

IN MEMORIAM

HENRY S. FITCH — A TRIBUTE

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In the Foreword to A Sand County Almanac, Aldo Leopold wrote, "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot." Henry Sheldon Fitch was another person who had a need for wild things, a passionate curiosity about the natural world. Just weeks before his death, when he was essentially bedridden, Henry asked his daughter, Alice, if they couldn't find a local site where they could initiate a mark-recapture study of *Nerodia*.

Henry said that his interest in natural history was innate, although he also said that his parents encouraged him. He grew up on an apple/pear ranch northwest of Medford, Oregon. He attended a one-room school with eight grades and one teacher. But his education also took place when he wandered over the surrounding wild country in the foothills of the Siskiyou Mountains. He had a particular interest in reptiles, and was catching snakes by the age of five. His interest in nature continued as he entered his teens and went to Medford High School. After graduation, he enrolled at the University of Oregon. He majored in zoology but was disappointed in his courses because the Zoology Department at that time was focused on preparing for medical professions. He said later that there was no professor in the department who had any interest in the native fauna or who could identify a toad, a mouse, or a snake.

But that experience could not stop young Henry Fitch. He enrolled at the University of California at Berkeley and was accepted as a graduate student by Joseph Grinnell at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. There he found students with interests similar to his own. The summer after his first year at Berkeley, his interest in fieldwork was strengthened by a field course studying the vertebrate fauna of Nevada led by a young mammalogist, E. Raymond Hall. Henry received his PhD in 1937 and in early 1938 went to work with the U.S. Biological Survey, later the Fish & Wildlife Service, on the San Joaquin Experimental Range studying the ecology of rodents on western ranges, and surreptitiously also studying reptiles. From 1941 to 1945, he served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, receiving training as a pharmacist. He spent time overseas in Europe during World War II.

After discharge from the army, he returned to his job at the San Joaquin Range. He married Virginia Preston on September 6, 1946 and soon thereafter he was transferred to Leesville, Louisiana, where he spent a year studying quail, mourning doves, armadillos, cotton rats, and deer. In 1948, Raymond Hall brought him to Kansas University to teach Ecology and be Superintendent of the new KU

Natural History Reservation, later named the Fitch Natural History Reservation. Four years later in 1952, I came to KU as a naïve graduate student with a goal of studying ecology but not knowing much about it. I do not remember much about my first meeting with Henry. He was not immediately impressive in that first meeting discussing my course of study. I completed my master's degree with his help in 1954 with a thesis on crows.

This afternoon I want to pay tribute to Henry Fitch for his enormous productivity in natural history research and the legacy of knowledge he has left us. Henry was passionate about natural history research. Although he belonged to a number of professional organizations, he avoided being an officer or on the Board. His daughter, Alice, wrote to me in this regard, "He didn't like to be involved in anything that seemed even vaguely political, and he definitely would have been frustrated by such responsibilities that would have taken his time away from research."

In his first years at KU, he spent much time initiating studies of small mammals on the Reservation. But he could not ignore his real interest in reptiles, especially snakes. No one was doing systematic ecological research on snakes. So he had to design a methodology. He designed a funnel trap for capturing snakes. From 1949 to 1956 he used these traps in the fall along rock outcrops where snakes came to hibernate. In 1957, he began trapping snakes in the summer using drift fences with these same traps. In November 1958, I received a letter from Henry asking if I would be interested in working on a project expanding the study of snakes to other sites in Kansas. He suggested I could get data for a dissertation from this project. I jumped at the opportunity and spent the next five years managing the snake study in Harvey and Chase counties — my initiation into herpetology. Later he also developed the method of using shelters or covers from under which to capture snakes.

Henry also developed the protocols for taking data on captured snakes and marking them by clipping subcaudal scales for individual recognition. These mark-recapture methods that he continued for season after season on the Reservation provided the massive amounts of data for which Henry was well known and for which he has been called the "father of snake ecology."

The legacy of knowledge in Henry Fitch's often-cited publications has had an impact on natural history and biology. He was the author or coauthor of 201 publications and, for more than half of these, he was the sole author. He had more than 50 publications on snakes, including a major paper from his dissertation on western Garter Snakes. It

was a biogeographic and systematic study but his interest in natural history can be seen from the information on behavior, food habits and habitat included in the study. From his work on the Fitch Reservation, there are major papers on long-term studies of the natural history or ecology of seven species of snakes. In 1997, he published a book on the snake community of 18 species that he had recorded on the Fitch Reservation summarizing 50 years of research and 32,160 capture records.

But Henry Fitch's interest was not limited to snakes. The breadth of his interests and studies and of his knowledge was legendary. He published 15 papers on the lizards found on the Fitch Reservation, including some long-term studies, and 13 papers on lizards from the western states. From 1967 for about 20 years he made annual trips to the tropics in Mexico, Central America, Ecuador or the Dominican Republic and published 37 papers on lizards of the American tropics. He authored 15 papers on birds, 22 papers on mammals and five papers on spiders.

Collecting data rather than theorizing was Henry's forte, but he wrote a number of review papers summarizing information for reptiles and some other vertebrates on the Reservation — movements, temperature relationships, reproductive strategies and food resources. And he wrote papers summarizing information for various groups of reptiles on reproductive cycles, sexual size differences and ecological patterns of relative clutch mass and litter size. These are mines of useful information. Henry's documentation of ecological succession on the Reservation is another important contribution. All of these studies and the large datasets he collected are an invaluable legacy that will become more and more valuable with time.

But Henry's legacy of research was not his alone. He had a family team that supported him and we need to at least mention their contributions. Virginia Fitch was not only a gracious hostess and supporter in the home but was sincerely interested in Henry's research, his friends and students. She often accompanied him in the field and recorded data, and was a coauthor of some papers. She typed and edited most of his manuscripts.

All three Fitch children developed an interest in natural history and helped Henry with his research while they were growing up. The eldest son, John, has followed in his father's footsteps, becoming an academic biologist and making contributions in ecology, ornithology, and conservation. His daughter, Alice, and her husband, Tony Echelle, are in the Zoology Department at Oklahoma State University. They have been coauthors of some of his Central American papers and his more recent papers. Their family has assisted Henry as he became frailer so that he could continue his studies and report on them. They have brought him to a number of KHS meetings. When he was having difficulty taking care of himself in 2006, Alice took him into her home and cared for him in his last years. Chester did not go into academic biology but has maintained an interest in natural history. He and his wife Dea live one-half mile from the Fitch Reservation and he continued to help his parents as long as they lived on the Reservation. Chester has an interest in snake photography and he provided a number of the photographs in Henry's book.

I also want to pay tribute this afternoon to Henry Fitch

as a teacher. He was not known as a dynamic lecturer, but his lectures were full of information. Looking back at my lecture notes from his ecology course in 1953, it is obvious that he had a wide knowledge of the ecological literature and this is what he lectured from. When you were in the field with Henry, his enthusiasm for natural history studies was contagious. He was a man of few words but he was always willing to talk with students. He had a word of encouragement for your efforts but you must pay attention to his questions. They alerted you to things you had missed. He stayed out of the pettiness and politics of university departments and that made it easier for his students. Henry was a friend for his graduate students, rejoicing over accomplishments and sympathizing when problems arose. After I had completed my degree and left KU, he continued to be interested in and helpful with my research projects. We received Christmas cards from Henry and Virginia Fitch each year and they were always interested in what our children were doing.

But I also want to pay tribute to Henry Fitch as a person. He was a tough man. He survived five bites by venomous snakes, in many cases with minimal treatment. Read the account in *Autecology of the Copperhead*. He suffered from diabetes for more than 30 years but did not let it discourage him from field studies, often in rather primitive situations. At the age of 89 he became disoriented and spent a cold March night in a ravine on the Reservation into which he had fallen but was little the worse in the morning. Five years ago at the age of 94, he traveled to Oregon with his daughter and went up in an ultralight with a cousin to fly over the country where he had grown up.

Henry was a devoted family man. His daughter, Alice, wrote in the last few weeks: "One of the really remarkable things about Dad was what a wonderful father he was, even when he was also doing so many other things. He told us stories, he played games with us, he sometimes made us toys, and he fascinated us with information about the amazing natural world that surrounded us, and that was all in a normal day!"

In the last few weeks, many have written remembrances of Henry Fitch. In reading through some of these, I have noted a consensus in describing the qualities of this man:

- Quiet and reserved—a man of few words but wide knowledge;
- Energetic and enthusiastic about field studies and natural history—almost universal mention of the difficulty younger students had in keeping up with the old man in the field;
- Gracious, gentle and kind—the gentle encourager of students and patient explainer to children and adults and yet he had high standards of excellence;
- Parsimonious—completing field studies with a minimum of expense;
- Modest and unassuming—not fighting to create his own "academic empire" but very competitive in basketball;
- A stubborn confidence and determination, and I would add perseverance, and focus to learn as much as he could about the life on one square mile.

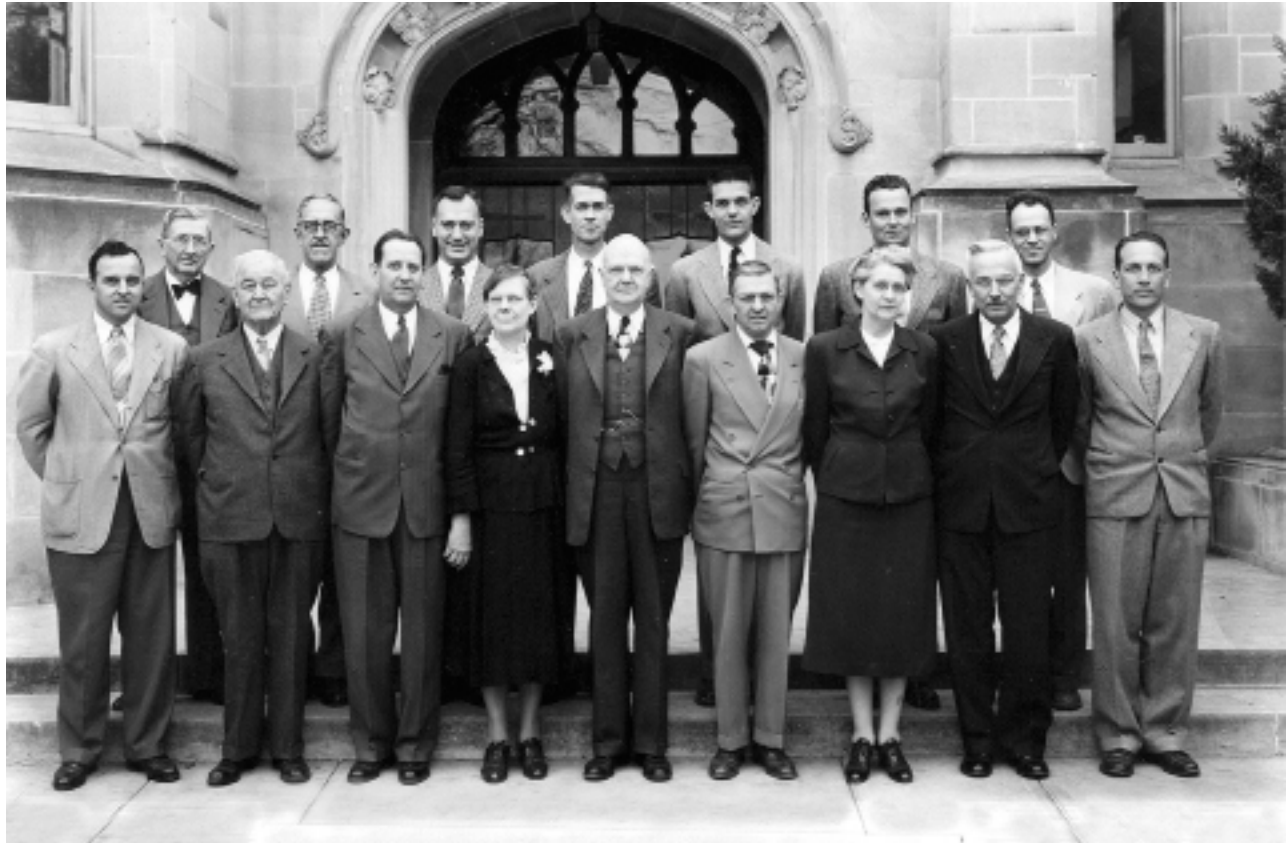
How much poorer we would be today if Henry Fitch had spent only a few years on the Fitch Reservation and then gone on to jobs with more prestige and higher pay.

There is sadness as we think about Henry and Virginia. We will miss them. We will miss their friendship. We will miss the papers Henry continued to give at KHS meetings. We will miss his questions and continued encouragement about our projects.

But it is also a time for celebration. In 1995 Henry Fitch wrote to his daughter, Alice: “. . . if, when I was Lena’s age I could have had a Martin Luther King type dream about my future and the world I would like to see, it would have been about the same as the life I have actually had. Getting a Ph.D. (nearly 60 years ago), having a loving and supportive wife, children like you and John and Chester, and grandchildren like Tyson, Lena and Ben, living on the Reservation, teaching natural history and doing research on reptiles, including anoles and pit vipers and making two

dozen trips to nine countries in the tropics for herpetological research have all been great experiences.” A life only a few months short of 100 years with such satisfaction deserves celebration. So let us celebrate the long productive life of Henry Fitch, a person who has touched almost everyone in this room in many ways, a student of natural history whose contributions include long term studies of many species on a square mile in northeastern Kansas and studies of tropical anoles and other lizards, a teacher of students many of whom continue the tradition of excellent ecological studies and a model for living and learning that we all could well emulate. Let us give a last standing ovation to Henry Fitch.

Editor’s Note: This address was presented by Dwight R. Platt on the occasion of the 36th Annual Meeting of the Kansas Herpetological Society in Olathe, Kansas, on 7 November 2009.



Assembled in February 1951 for a group photograph were the faculty members of the University of Kansas Department of Zoology, all colleagues of the late Henry S. Fitch. Back row (L–R): Professors Lane, Taylor, Leone, Wilson, Tordoff, Baker, and Weir. Front row (L–R): Professors Peabody, Baumgartner, Nelson, Larson, Lawson, Leonard, McNair, Hall, and Fitch. University of Kansas Natural History Museum file photograph, courtesy of Robert M. Timm.

