

Pearl Mitsu Sonoda (1918–2015)

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PEARL MITSU SONODA was born in Imperial, California, on May 17, 1918, the third of four daughters of Japanese-born parents, Tomoji and Sachi Sonoda. Her father, Tomoji, was an ambitious farmer: he owned an asparagus ranch and was exploring an expansion into rice farming. Pearl once said that her family owned and lived on a farm of some 40 acres and leased another 160 acres. Soon after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Japanese Americans living on the West Coast were evacuated from their homes and relocated to internment camps by the War Relocation Authority. Tomoji was considered an especially high risk because he could speak English as well as Japanese and was a leader in the Japanese-American community. Tomoji was arrested by the FBI in early 1942 and ultimately sent to a camp in Arkansas. Sachi and her four daughters were sent to the Poston relocation or internment camp on a Native American reservation close to the Colorado River, near Parker, Arizona. This was a particularly traumatic experience about which Pearl spoke little except to say that she wished no one to ever again have to live through what she and other Japanese Americans were forced to endure. TI once asked Pearl about her experiences during the war. She was attending Pomona College when the US entered the war in December 1941. Pearl had to drop out mid-semester, probably in her third year, and make her way home alone with her few possessions when the relocation orders were issued in late March 1942. She, her mother, and three sisters had to sell off their home, ranch, and almost all their personal possessions at pennies for the dollar (they were given less than a week to do this). They could bring to camp only what they could carry. Pearl said that it was because of the trauma of losing most of her treasured possessions that she thereafter never accumulated many cherished belongings.

Pearl had a strong interest in natural history and had studied biology as an undergraduate at Berkeley (she is listed in the University of California Catalogue of Officers and Students for 1936–1937) and then at Pomona College. She also took classes at Roosevelt University in Chicago. Pearl was a dedicated student despite another indignity, likely experienced in grammar school: she told southpaw LRP that she too was naturally left-handed but forced to switch to writing with her right hand as was once the custom. While in internment camp in Arizona, her interests in biology became known to renowned Chicago Museum of Natural History (now Field Museum) herpetologist Karl P. Schmidt who followed the ideals of Quakers and the American Friends Service Committee—probably the most supportive organization of the incarcerated Americans of Japanese ancestry during the war. Starting in 1943, many of the internees were allowed to leave the camps to join the US work force outside the West Coast. Schmidt, who was Chief Curator of the Department of Zoology, sponsored Pearl's move to Chicago to work in his department. From 1943 to 1955 she served as

secretary and assistant in the Division of Mammals and from 1955 to 1967 as the assistant in the Division of Fishes in Zoology at Field Museum. There she met Margaret Bradbury, who became Staff Artist of the Department of Zoology in 1947. In 1967, Pearl returned to her native California to become Senior Curatorial Assistant in Ichthyology at the California Academy of Sciences (CAS; Fig. 1). She was hired by William N. Eschmeyer to fill a position that was funded by an NSF grant that brought the George Vanderbilt Foundation collections to the Academy. Margaret Bradbury had moved to the Bay Area in 1963 to become an Assistant Professor of Biological Sciences at what was then San Francisco State College (Iwamoto et al., 2011). Pearl and Margaret lived together, first in a house off Skyline Drive in Daly City, and then later in a house they purchased together in the Pacific Manor district of Pacifica.

Pearl's job title conveyed little of her passionate involvement in and dedication to the day-to-day life of the Academy. For 30 years, Pearl was the heart of the Department of Ichthyology (Fig. 2). She had a mature sense of humor punctuated by a delightful, spontaneous laugh. She main-



Fig. 1. Pearl Sonoda in the Department of Ichthyology, California Academy of Sciences (the late 1960s or early 1970s, likely between 1967 and 1971).

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Fig. 2. Staff and associates of the Department of Ichthyology, California Academy of Sciences, 1988. Standing, left to right: Margaret Bradbury, Lynne Parenti, Pearl Sonoda in front of Tomio Iwamoto, Bill Eschmeyer, Dave Catania, Tom Tucker, Jon Fong, Barbara Hudler, Barbara Weitbrecht, Gerry Stockfleth, and Lex Snyder. Seated: Lillian Dempster.

tained meticulous, detailed logs of visitors, loans, accessions, and other data that were essential statistics for NSF grant reports. Quietly, yet forcefully, she planned and guided social activities including birthday parties, celebratory lunches, and coffee breaks. Frequently these celebrations extended to her home where she and Margaret were famously warm and generous hosts. The food and wine was prepared or chosen with care; the menus tailored to the tastes of guests. A jigsaw puzzle had regularly been started on a table in the living room and provided the setting for hours of good fun and laughter. One such puzzle of a portrait of Elizabeth the First was particularly frustrating as it included the image of several strands of pearls, each piece of which looked and fit together just like another. Pearl remembered that puzzle and laughed about it years later. During one period of Pearl's tenure, the Ichthyology staff at the Academy were engrossed in jigsaw puzzles and devoted the main library table to an ongoing puzzle that they tackled during lunch and coffee breaks.

Field Museum ichthyologist Marion Grey honored Pearl's contributions to systematic ichthyology by naming a genus of deep-sea stomiiform fishes *Sonoda* Grey, 1959. Pearl served ASIH as a member of the local committee for meetings in Chicago (1960) and San Francisco (1989). Her scientific legacy is recorded further in the many acknowledgments she

received from colleagues who were grateful for the extensive help which she gave readily. Pearl was satisfied to assist the research of others and co-authored just two scientific publications—Woods and Sonoda (1973) and Nelson and Sonoda (1987)—and an obituary for Marion Grey (Sonoda and Inger, 1964). Loren Woods, ichthyologist at the Field Museum, could not find the time to finish the chapter on Beryciformes for the *Fishes of the Western North Atlantic* volume, so Pearl took on the task of completing the comprehensive paper, which was published after she moved to CAS.

Throughout her life, Pearl remained close to her family, especially her sisters, all of whom pre-deceased her: Mary Sonoda (1914–1999), Louise Sonoda (1920–2004), and Margaret Haruko Komuro (1917–2013). Margaret married and had two daughters, Patricia Nakata and Betsy Sato, as well as step-children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren. After her retirement from the California Academy of Sciences in 1995 (Fig. 3), Pearl moved back to Chicago to live with sisters Mary and Louise. They enjoyed a full and rich life together and were, as always, gracious hosts to visitors (Fig. 4). Pearl (in litt. to LRP, January 10, 2000) summed up their remarkable strength and optimism as she reported the death of her oldest sister: "Mary led a long and happy life and she



Fig. 3. Staff and associates of the Department of Ichthyology, California Academy of Sciences, June 25, 1995 on the occasion of Pearl's retirement. Photo by Dong Lin (CAS). Standing, left to right: Michael Pope, Carl Ferraris, Tomio Iwamoto, Mary Carroll, Pearl Sonoda in front of Bill Eschmeyer, Dave Catania, Tom Tucker, Diana Catania, Barbara Hudler, Jon Fong, Margaret Bradbury, Mysi Hoang, and John McCosker.

brought happiness to many so we can only feel she's earned a long rest."

By 2010, Pearl's health was in decline and she was no longer able to live alone in Chicago. She moved to Arvada, Colorado, home of her sister Margaret and her family. Pearl Sonoda, a gracious, charming, and beloved member of the systematic ichthyology and natural history museum com-

munity, died in Colorado on March 4, 2015, just two months before her 97th birthday.

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Fig. 4. Enjoying a meal at Carson's barbecue restaurant in Chicago, July 26, 1996. Seated left to right: Mary Sonoda, Pearl Sonoda, and Lynne Parenti. Standing: Louise Sonoda.