

C. Richard Robins and the Miami School of Ichthyology

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CHARLES RICHARD ROBINS was a central figure in two of the Twentieth Century’s great “schools” of ichthyology, first as a student at Cornell University under Edward C. Raney, and later as the head of his own program at the University of Miami, Florida. Dick Robins (and he was always Dick, never Charlie or Chuck) has a long list of accomplishments to his credit, as a scientist, as an educator, and in public policy. He has published more than 200 papers and books. Thirty-one students received their Ph.D. degrees under Dick’s supervision, and another 14 received Master’s degrees (Courtenay and Robins, 1997). Many of these students went on to make major contributions of their own. Countless other students passed through his classrooms on their way to other fields. In 1998, Dick was honored by the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (ASIH) with the Robert H. Gibbs, Jr. Memorial Award, given for “an outstanding body of published work in systematic ichthyology.” Two of his former students, William N. Eschmeyer (1999) and William F. Smith-Vaniz (2011) went on to win the same award themselves.

There is also an intangible legacy. Students absorb more than technical knowledge from the professors under whom they work. They also learn attitudes and principles. Dick Robins has always been characterized by his ethics, integrity, and honesty, and his devotion to service. These attitudes have surely had a lasting influence on those who have known him and studied under him, and they in turn pass these values on to their own students and colleagues.

BEGINNINGS

Dick Robins was born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania on 25 November 1928, the youngest of three children. His parents were Claude Revere Robins and Helen Ayers Robins. Claude Robins left school at an early age and went into business for himself, building a very successful career in wholesale jewelry and other operations. The Great Depression struck shortly after Dick’s birth. Like many other business owners, Claude was hit hard, eventually giving up many of his other activities to concentrate on jewelry. He persisted, however, and not only survived but later went on to serve two terms as mayor of Harrisburg (1948–1955).

Shortly before the Depression, the Robins family moved to a large house at the north end of town, situated on a sizable piece of property. It was here that Dick began to pursue his interest in nature, and particularly in birds. He had little in the way of equipment—no binoculars and few books—but he was a careful observer, noting the appearance and behavior of the birds he saw and later matching these with descriptions in the literature. Eventually, he found companions in the area who also enjoyed the outdoors, and they spent many hours exploring the surrounding woods and fields. His grandfather had a large collection of National Geographic magazines, which Dick enjoyed reading and learning about the wide world beyond his home town. It was here that he was introduced to the writings of the noted ornithologist Arthur A. Allen (1885–1964), then on the faculty of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He also had the opportunity to meet the ornithologist George Miksch Sutton (1898–1982). Sutton had been the state ornithologist of Pennsylvania from 1925 to 1929 before going to Cornell for graduate studies under Arthur Allen and later as a faculty member. During that time, he frequently returned to Harrisburg where he roomed with the business partner of Dick’s father. Between Allen and Sutton, Dick knew that he wanted to attend Cornell.

THE CORNELL YEARS AND EDWARD C. RANEY

He arrived at Cornell in the fall of 1946, a time of great change on college campuses and in the nation as a whole. The country was finally beginning to recover from 15 years of depression and war, and a new era of growth and development was beginning. Thanks to the G.I. Bill (officially the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944), returning veterans were able to begin or continue their college education. It was a unique situation that brought together 18-year-olds fresh out of high school and veterans several years older who had been places and experienced things that their younger