policeman be called and it would be this officer's job to head on up the mountain and recover the rifle. When the policeman arrived and saw where he would have to go, he utterly refused, saying "There are only bad people up there!" Taylor never did recover the rifle.

Once, Hobart and Taylor lost a gas tank on the Chevy while collecting south of Saltillo in northwest Mexico. The tank was placed in the back seat, with a plastic tube connected with the distributor. As the tube got shorter and shorter with repeated occurrence of leaks in it, Hobart wound up standing on the running board holding aloft a gallon jar with the remains of the gasoline while Taylor drove into Saltillo where a mechanic replaced the gas tank and its connections to the engine. This association between Hobart and his somewhat eccentric mentor lasted for many years.

Having learned his way around from Gloyd and Taylor, Hobart had become skilled in preparation of specimens, tagging and cataloging them. Thus on his trip to Mexico with Taylor, he took care of most of that work. One summer while Rozella and Hobart were collecting on the Bacon Scholarship, Taylor notified them he would like to accompany them for a month. Unfortunately it was a month of small disasters, Taylor's car giving engine problems and getting flats repaired, as well as having difficulty controlling events. Taylor found that he could not have his way all of the time; his strong will conflicted with Rozella's strong will, creating considerable mutual antipathy. Near the end of the month a drying pair of Taylor's slacks caught fire at night in a mountain cabin where they were staying. A few days later he left us, stating with an accusatory glare that he had never had a more unpleasant collecting trip in his life. The Smiths rather agreed.

#### LITERATURE CITED

Chiszar, D. and R.B. Smith. 1982. Fifty Years of Herpetology: Publications of Hobart M. Smith. John Johnson, North Bennington, VT. 78pp.