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BIOGRAPHY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY  
OF  
JAMES A. PETERS

FRANCES J. IRISH +  
&  
GEORGE R. ZUG \*

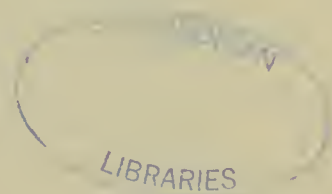
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SMITHSONIAN  
HERPETOLOGICAL INFORMATION  
SERVICE  
NO. 51

1982



## James A. Peters: A Biographical Sketch

(1922-1972)

Jim was a towering presence in mid-twentieth century herpetology. His six foot four inch lanky frame was a standout in any herpetological gathering throughout the forties and fifties, and only with the appearance of the larger and hairier herp students of the sixties did he merge back into the crowd. If not seen, he was still heard.

Jim delighted in playing the devil's advocate, and, while he held many opinions firmly, he was likely to take the opposite position just to keep a verbal duel alive. It is difficult not to take your opponent's opinions seriously when he towers over you, booms out his replies, and glares at you through bottle-bottomed lenses -- that was Jim.

Jim was born in Iowa, but spent most of his growing years in southern Illinois. He was the son of a small-town doctor, and apparently tried to keep his father busy by challenging his pals to feats of derring-do. In one such challenge, Phil Smith was performing aerial acrobatics on an overhanging tree limb. Phil spun, slipped, and fell to the sidewalk below. The landing was on three or more points, and one of the points, an arm, broke. Jim reassured Phil that all would be set right, because his dad was a doctor and could fix anything. The arm was repaired, and Jim later received a stinging reminder that his father did not desire Jim's assistance in producing patients.

His life-long interest in snakes grew out of his friendship with Phil. Phil and his cronies spent each spring and summer scouring the surrounding fields, woods, and river bottoms for snakes and other scaly creatures. The uncommon or unusual ones were brought home and installed in Phil's menagerie, an old shed. In the mid-thirties, the Peters' family moved into a house a half block away, and Jim became a regular visitor. Soon he was an avid collector and was likely trying to outdo his snake-hunter friends.

By high school, Jim had gained local fame as an expert on snakes. His reputation garnered him the opportunity to take his snake show on the road. Thus, Jim joined the carnival circuit and spent the latter part of one summer traveling from county fair to county fair. His snake show was one of the few free items on the midway, a state-supported show aiming to educate as well as entertain. Certainly it remained a fondly remembered summer, for Jim delighted in demonstrating to his children his ability to read the cryptic carny road signs posted each summer along the carnival routes. Likely, some of his

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footnote: I have tried not to duplicate information previously published about J.A. Peters. Further details may be found in The Washington Post obituary (Thursday, Dec. 21, 1972), Copeia 1973(2):388-390, and HISS News-Journal 1(6):187-188.

public speaking skills developed that summer and, if they occasionally showed a bit of the sideshow barker, we should not have been surprised.

As a high school student, Jim attended his first ASIH meeting in 1939. Even as a teenager, Jim was not bashful. I am certain that there was only a momentary pause before he introduced himself to the professional herpetologists and joined in the herpetological conversations. The favorable impression of this first meeting in Chicago was long lasting, for he devoted much time and energy to the society throughout his entire professional career. Whether serving as its business secretary, a governor, or committee member, he strove to improve the society, and was honored to be its president for the 1970-71 term. A fortunate happenstance, for his contributions would be lost to the society soon thereafter.

He had begun college in Illinois when the United States entered WW II. He joined the air force and spent the war years in active service. His eyesight was too poor to pilot planes, but he was right up front as a radio operator. He served in the Asian theatre flying supplies "over the hump" from India to Burma and transporting planes across SW Asia and North Africa for their periodic maintenance. His tour of duty in these areas allowed him to sample the herpetofauna of Africa and Asia and reinforced his desire to become a professional herpetologist.

With the end of the war, he returned to his studies, not in Illinois but at the University of Michigan. His Michigan sojourn lasted seven years, from 1945 to 1952, and encompassed both his undergraduate and graduate training. It was a period of intense herpetological growth and maturation for him. He early captured the highly-desirous research assistantship in the reptile section of the Museum of Zoology and held it for his entire graduate tenure. Here, he learned his curatorial skills and inventoried the herpetological type collection. Here also, he began his first in-depth studies of reptilian taxonomy under the tutelage of Norman Hartweg and was introduced to the Latin American herpetofauna. The museum mammalogists were collecting in Mexico, and Jim accompanied them in the summer of 1949 and 1950. Like other herpetologists who have accompanied mammalogists in the field, Jim complained that the best herp collecting times were spent riding to new collecting localities.

Jim began his teaching career at Brown University in 1952. The Brown years must have been frustrating ones, for he reminisced little about them. They were not, however, unproductive years, for he completed his dipsadine research, collated the "Classic Papers in Genetics," and compiled his "Dictionary of Herpetology." During this time, his research interest turned to South America, particularly Ecuador. I suspect this was in response to the superabundance of researchers concentrating on the Mexican herpetofauna and his desire to work in a less herpetologically trampled area. His Fulbright lectureship at the Universidad Central de Ecuador (1958-1959) ended the Brown years and entrenched his interest in Ecuadorian and South American herpetology. He was to return several more times to Ecuador (1962, 1966, 1969).



Every free moment in Ecuador was spent in the field. He made trips to isolated villages and would rent space at the local cabarets. While the evening crowd was making merry, Jim would be out collecting frogs and other critters. He would return as the revelry broke up, often to make his bed on a bench or behind the bar. Such behavior was not unexpected from a crazy gringo who chased snakes and other creepy things. Here also he began transect studies by traveling the supply trails on mule or horseback. Once he was accompanied by the unlikely pair of E.H. Taylor and C.F. Walker. He recalled stopping after several days of collecting, and Ed finally stopping his frantic collecting long enough to reconstruct data and tie tags on his specimens.

Upon returning stateside, he had a brief stay at the University of Southern Illinois before assuming his new position at San Fernando Valley State College. San Fernando provided him more time for research and a core of students interested in herpetology. However, his life's goal was to work in a museum, and when he was offered a curatorship at the National Museum, he grabbed it even though it meant a salary cut.

He arrived at the museum in time to prepare for the move from the cramped quarters in the central building to the spacious collection range in the just-completed west wing. No more would the collection have to be arranged by bottle size; now the specimens could be placed in taxonomic order. The collection was moved cafeteria-style. Everyone participated. The mover would take a set of cards from the species file, search through the old range, find specimens of his species scattered here and there, and then carry the completed set to the new range. With more than 200,000 specimens, the move was arduous, but it was rewarding to be able to go to one shelf and find all the specimens of a species together.

The museum years were good ones for Jim. He was able to extend his research and organizational energies in many directions. Latin American herpetology and computer storage and analysis of biological data always remained high in his active research. Jim had first used the computer to statistically analyze his dipsadine data at Michigan, but his interest blossomed in the late 60's with the advent of time-sharing computers. While statistical computation was useful, he was attracted to the computer's potential for the storage and retrieval of taxonomic and museum data, and their transmission and exchange through a museum network of time-share computers. This interest led to his establishment of MUDPIE -- an acronym for Museum and University Data, Program and Information Exchange and a typical example of his delight in word play and puns -- in order to share his ideas and interest with others. He became engrossed in developing interactive programs for the identification of taxonomic specimens. His joy was an interactive program that permitted museum visitors to a special reptile exhibit to ask questions about reptiles. Every afternoon, he would review the questions asked that day and add additional data to make the "machine" smarter. By the end of the exhibit's stay, few visitors could stump the machine.

A fortuitous remark at an international conference permitted the establishment of the Neotropical Squamata project. Jim's compilation instinct had led to the growth of a small file/catalog on neotropical snakes and lizards.

It would have likely remained a personal file if François Bourlière had not mentioned to Secretary S.D. Ripley that ecologists and conservationists needed a complete taxonomic guide and checklist to neotropical reptiles. Upon his return from the conference, Ripley queried Jim about the feasibility of such a guide and the project was born with the Secretary's support. The groundwork was laid; Roberto Donoso-Barros and Braulio Orejas-Miranda arrived to be immediately set to work. Jim was an unceasing, but congenial, taskmaster and after a year the bulk of compilation and cross-checking was completed. Roberto and Braulio returned home in the fall of 1968, but Jim continued to refine the checklist for another year before it went to the press, a monument to the loving effort of these three men.

With the catalog finished, Jim returned to his systematic herpetology and computer technology projects. His time was short, although he didn't realize it. He was busy finishing up many partially completed projects so he could return to his favorite research animals, snakes. Two snake projects -- Dendrophidion and a typhlopod checklist had been begun but laid aside. He was never to complete them. The nagging stomach ache of 1971 continued into 1972 and, in spite of intense medical examinations, only when the cancer laid him low was the cause discovered -- much, much too late.

George Zug  
December 1980

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