

Memorial to Katherine Van Winkle Palmer 1895–1982

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Katherine (Evangeline Hilton) Van Winkle Palmer, illustrious Tertiary paleontologist and long-time (1952–1978) director and Life Trustee of the Paleontological Research Institution, died on September 12, 1982. In November a memorial service was held at the Dewitt Historical Society of Tompkins County, Ithaca, New York. At that time her notable career in scientific, academic, and civic affairs was celebrated. She was the widow of Ephraim Laurence Palmer, famous professor of nature study at Cornell University. Their son Robin survives her.

Katherine was the lineal descendant of Jacob Walingen Van Winkle who came to New Amsterdam in 1634. He was one of the “First Twelve Men” who helped form the first official representative body of New York and New Jersey in 1641. Eph’s earliest American ancestor was a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629.

I first knew Katherine as a paleontologist 300 years after Ephraim’s ancestor landed, but I had known Eph as my scout master for about ten years by then. Katherine was the senior paleontologist in the well-known paleontological laboratory of G. D. Harris at Cornell University when I first made her acquaintance as a scientist; her widely known doctoral study on veneracean lamellibranchs (1927, 1929) was an example to emulate for all of us aspiring students of paleontology. As Harris often remarked, “After God made Katherine, He broke the mold.”

Katherine Palmer’s paleontological career began at the University of Washington (B.S., 1918) under the inspiring teaching of Charles E. Weaver, renowned student of the Tertiary. She served him as a laboratory assistant (1918) before transferring to Cornell for graduate study. At Cornell she was an assistant in paleontology and historical geology (1921–1925), a Goldwyn Smith Fellow in Geology (1918–1920), and held a Hecksher Fellowship (1925–1927). At various times, she served as a special lecturer in paleontology at Cornell (1942–1945), and was a visiting assistant professor of paleontology and historical geology at the University of Washington (1922). She served as curator of the paleontologic collections of Oberlin College (1928), as technical expert in zoology at the New York State Museum (1945), as a special technical assistant at McGill University (1950), and the same at the Provincial Museum of Quebec (1951). She served as director and emeritus director of the Paleontological Research Institution, Ithaca, New York, from 1952 until her death, having retired from active direction in 1978.

Among her many honors, Katherine received the Paleontological Society Medal in 1972 (see *Journal of Paleontology*, v. 47) for her distinguished work on Tertiary Mollusca; the Western Society of Malacologists Award (1974); and an Honorary Doctor of Science from Tulane University (1978). She was president of Sigma Delta Epsilon, women’s graduate scientific fraternity (1938) and was designated a National Honorary Member in 1971; she was a charter member and president of Chi Upsilon, women’s geological sorority. She served as secretary-treasurer of the Cushman Foundation (1954–

1961), vice president (1958), and president (1960); and was made an Honorary Life Member of the American Malacological Union. In 1935 she was made a Fellow of the Geological Society of America, and GSA Special Paper 184 was dedicated to her in 1976. She was an honorary member of the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists, and a member or fellow of most prominent geological and paleontological societies of the world.

Over the years Katherine received many grants in support of her paleontological research: Geological Society of America (1938); American Philosophical Society (1945–1969); National Science Foundation (1954). But, supported or not, her research on Tertiary paleontology continued, even while she fulfilled her domestic responsibilities as wife and mother of two sons, the eldest of whom was an invalid for many years. On several occasions she received appointments for special work in nature study at Cornell University and the Utah Agricultural College in connection with the primary interests of her husband.

Upon his retirement from Cornell University (1932), G. D. Harris and his family, together with a group of his former paleontology students, founded the Paleontological Research Institution at Ithaca to house Harris's large collections and library, and to continue his life work of publishing the *Bulletins of American Paleontology* and *Palaeontographica Americana*. Katherine was a founding member and Life Trustee; she succeeded Harris as director in 1952. Under her leadership, the Institution acquired splendid new headquarters across Cayuga Lake from Cornell University, as well as substantial endowments. The collections grew immensely, and adequate funds for curatorial work were found. Under her director-editorship, some 150 *Bulletins of American Paleontology* and 20 monographs of *Palaeontographica Americana* were issued. However, Katherine drew the line at personally doing the actual printing as Harris had done for many years! She had, however, studied typesetting at his insistence when a graduate student.

During her long life, Katherine had opportunity for field study and collecting of Recent fossil Mollusca in many parts of the world, most notably in the Gulf of Mexico, West Indies, and New Zealand. On the Ithaca scene, she entered fully into campus and community activities. To the end, she was actively engaged in research on Cenozoic paleontology and left uncompleted studies on Florida and Alabama Eocene molluscs. Her lasting memorial lies in her more than sixty publications over 64 years. Many of these were monographic studies of Tertiary and Recent Mollusca.

In closing this tribute, a quotation from the citation for Doctor of Science at Tulane University (1978) is most appropriate:

All the praise and recognition she has received could not be enough to match the extent of her contribution to Tertiary paleontology. The brilliance of her work, the precision of her method, the wisdom of her leadership of the Paleontological Research Institution, will stand as the greatest monument to Dr. Palmer and as the highest example for future generations of what it means to be a scientist.

Those of us who knew her as an ever-helpful friend and gracious hostess will carry a lifelong gratefulness for having known her.

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