

## Remembrances and Reflections: Early Days of the Society of Systematic Zoology

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The Society of Systematic Zoology (SSZ), the direct ancestor (cladists, please pardon the term) of the Society of Systematic Biologists, had an unusual birth. It was and is the sister group to the Society for the Study of Evolution (SSE) established in 1946. At the first annual meeting of SSE in Boston, the planning for the mission of the Society and its journal *Evolution* made it clear that the emphasis would be on the process of evolution to the exclusion of considerations of pattern or products. Although several systematists at this meeting objected, Ernst Mayr and George Gaylord Simpson adamantly opposed inclusion of systematics in the purview of SSE. Ironically, both men would later serve as Presidents of SSZ, Simpson in 1963 and Mayr in 1966.

Waldo Schmitt (a carcinologist) of the U.S. National Museum (now the National Museum of Natural History) and George Wharton (an acarologist), then at the University of Maryland, decided after this rebuff to establish a separate society that would include all zoologists carrying out "taxonomic" studies. Technically, SSZ was organized in late 1947 and at its first meeting in Washington, D.C., in 1948 Schmitt was elected President and Wharton Secretary-Treasurer.

My own association with SSZ dates from 1950. At that time I was finishing my senior year at Stanford University and looking forward to continuing graduate school there. I had been fortunate as a freshman to be "adopted" by the graduate students working for George Myers in the Stanford Natural History Museum, where my interests in systematic herpetology were encouraged. This was an exciting time! Most of the graduate students (and many of my fellow underclassmen) were veterans of World War II. Most were very serious about taking advantage of their educational opportunities and brought an exceptional level of maturity and experience to any intellectual discussion.

As students of systematics, we were especially inspired by Mayr's *Systematics and the Origin of Species* (1942), and Stebbins' *Variation and Evolution in Plants* (1950) for illustrating the ways that our studies could contribute to understanding the origin and maintenance of biological diversity. It was only natural that we joined SSZ, and most became members of SSE as well. We were probably much influenced in these decisions by our Professors, Gordon Ferris, an early Council Member of SSZ, and Myers, who published an article on *The Nature of Systematic Biology* in an early issue of the society's new journal *Systematic Zoology* (1:106–111; 1952).

In its initial phase, the Council of the Society envisaged an ambitious program that included a journal, a textbook, a newsletter, faunal handbooks, and several service functions. Not all of these came to pass but over the next few years several of these initiatives were brought to fruition. In this formative period, Richard E. Blackwelder, a coleopterist at the U.S. National Museum and later Professor of Zoology at Southern Illinois University, an officer of the Society for 15 years and President in 1961, was the mainstay of SSZ. Blackwelder always gave great credit to Waldo Schmitt for many of the innovations undertaken by the Society. However, there can be no question that Dick Blackwelder was the epoxy that held everything together. He was the first editor of the Newsletter and the first editor and designer of the cover of *Systematic Zoology*, which made its inaugural appearance in 1952. He was Secretary-Treasurer (1948–1959), prepared *The Directory of Zoological Taxonomists of the World* (with R. M. Blackwelder), and prepared nine editions of *Books on Zoology* (1952–1976) for SSZ. He founded and manned the Book Lounge, where all zoologists at American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meetings could review recently published zoology books. He solicited the books

from the publishers and personally drove to each meeting towing a specially made trailer containing the book exhibit. He was a meticulous and selfless servant of the Society, which for much of the early period had a very small and tight budget.

Dick had his own, perhaps narrow, view of the nature of systematics. He believed that taxonomy was based on detailed description and comparison of the characteristics of organisms. These in turn would provide the basis for classification (the natural hierarchy of nature), from which phylogenetic history could be deduced. He regarded the task of the taxonomist to examine the products of evolution to establish pattern. His views often were at odds with evolutionists of the “new systematics” ilk, and he was highly irritated by claims by proponents of “evolutionary systematics”, especially Ernst Mayr, that their paradigm was either new or the touchstone to understanding diversity.

If anything, he took even more umbrage with the numerical taxonomists (P. Sneath and R. Sokol), whom he thought might have a different view if they ever actually worked on the systematics of a group of organisms. In the end, he did not look too kindly on the cladists either (see *Syst. Zool.* 26:107–137; 1977). As you can see, Dick held very strong views on these matters and others and was not easily dissuaded from his positions.

At that time, the majority of systematic zoologists were located in the Washington–Philadelphia–New York–Boston corridor, and most were U.S. Government employees, mainly at the U.S. National Museum and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Other centers were at the Field and Carnegie Museums and the Natural History Museums at various universities (e.g., Michigan, Kansas, University of California, Berkeley). Usually, the SSE held its meeting conjointly with the AAAS, which at that time was rarely held west of St. Louis; thus it was natural that a Pacific Section of SSZ was established to meet with the Western Division of the AAAS.

By this time I was a young faculty member at the University of Southern California with laboratory space in the Allan Hancock Foundation. Capt. Hancock, who had established the Foundation and funded the facility, was a great friend of systematics and was the first patron of SSZ. The Pacific Section of SSZ was now very active and had its own set of officers; I served as Secretary-Treasurer from 1957 to 1960.

In 1958 Libbie Hyman had taken over as Editor of SSZ and was doing a fine job of editing as well as soliciting important articles. However, she was primarily a scientist, not much interested in practical matters of publication or fiscal constraints. After a short time she was driving Blackwelder, still Secretary-Treasurer, quite mad with cost overruns and failure to follow his instructions to remedy matters. In addition, she became President of the Society in 1959, during Dick’s last year in the Secretary-Treasurer job. Bill Follett, who was a practicing corporate lawyer, nomenclaturist, and ultimately Curator of Ichthyology at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, was to become President in 1960. Bill and Dick, who was the President-elect, were deeply concerned about the Society’s financial condition and Libbie’s rather intransigent position as Editor.

I think it was Bill who suggested that the Society needed someone beside Dick to deal with Libbie on fiscal matters relating to *Systematic Zoology*, because the two were barely tolerating one another at this point. Bill knew me from my service with the Pacific Section and asked me to fill a new position, that of Business Manager, which I held for 4 years (1960–1963).

As I soon found out, I was supposed to be the buffer between two very talented but stubborn people who could not communicate with one another. Besides keeping track of subscriptions, orders of back issues of *Systematic Zoology*, and so forth, I spent most of my time trying to keep the journal within budget limits and keeping one from firing the other or one or both resigning. For example, Libbie couldn’t figure out that three blank pages in an issue of the journal cost almost as much as the same number of printed pages. Dick, on the other hand, didn’t really like going through me to, as he said, “keep Libbie in line.” Fortunately, Roy McDiarmid (later SSZ Treasurer 1988–1994), a graduate student at the time, aided me during this hectic period with much of the routine work, aside from the personal counseling. Please note that Libbie finished her term as Editor in 1963, Dick his final three years on the Council in 1964, and I happily went on sabbatical leave from USC. The office of Business Manager then disappeared, never to be seen again.

These comments on Blackwelder’s relationship with Hyman should not be misconstrued. He held her in the highest regard as a scientist. He was rightly impressed by

Hyman's monumental and classic six volumes on invertebrate animals, although somewhat disdainful of her lack of knowledge in that most important of all animal groups the Arthropoda. Dick, of course, wrote the famous *In Memoriam* (the Legend of Libbie Hyman) (*J. Psych. Biol.* 12:3–12) on her death in 1969.

After Dick's final service on the SSZ Council, he continued to be a faithful member of the Society. He was dismayed, however, by the changing fashions in systematics and the gradual erosion of the Society's activities for the benefit of the systematic community. Thus, in the mid-1960s, over time the Society dropped its support for the Directory of Taxonomists, the Book Lounge, the Newsletter, etc. He had a particular antipathy for Ernst Mayr, who he believed was mostly responsible for influencing the officers to reduce the Society's activities to no more than an annual meeting and publication of the journal. After all, Mayr had been against systematics being a part of the agenda for SSE.

Blackwelder regarded these changes as seriously undermining the Society and its influence within the scientific community, but he was doubtless not prepared for the next three crises to engulf the Society within his lifetime: the Numerical *Taxonomy Anschluss* (1967–1974), the Cladistic Wars (1974–1982),

and Cladogenesis: formation of the Willi Hennig Society and our sister journal *Cladistics*.

The challenges of the early days were mostly budgetary and the low respect that systematics received in the biological community. Later challenges addressed fundamental issues on how our science should frame its theories and understand the patterns responsible for today's biodiversity. From the fire in the crucible of controversy (not always framed on reasoned argument), much light was produced. The Society of Systematic Biologists is now a vibrant and energized leader in promoting biodiversity research. That prominence is due in no small part to the vision and commitment of the founders and early officers of the SSZ, especially Dick Blackwelder, and the success of the journal, now *Systematic Biology*.

Postscript: Dick Blackwelder was born in 1909 and received his doctorate from Stanford University in 1934. He became Professor Emeritus at Southern Illinois University in 1976. Currently he resides at the Chateau Girardeau Retirement Village in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, where he is working on a taxonomy of all Star Trek episodes and movies to follow up on similar work on all of J. R. Tolkien's books and characters.