

Pioneer of Parasitology

Honoring the legacy of Dr. Mary Lou Pritchard on her 100th birthday

Article by Dr. Scott Gardner, Curator of Parasitology, UNSM and Daniel R. Brooks, Senior Research Fellow, Manter Laboratory of Parasitology, UNSM

Her feet firmly planted on the ground, her heart rooted in her beloved state of Nebraska and her eyes always on the horizon, Dr. Pritchard has honored the state of Nebraska, the University of Nebraska, and the University of Nebraska State Museum with her academic and scientific achievements, and her service.

Pritchard entered the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) in the autumn of 1942. At the 1946 Undergraduate Convocation she received a BS in business with Distinction in Business Administration as well as majors in accounting, economics, French, and zoology. She was awarded fellowships and scholarships each year, including a Regents Fellowship. She was elected to Phi Beta Kappa (National Academic Honorary Society), Phi Sigma Iota (Romance Languages Honorary Society) where she was president of the local chapter, Phi Chi Theta (National Business Administration Women's Society) where she received the 1946 Key as College of Business Administration's outstanding woman graduate, and Phi Sigma Iota (National Business Administration Honorary Society). She was undoubtedly one of the most academically decorated undergraduates in UNL history.

In 1949 Pritchard received a MS degree in zoology. During her graduate studies, she was awarded graduate fellowships in zoology and the College of Business Administration, won the Wolcott Prize as outstanding graduate of the Zoology Department, became a charter member of the Society for Systematic Zoology (now the Society for Systematic Biology), and was elected to Sigma Xi (National Science Honorary Society). Pritchard's achievements were even more remarkable given the considerable resistance to women studying in universities at that time. Despite being awarded her MS with accompanying honors, the then-chairman of the Zoology Department told Pritchard department policy was to not recommend women for doctoral programs.

Undeterred, Pritchard began an extremely productive professional career working as the research associate for Professor Harold

W. Manter. In 1959, she was elected to Sigma Delta Epsilon (Graduate Women in Science Honorary Society) and edited the organization newsletter from 1958-1966. In 1969, the University of Nebraska State Museum established the Harold W. Manter Laboratory (HWML) within the Division of Parasitology. In 1971, Pritchard became the founding curator of the HWML.

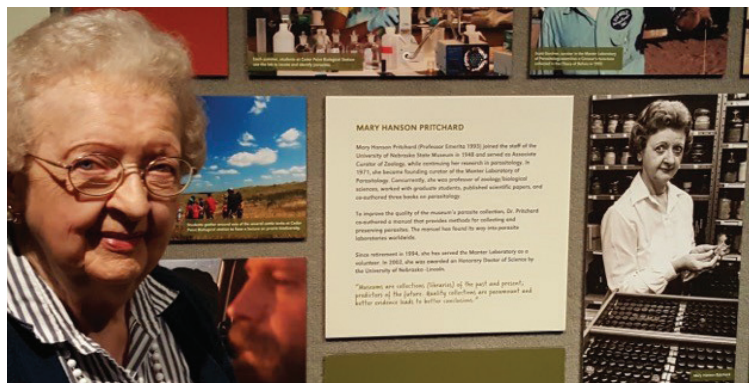
For the next decade, Pritchard tirelessly built the HWML. She was one of the first people to realize the critical role of archival museum collections in establishing historical baseline data for assessing the impact of climate change and anthropogenic impacts on biodiversity. She envisioned the need for collections accepting large numbers of specimens from large, one-off inventories or regular monitoring projects. These would complement traditional collections focusing on small numbers of as many different species as possible. She published her own research and mentored several academic generations of younger parasitologists. Those lucky researchers found great inspiration

in Pritchard's support for their efforts to forge new pathways of scientific discovery. From 1972 to 1988, graduate students under Pritchard's guidance produced 125 peer-reviewed publications.

Combining her position as curator along with her abiding interest in the environmental welfare of the people and wildlife of Nebraska, Pritchard

accepted an appointment as a consultant for the Environmental Protection Agency from 1976-1980. In 1980, she was granted tenure and promoted to full professor. A year later the American Society of Parasitologists designated HWML as one of four national resource centers for parasitology. By 1994, HWML had become the sixth-largest parasitology collection in the world.

In recognition of her achievements, Pritchard was awarded the American Society of Parasitologists President's Special Award for Distinguished Service. The award recognizes career achievement and a person of unusual courage and strength



Mary Lou Pritchard poses by a portion of the "Guts and Glory: A Parasite Story" exhibit. The display celebrated her work in parasitology and contributions to UNSM. The exhibit opened in 2017 at Morrill Hall and was enjoyed by thousands of visitors before it ended.

of character. In his remarks, President Brooks commented, “Mary Lou has fought her entire career against prejudices towards women...in a professional environment that...always undervalued her.”

Soon after, Pritchard opted for voluntary retirement but continued to work tirelessly as an unpaid emerita for 25 additional years.

As a result of efforts coordinated by Pritchard’s successor as curator, Dr. Scott Gardner, at the 2003 UNL Convocation Pritchard was awarded an honorary DSc, finally achieving the doctorate she so richly deserved and had earned many times over. Her lifelong commitments to museum-based studies of parasites in relation to climate change, emerging diseases, and biodiversity dynamics as well as her promotion of opportunities for women in science and concerns about the future of Nebraska make Dr. Pritchard an outstanding example of the pioneering spirit of her beloved home state.

Following the incredible direction Dr. Pritchard provided, the current curator and staff of HWML have continued to work to grow the parasite collection and maintain her legacy. The current number of cataloged specimens in HWML recently

passed the number of cataloged specimens in the National Parasite Collection (Smithsonian Institution).

Those wishing to honor Dr. Mary Lou Pritchard’s legacy and support the work of HWML may do so by donating to the Mary Hanson Pritchard Endowment Fund (01056470) on-line at <https://nufoundation.org/fund/01056470/>



Two young girls explore parasitology on the digital parasite table located in the *Cherish Nebraska* exhibit on Morrill Hall’s fourth floor.

Dr. Mary Pritchard Centenary Celebration



July 16-18, 2024

Morrill Hall
645 N. 14th St.
Lincoln, NE 68588

hwml.unl.edu

Join us for a FREE, 3-day symposium honoring the legacy of Dr. Mary Lou Pritchard - a pioneer of museum parasitology collections & science.

Lecture Topics include the importance of museum science, coping with climate change, and women leaders in museum-based research.

