ROCK STARS

The Lady and Her Fossils: Katherine Van Winkle Palmer (1895–1982)

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Katherine Van Winkle Palmer, ca. 1940.
(Courtesy of the Paleontological Research Institution [PRI].)

After God made Katherine, he broke the mould. —Gilbert D. Harris.

INTRODUCTION

Katherine Evangeline Hilton Van Winkle was born in Washington State on 5 February 1895, the only child of Jacob Outwater Van Winkle, a doctor, and Mary Edith Hilton Van Winkle, a nurse. Katherine grew up in the small town of Oakville, southwest of Tacoma, and not too far from Olympia. She and her father, a local physician, had a very close bond, and it was he who introduced her to nature and the out-of-doors. No doubt given the proximity of their home to outcrops of the Tertiary-age[1] Cowlitz Formation, she and her father had fun collecting fossil mollusks, and it was on these trips that she developed her love of science and her fascination with fossils. As she said later in life, "I knew fossils as a child, so by the time I went to the University of Washington I knew I wanted to study geology" (Allmon, 2007, p. 31). As a young girl, she attended the local schools, and she was the only girl in her class to go to college.

It was at the University of Washington that Katherine started her formal work in paleontology under the watchful eye of Professor Charles E. Weaver (1880–1958), a well-known expert on Paleogene fossils. She graduated with her B.S. in 1918 and published her senior thesis on age determinants within faunal provinces that same year[2]. The fieldwork she did in 1916–1917 for the thesis was "... by means of a compass and tape traverse…" up and down several creeks. This first paper, which was almost 30 printed pages, plus plates, proved to be the first of many long publications devoted to paleontology.

After briefly working as a post-graduate laboratory assistant to Dr. Weaver, and upon his recommendation, Katherine applied for and received a Goldwyn Smith Fellowship (1918–1920) to do graduate work at Cornell University with the east coast Paleogene expert, Gilbert D. Harris (1864–1952)[3]. Later (1921–1925), she received an assistantship in paleontology and historical geology to continue her work with Professor Harris.

LIFE AS A CORNELL STUDENT

Because Gilbert Harris was an expert in Katherine's chosen field of Paleogene paleontology, it was natural that she would be working with the east coast expert. But there was another reason she was to become a student of G.D. Harris at Cornell, for, at that time, he was the only professor in the geology department who would accept women as students (Brice, 1996). Katherine received her Ph.D. in paleontology in 1925, but not before she had to set the type, make the plates, and then print her thesis on Professor Harris's own printing press. Not many paleontologists have done that.

A legacy of her student days at Cornell University is the organization Sigma Delta Epsilon[4], which was founded at Cornell in 1921. At the time, it was the only national organization for women in science, and Katherine was one of the founders and later served as national president.

Katherine had intended to return to Washington State and resume her work with Dr. Weaver, but those plans changed. She had fallen in love with the Ithaca region and with a Cornell professor of rural education, Ephraim Laurence Palmer (1888–1970)[5]. They were married in 1921 while she was still a graduate student. The couple had two children: Laurence Van Winkle Palmer, born in 1923, and Richard Robin Palmer, born in 1930. However, tragedy stuck the family when Laurence, "Punky" as he was known, was stricken with a *Streptococcus* infection at age 4, which left him with severe arthritis and eventually took his life at the age of 17.

[1] Although this was the proper terminology for this part of geologic time when Katherine was growing up, this has since been redefined as the Paleogene. To keep with current terminology, the term Paleogene will be used in place of Tertiary in the rest of the paper.

[2] For a complete bibliography for Katherine Palmer, see Caster (1983, p. 1142–1144).

[3] For details of Harris's life see Brice (1996).

[4] The formal founding name was Sigma Delta Epsilon Graduate Women's Scientific Fraternity. It is now known as Graduate Women in Science.

[5] For details of Dr. E. Laurence Palmer's life and work, see Pruitt (1963).

Paleontology class of G.D. Harris, ca. 1921: (left to right) Axel Olsson, Harris, Pearl Sheldon, Dr. Carlotta Maury, Katherine V.W. Palmer. Note: Dr. Maury, a former student, was visiting the campus to study the collections at the time the photograph was taken (courtesy of PRI).

LIFE AFTER GRADUATION

Upon graduation, Katherine received a Hecksher Fellowship (1925–1927) to continue her work with Professor Harris on Paleogene fossils. Several years later, she was present when Harris laid the cornerstone for the Paleontological Research Institution (PRI) in 1932; it was literally in the backyard of his home, just across the gorge from Cornell University. Katherine worked actively with PRI and served on its board of directors. During World War II, she was also a special lecturer in paleontology at Cornell University.

Though Katherine never had a full-time academic appointment, over the years she served as curator of collections and technical assistant at several universities and museums. Her long association with PRI gave her a professional base from which and through which she published much of her work.

She made many fossil-collecting trips over the years, often with Professor Harris, to Paleogene locations along the Eastern and Gulf Coasts of the U.S., and to Cuba in 1941 and 1947. She traveled as far away as New Zealand in 1947, although appendicitis and surgery delayed the trip, but only by a few days. In 1959, Katherine and several others made a collecting expedition to Panama. Sometimes a picture of a fossil she collected would end up on the annual PRI Christmas card.

Frequently she would become involved with projects that, though important to the field of paleontology, few workers would undertake, such as the fossil catalogues that she published. Later, a colleague would say of these works, "Such work [the catalogues] is perhaps our greatest drudgery and most thankless endeavor, yet when well done, far surpasses in general utility many a long monograph" (Caster, 1973).

DIRECTOR OF PRI

Due to Gilbert Harris's illness, and before his death on 4 December 1952, the board appointed Katherine director of PRI in April 1952. She was the logical successor as she had been associated with the institution right from the laying of the cornerstone some 20 years earlier. One of her main concerns as the new director was to find new quarters, for the little concrete block building in Harris' backyard was no longer adequate. Though it took over 10 years, she succeeded, and PRI moved to the west side of Cayuga Lake to the former International Order of Odd Fellows orphanage. The purchase was completed in 1968 and PRI began a new era[6].

As director of PRI, Katherine was responsible for PRI publications, which included both the *Bulletins of American Paleontology* (BAP), which Harris founded in 1895, and *Palæontographica Americana*, founded in 1916. And, yet, she also managed to continue her research work in paleontology and to care for her family. In addition, the Palmer family was well known for their gracious hospitality, often hosting visiting scholars of both geology and rural education from around the world. Ephraim L. Palmer died on 18 December 1970, and though her health slowly deteriorated during the 1970s, Katherine continued as director of PRI until 1978.

During the first 21 years as director of PRI, Katherine Palmer edited 137 numbers (28 volumes) of *BAP* and 20 numbers (4 volumes) of *Palæontographica Americana* as well as several books, guidebooks, and booklets. Over her productive career, she produced more than 70 paleobiologic papers, 17 of which are considered "… major works" (Caster, 1973). Some of them are quite massive; e.g., Palmer (1937 and 1946) and Palmer and Braun (1965–1966); just these three papers total more than 2,000 pages of paleontology.

Katherine Palmer's contributions to paleontology were officially recognized by several professional societies: She became a GSA Fellow (1935); received the award for "outstanding contributions to the study of Mollusca" from the Western Society of Malacologists (1974); received an honorary degree from Tulane University (1978); and was the first woman to be awarded the Paleontological Society Medal (1973).

Truly a pioneer in geology and especially in paleontology, Katherine Van Winkle Palmer died on 12 September 1982. Her last publication was a history of PRI. Fittingly, the second home of PRI, and now the administrative building, Palmer Hall, is named in her memory.

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[6] For more on the history of PRI, see Allmon (2007).