



ABOUT

At a Glance

Get Involved

Institutes & Centers

History

The First PhD at UT - Part I

The First PhD at UT - Part II

Early Biology Buildings on Campus

Marie Betzner Morrow

Hilda Florence Rosene

Hermann J Muller - Part I

Hermann J Muller - Part II

Mary Sophie Young

Exalton Delco

Herbaria History

The Fly Room

Updates

EXALTON DELCO: UT'S FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN PH.D IN ZOOLOGY

by Nicole Elmer, February 2, 2017



Delco at home during an interview with the author

Exalton Alfonso Delco Jr. began his Ph.D. work in the Department of Zoology at UT in 1957. Although UT was deemed “desegregated,” the campus and surrounding businesses at the time still had resistant attitudes towards full integration of African Americans, making the pursuit of a degree not for the faint-of-heart. Like many African Americans in his generation pursuing higher education at UT, Delco withstood many of the challenges to have a long and influential career in higher education.

Delco was born September 4, 1929 in Houston, TX, in a neighborhood called Studewood. He was the only child to a butler and a housewife. Growing up, Delco was intuitively curious about nature. He would pick leaves and gather seashells, later trying to find their proper scientific names.

Delco attended Jack Yates High School where he graduated in 1945 as valedictorian, and at the age of 15, he entered Fisk University, a private historically-black university in Nashville, Tennessee founded in 1866. Here, he majored in biology, and was involved with the research of embryologist Dr. Lloyd Alexander who studied the way the eye formed. Delco also met his wife, Wilhelmina Delco, while they were both students at Fisk. They would marry in 1952 and have four children.

After graduation from Fisk in 1949, Delco attended the University of Michigan for his masters. Here, Delco became interested in entomology and worked with beetles and maze learning.

After obtaining his masters, Delco taught at Texas Southern University in Houston, educating noteworthy students such as Barbara Jordan, a lawyer, educator, politician, and leader of the Civil Rights movement. In 1954, Delco applied for admission at UT Austin to continue his education but was instead drafted into the army. Delco served in a MASH unit (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) in Germany where he worked as a surgical tech, or a “scrub nurse” as they were called. When he returned, he used his veteran benefits from the GI Bill to attend UT.

THE CALLS OF FISH

Delco was one of about 11 students involved in Ph.D. level course work in the Department of Zoology in 1957, and the only African American. Delco studied ichthyology with Dr. Clark Hubbs who was widely considered to be one of Texas’ foremost researchers in ichthyology, and was responsible for starting the foundation of UT’s Ichthyology Collection.

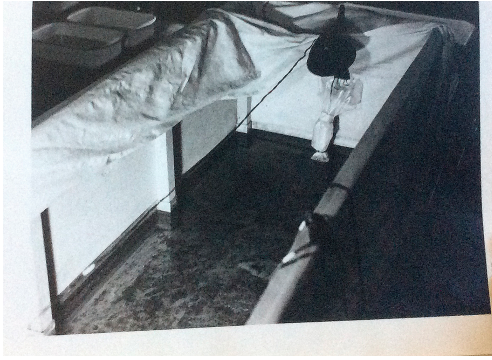
For his dissertation, Delco studied red-horse shiners (*Cyprinella lutrensis*) and blacktail shiners (*Cyprinella ventusa*) and three hybrid zones where they interbred. Interested in understanding why hybridization was occurring, Delco approached his research from a sonic perspective. Starting with glass battery jars, he eventually expanded to create a larger tank with a National Science grant, connecting it to recording devices that allowed him to analyze the mating calls of these two species.



Exalton and Wilhelmina Delco during their years at Fisk University (courtesy Exalton Delco)



Delco deduced the reason for the occurrence of hybridization in these zones was due to noise



The tank that Delco built (courtesy Exalton Delco)

interference from things such as a waterfall and a nearby road base factory. The two different species could not hear their own mating calls, and as a result were interbreeding. Delco's work became the focus of his 1962 dissertation: "Reproductive Behavior and Sexual Isolating Mechanisms Between Two Sympatric Cyprinid Fishes."

THE "LITTLE THINGS"

In 1957, after Exalton had been accepted in the zoology program, he discovered the hard realities of being the only graduate African American student in his department. The landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Sweatt vs. Painter* in 1950 had essentially provided admission of black applicants into graduate and professional programs at UT,

but only as long as the students were unable to find similarly equal programs in the other African American colleges in Texas. It would be the *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka* ruling in 1954 that would set off the trajectory into fully-integrated educational facilities, but not without resistance.

It was "the little things," as Delco called them that made life more difficult as a student from an underrepresented population. Although he studied regularly with his fellow students, he noticed that he was often given lower grades than the others and not invited to social events. Within a week of his entering the university, the other men in his program had jobs. He did not.

His housing situation proved to be particularly challenging as well. Although he initially was told he and his family could live at the Brackenridge apartments, once it was known Delco was African American, he was directed to public housing, as African American families were not permitted to live at the Brackenridge apartments. Delco was able to secure housing for his family in the student apartments at Huston-Tillotson, a historically black private university in Austin established in 1875. Delco would use a closet space as his study room.



Students protesting before segregated restaurants (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, UT Austin)

Delco also noted the racist tone of lectures given by Theophilus S. Painter, a professor in the Zoology department, who would also serve as president of the university from 1946-1952. Delco had enrolled in a course in cytology under Painter, and while he spoke of him as being an excellent lecturer, he recalled Painter would use slides of pickannies, today considered racist caricatures of African American children. Sitting in these classes of 150-200 students who found the slides funny, Delco often questioned "Why am I here?"



African American and White students during a sit-in protest at a restaurant on the Drag (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, UT Austin)

Delco felt this sense of otherness and a lack of integration into a social life at UT was common for other African Americans studying there. While he was raising his family, he could not afford to attend athletic games, but when speaking with other African Americans who were students at the time he was, he learned they were insulted with racial slurs when they would attend games. African American students wanted to have the same access to activities during their education as white students had in the 1950s: eating in the same cafes on the Drag, watching movies in the same theaters, buying the same school supplies. Very often professors would assign students to watch a movie but the African American students could not attend as they were not allowed into the theater.

AFTER THE PH.D.

Shortly before Delco received his Ph.D. in 1962, he began teaching biology classes at Huston-Tillotson. This ended his 10-year teaching stint at Texas Southern University and began what would be a 25-year career at Huston-Tillotson, starting as Instructor and eventually becoming Dean. Delco would also serve for eight years as the Vice President for Academic Affairs at Austin Community College until retirement in 1995.

Around this time, he would work as Special Assistant to UT President Robert Berdahl from 1993-1997. Delco worked with Berdahl to make UT more open to work with other presidents of community colleges and African American colleges and universities.

Currently, Delco and his wife, Wilhelmina, are active travelers and take cruises every year. A map lies on the wall in the living room of their home, covered with pins marking their destinations to places like India, China, Israel, Japan, and Brazil.

When looking back over his successes in life, Delco comments, "Whatever I've done here, I wouldn't have been able to do without my wife." Delco also recognizes his fortune at having had excellent teachers who were very involved in their students' education, and the fact his parents enabled him with a can-do attitude when he was young.

SOURCES

Author's interview with Dr. Delco, September 20, 2016, Austin, TX

Handbook of Texas Online, W. Page Keeton, "Sweatt vs. Painter," accessed October 11, 2016.
<http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/jrs01>

McCray, Marilyn. "The Many Lives of Wilhelmina Delco," *Austin Woman Magazine*, May 2009.

"Overcoming Isolation in the Early Years of Integration: Exalton Delco and Norcell Haywood." July 10, 2014. Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, UT Austin

Oyez, Oyes, Oh Yay! Civics Resources for Texas Students & Teachers: Sweatt vs. Painter. accessed October 6, 2016. <https://www.texasbar.com/civics/High%20School%20cases/sweatt-v-painter.html>



College of Natural Sciences
The University of Texas at Austin

Department of Integrative Biology
The University of Texas at Austin
2415 Speedway #C0930
Austin, TX 78712

Campus Code: C0930

Department Phone: 512-471-5858
PAT Labs Mailroom Fax: 512-471-3878
PAT Labs IB Office Fax: 512-232-9529

Help »
Sitemap »
Login »
Web Privacy Policy
Web Accessibility Policy