



N.W. Riser at Hopkins Marine Station in 1947 while a Ph.D. student.

Obituary

Nathan Wendell Riser (1920–2006)

Professor Nathan Wendell Riser died at his home in Swampscott, Massachusetts on Wednesday July 26, 2006 at the age of 86. He was known to his colleagues as “Pete” and to his graduate students as “Doc.” He was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1920 where he completed secondary school in 1937.

After attending the University of Utah for three years he transferred to the University of Illinois, Champagne, where he earned his B.S. degree in zoology in 1941. He enlisted in the military in 1942 and served as a Navy Corpsman in the Navy Medical Corp where he saw action in the Pacific Theater of WWII. He was discharged in 1945 and entered graduate school at Stanford University where he conducted research at the Hopkins Marine Station in Pacific Grove, California. He earned an M.S. degree in 1948 and a Ph.D. in 1949 on the biology of tetraphyllidean cestodes associated with sharks and rays (“The morphology and systematic position of some little known Tetraphyllideans”) under the direction of Prof. Tage Skogsberg.

His tenure as a doctoral student at Hopkins coincided with the maturation of American marine biology into a well-defined field. Pacific Grove was a hotbed of marine biology in the 1940s and he became friends with Edward Flanders Ricketts, owner of the Pacific Biological Supply company, author of the classic field guide “Between Pacific Tides.” His good friend, Nobel Prize-winning author John Steinbeck, would make Pacific Grove and Ed Ricketts famous as the main character in his 1945 book “Cannery Row.” When Ricketts was killed by a train in 1948, Doc attended his funeral and helped to settle some of his personal affairs. He collected intertidal invertebrates in Pacific Grove with legendary Prof. S. F. Light who penned what came to be known as “Light’s Manual,” an identification guide to the invertebrates of the mid-California coast, and he was friends with many invertebrate zoologists who would later achieve great fame including Cadet Hand, Ralph Smith, and Joel Hedgpeth.

In 1949 he accepted a position on the faculty at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia) in the Department of Biology where he taught invertebrate zoology for a year before joining the faculty at Fisk University in Tennessee where he became Chair of Biology in 1953. He spent the summer of 1952 teaching a course on invertebrates at the Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole, and conducted research at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution during 1956–1957. During the summers of 1950–1957 he taught a course in invertebrate zoology at the University of New Hampshire where he was joined by many prominent invertebrate zoologists such as George Moore, Marian Pettibone, and Ruth Turner. In 1957 he assumed the duties of Chair of Biology and professor at Northeastern University in Boston and in 1967 he became the founding Director of the new marine station in Nahant (north of Boston) then called the Marine Science Institute (MSI).

Riser was Director of the MSI from 1967 until 1979 and he officially retired from the faculty in 1985. However, he continued to work in his laboratory nearly every day and maintained an active research program until his death in 2006. During his tenure as Director, he brought widespread recognition to the MSI as a center for marine organismal biology where the Louis Agassiz approach to investigation was promoted (“Study nature, not books”). The Institute attracted hundreds of prominent international marine biologists whose presence enriched the lives of the resident graduate students and produced a vibrant and scholarly atmosphere. Doc was assisted by another resident faculty member, Prof. M. Patricia Morse, who helped him create an intellectually challenging and socially vibrant environment for students. During his years as a faculty member he taught a wide variety of courses including comparative vertebrate anatomy, histology and microtechnique, comparative embryology, invertebrate zoology, and the history of biology. He was particularly fond of invertebrate taxonomic and comparative morphological studies emphasizing turbellarians, nemertean, and polychaetes but his emphasis was always on the biology of living organisms. He taught using the “Agassiz method” in which he introduced new students to living invertebrates and encouraged them to investigate facets of their life histories that were largely unknown to science. He strongly encouraged students to divide their time between the field, where they collected and identified invertebrates, and the lab, where they conducted histological, anatomical, physiological, or developmental studies. He made sure every student had a flowing seawater aquarium in their lab

containing a wide variety of specimens so they could observe daily and note any interesting behavior. He led numerous collecting trips to the Woods Hole region to the south and Maine to the north where students could become familiar with the intertidal and subtidal fauna and experience the joy and camaraderie of field work. Over the years he was joined in these memorable field outings by some of the most prominent invertebrate zoologists in the world including Libbie Hyman. The collecting sites he chose along the shores of the Gulf of Maine had been frequented by other prominent nineteenth century American marine biologists including William Stimpson and Addison E. Verrill 100 years earlier and he made certain students understood the contributions of these pioneers.

One could easily describe Doc as eccentric and his communications with students were often puzzling if not incomprehensible. However, he always had the interest of the student at heart and he nudged them forward in their work and always encouraged intellectual exploration and curiosity. Famous for his reticence and his ever-present pipe, students learned largely by following his example while attempting to decipher his often enigmatic statements. Doc was particularly fond of introducing students to the classical zoological literature of the nineteenth century and he encouraged them to become proficient in more than one language. Students were encouraged to browse the extensive collections of the Marine Biological Laboratory library in Woods Hole and the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University and he frequently dropped obscure scientific reprints on a student's desk as a not-so-subtle hint that the paper should be digested. Many of his students went on to careers in medicine while others chose biological research. His academic children include physicians, hospital administrators, research scientists, university professors, museum curators, and science administrators. His former students all have one thing in common—a deep fondness for the eccentric professor who shared his love of marine invertebrates and encouraged them to strive for excellence.

Riser was in many ways an old-school marine naturalist with broad ranging research interests but his scientific publications centered mostly on the biology and systematics of dorvilleid, nerillid, protodrilid, and syllid polychaetes of the Gulf of Maine, non-otoplanid proseriate turbellarians from the New England region, and nemerteans from New England and elsewhere. During his long professional career he also held appointments at the Marine Biological Laboratory and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution in Woods Hole, and the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University. Doc never kept track of the number of graduate students he supervised but he guided nearly 30 students during his 18 years as Director of the MSI and many more in his previous faculty appointments at other universities. He published nearly 50 scientific papers and had a remarkable 16 new species described in his honor from five phyla including one turbellarian, two cestodes, seven polychaetes, one oligochaete, one mollusk, two nemerteans, and two arthropods.

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