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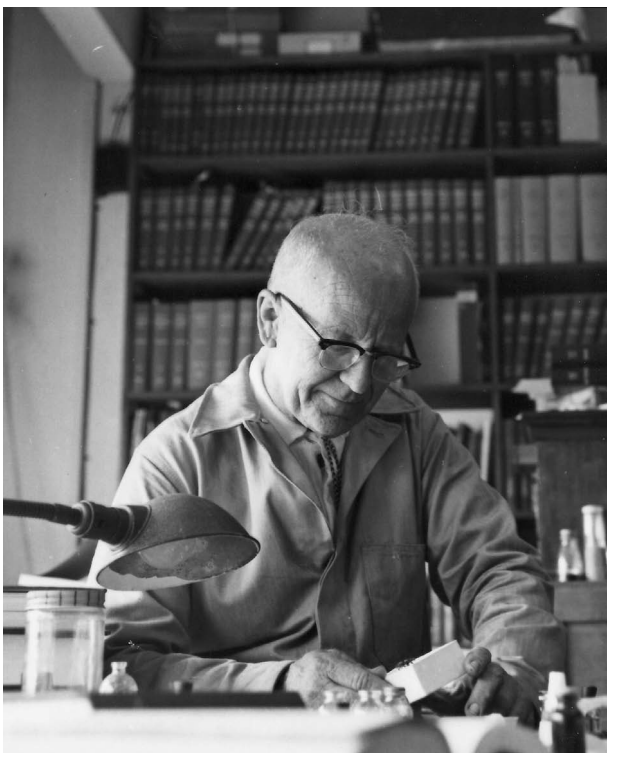
CHARLES F. HARBISON (1904-1989)

PIED PIPER OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA JUNIOR NATURALISTS

For more than 30 years, Charles Harbison—'Harbie' to his friends, which included everyone who knew him —was the primary spokesman for natural history inquiries in San Diego County, California. Possibly no person was more instrumental in the early development of young biologists on the Pacific Coast, and several of his protégés became lifelong lepidopterists. Although he was not primarily a lepidopterist, he was a member of our Society for 24 years beginning in the 1950s and attended many Pacific Slope Section meetings. He organized and hosted two of these at the San Diego Natural History Museum (SDNHM), in 1955 and 1965. The former was just the second meeting following organization of the Pacific Slope group. It was well attended and featured an immensely successful and memorable field trip to the desert following late summer rains, and it was instrumental in establishing the popularity of the meetings. In 1982, Harbison was the Comstock Award honoree at the Pacific Slope Meeting.

Charles Harbison was born in National City, just south of San Diego, in January 1904, into a pioneer family in San Diego history. His grandfather, John S. Harbison, was one of the earliest successful beekeepers in California, in the Sacramento Valley in the 1850s. In 1869 he moved to San Diego and by 1874 moved to the area that is now called Harbison Canyon, in the foothills east of San Diego, where he developed a large bee range. He eventually operated six apiaries with 2,000–3,000 hives, and according to Wikipedia, within seven years he was the largest producer of honey in the world, shipping carloads to Chicago and other eastern cities. Charles' father settled in National City in the1870s, and in 1908 moved the family to the Imperial Valley, where he owned a turkey ranch near Seeley. Harbie recalled that his interest in insects began in his first year at El Centro High School, and he made his first collections there and at the Johnson Ranch near the town of Boulevard in the mountains of eastern San Diego County, where the family spent parts of the summers. His father also operated tourist trips, and young Charles helped run trips into northern Baja California, where he had his first experiences in the region. By 1919, the family returned to the San Diego area, and he graduated from Sweetwater High School in Chula Vista in 1923. Harbie then took courses at San Diego Normal School (now California State University, San Diego), before moving to Los Angeles, where he spent five years working for the Division of Nature Study of the Los Angeles City Schools. There he continued his formal education, taking night courses at the University of California, Southern Branch (now UCLA).

Harbison entered U. C. Berkeley, in spring 1932 as a junior and studied entomology under Profs. E. O. Essig, S. B. Freeborn, and W. B. Herms and invertebrate zoology under Joseph Grinnell. Economic times were so poor that the summer field course, which was required of entomology major undergraduates from the 1920s until 1970, consisted of an encampment near Vacaville in the Sacramento Valley, where the students studied effects of Buckeye blossoms on honeybees, using pollen grain comparisons. Even so, after retirement Harbie said he often wondered if he ever had a happier time than his first year at Berkeley. He graduated with a B. S. in entomology in May 1933;



he had hoped to continue in the Masters program, but in April word came from the Federal Government that there would be no student grants that year. This, coupled with the recent death of his father, forced him to leave school and return to help support the family in Chula Vista, where he lived for most of the rest of his life. He packed his books and other belongings and ***walked*** back to Los Angeles due to lack of funds. He left behind a girlfriend, with the intent they would reunite when his financial situation improved, but it did not for many years, and he never married.

Harbie found work with Federal job programs (SERA and WPA), at first as a pick and shovel laborer, and beginning in1934, in the Entomology section at the SDNHM, which could not afford the $90 weekly salary that the WPA provided. During the 1930's he maintained the entomology collections with the help of Ian Moore, a college student and later noted coleopterist. More than anything, Harbie desired permanency at the museum, not imagining that it would be 17 years before he would obtain a full time position.

During that era he participated in many field trips. His first opportunity to explore Baja extensively came in 1935, when he and C. M. Brown were financed by a sphingid collector in the eastern U. S. to make an expedition through much of the northern peninsula, and this led to a lifelong fascination with Baja. Other expeditions during the pre-WW II years included several as an assistant to the museum mammalogist, L. M. Huey, to Organ Pipe National Monument and other sites in southwestern Arizona, and to Baja California.

Between 1939 and 1949, Harbison also was employed part time by the San Diego City Schools to teach nature study programs through the museum, and in that role he achieved his most influential success, for his enduring talent lay in encouraging younger students. In 1943, the U. S. Navy took over the Natural History Museum for use as a hospital, but Harbie was not deterred from his junior naturalist programs. He moved his materials, along with part of the entomology collections, to Brooklyn Grammar School, in south San Diego, and maintained a "Children's Museum," where he continued to offer classes. He taught summer courses and classes on Saturdays during the school year. These were highlighted by local field trips, each emphasizing a different subject of natural history. Enhanced by the seacoast to mountains to desert diversity of San Diego County, we stalked marine fossils, birds, spring wild flowers, insects, or intertidal animals (and low tide always seemed to occur at 5:00 A.M.). Students spent half the time off looking for their own special interests, tolerated and converted into added lessons by Harbie's patience and versatility as a naturalist. Later, in high school and as undergraduates at SDSC, we often visited the museum to identify specimens and to be encouraged in our particular pursuits by Harbie. Whereas city residents could ride the streetcar, which stopped across the street from the museum, John Heppner recalls bicycling in the early1960s with a beetle collector friend 15 miles from his home in Santee to visit Harbie.

When the museum was reopened in 1949, the junior program was turned over to young instructors who had been high school junior specialists of Harbison's program. Unable to survive on his woefully underpaid, part-time curatorship, Harbie worked night shifts at Solar Aircraft and resumed taking college courses to obtain a teaching credential from SDSC. He taught grammar school in rural Jamul, but never having been able to administer discipline of any kind, resigned in exasperation after one year. Finally, in 1952, he was able to return to the SDNHM as a fully salaried staff member, with three days per week spent in the Entomology Department and two weekend days assisting in the Library and conducting nature walks for the public. Most of the time he worked seven days a week, so he was always available to visitors in the Entomology Department, and scarcely a day went by that he did not spend hours responding to phone inquiries or showing recent collections to visitors, especially kids, answering their questions about everything from moths that came to the porch lights to tarantulas and fossils. Hence, his influence on young naturalists continued until his retirement in 1969.

Trips of the early post WWII era were made in an adventurous atmosphere, mostly in dilapidated 1930's cars, and we all remember digging and pushing them from the sand, for which Harbie never seemed to gain proper respect. Or we waited apprehensively while he walked or rode a bus back to civilization for parts or assistance, or until he trudged back to camp at dusk, burdened with net, trowels, plant presses festooned with palm fronds and bags of succulents, looking like a burro in baggy pants. Vivid in my memory is an incident when I hiked part way back down the precipitous trail into Tajo Canyon because it was getting dark, to find Harbie struggling up the slope with a heavy backpack and plant presses under both arms; he refused to hand over any of his load, but instead instructed me to dig up specimens of an onion growing along the trail. A few years later in similar circumstances he fell and broke a tooth because he was carrying his flashlight in his mouth.

The list of Harbison's protégés who went on to make contributions to biology, as amateurs and professionals,

is remarkable and includes professors, writers, and curators at several California universities, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of North Carolina, as well as the Executive Director of the Entomological Society of America and educators and naturalists in the San Diego area. Persons he assisted to a greater or lesser extent and went on to publish on and/or make significant collections of Lepidoptera include John W. Brown (Ph.D. Entomology, U.C. Berkeley); David K. Faulkner (M.S. Entomology, CSU Long Beach); J. O. Hunt (B.A., SDSC); R.A. Mackie (M.S. Entomology, U. Idaho); Gordon Marsh (B.S. Entomology, U. C. Berkeley); the late M. J. McKenney (M.D., Stanford U.); the late D. M. Peterson (M.S. Entomology, U. C. Riverside); J. A. Powell (Ph.D. Entomology, U.C. Berkeley); Paul A. Rude (M.S. Entomology, U.C. Berkeley), Oakley Shields (Ph.D. Entomology, U.C. Davis), Paul Spade, and Ray Stanford (M.D. UCLA). Many other Harbison students later held professional positions as biologists or taught in high schools.

Harbison's own research interests were in the insects, especially Odonata, and plants of Baja California. He made many trips during 1949 to 1969, in an effort to visit the type localities of dragonflies and plants, especially succulents and cacti, with which Harbie had expert familiarity. He traveled the length of the peninsula in 1952 with Museum botanist Ethel Higgins (who was in her 80's) and again in 1967 with Darley Howe and Gordon Marsh. He was particularly fascinated by Cañon del Cantil (Cantillas and its north fork, Tajo Cañon) in the Sierra de Juarez, which he visited many times, leading expeditions of naturalist hikers. On the last of these, in 1973, he had to be virtually carried out of the canyon after he fell and injured his head. The nucleus of insects collected by Harbie in Baja stimulated generations of entomologists to focus efforts on that fauna.

Harbison made 27 extended research trips between 1952 and 1968, including five visits to Guadalupe Island, Mexico, and the 1958 Scripps Institution of Oceanography expedition to Barro Colorado Island, Panama, and Clipperton Island, Mexico. The latter is a harsh and desolate atoll 900 miles south of Baja California, which had 30 species of weedy plants (Sachet 1962). Harbie found 13 orders of insects as well as spiders and other arthropods and was quoted as calling it "an apex of my career." He was a member of the 1962 Belvedere Expedition to the Gulf of California, which visited 32 islands, where he collected more than 10,000 arthropod specimens (Lindsay 1962).

Harbison's published productivity was limited but began with an enchanting description of the vegetation in one of the steep, north slope ravines of Santa Cruz Island in 1927, and included at least two articles on type localities and rediscovery of plant species and descriptions of two new Agave-feeding megathymid skippers from Baja California. The versatility of his interests is reflected in patronyms proposed in his honor. They include at least two plants, *Verbena Harbisonii* Moldenke, 1940, and *Astragalus Harbisonii* Barneby, 1953; a mouse, *Peromyscus guardia harbisoni* Banks, 1967; a bee, *Centris harbisoni* Snelling, 1974; a butterfly, *Euphyes vestris harbisoni* Brown and McGuire, 1983; a yucca skipper, *Megathymus yuccae harbisoni* J. & T. Emmel, 1998; and a scorpion, *Vaejovis* (now *Serradigitus*) *harbisoni* Williams, 1970, named for his collecting in Baja California and "having encouraged many biology students to study the arthropod fauna of this region."

Upon his retirement in 1969, Harbison remained active at the SDNHM for another six months—and continued to teach occasional classes to young students as a volunteer until 1972—but then felt it best to separate himself in fear that the Museum would not feel a need to recruit a replacement in the Entomology Department. This was a well-founded apprehension; in fact, a full time curator was not hired for many years. However, it was a shame that Harbie's contributions to the SDNHM, especially the public relations value he provided, and his own interest in working with the collection were terminated with many potentially productive years remaining.

As the city's best-known resident naturalist, Harbie frequently appeared in the news media, often to help dispel fear of insects and spiders. On one occasion, under the incredulous, slack-jawed gaze of a TV host, Harbie prodded a shaggy tarantula into biting his finger, and then held it up with the beast still attached, to show parents in chaparral suburbia that the pain was endurable and the venom feeble. Harbison maintained a steady, determined expression and seemed undaunted by the cameras. Whether any viewers were convinced is unknown. Of all things that Charles Harbison did or did not accomplish, he can never be forgotten for the time he spent with people, especially young naturalists, answering their questions. Certainly many of us will never forget our introduction to a microscope, professional books and monographs, and adventures trying to match our catches with identified specimens in a museum collection. It is to be hoped that Harbie was repaid in satisfaction in seeing so many of his students contract an incurable interest in natural history from his infectious enthusiasm, which we carried into professional lives.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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