

REMEMBRANCE

What's in a Name?

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Photographs by C. Kenneth Dodd, Jr.

Nearly 14 years have passed since I first heard the name “Dr. Henry Fitch,” invariably spoken in tones of near-reverence. The name, often abbreviated to simply “Fitch,” is always spoken softly, and followed by thoughtful, staring-at-your-shoes silence — even more so since his death. His absence in the herpetological community is sorely felt, even by those who knew him only vicariously through the legacy of his work. For those lucky enough to have had a closer relationship with the man, the scientist, (dare I say) the *Legend*, his loss leaves an indelible wound on the heart.

When first introduced to the name, I was only a “spouse of,” part of a group of perhaps four, maybe six herpetologists and wildlife students, and

brand new to this world of amphibian-and-reptile legend, lore, science, and pioneers. Like the tip of an iceberg, the tone and silence, that inward-turning focus and gentle smile that accompanied the name “Fitch,” foretold of a man who I sensed must be a giant among these men of science.

Whenever I asked: “Who *is* this Dr. Henry Fitch?” the answer came back unvaried: “You’ll just have to meet him!” Luckily, I did...

For this occasion, I had again joined my husband, some of his colleagues, and numerous students for a field trip within the University of Kansas Fitch Natural History Reservation¹. We stood in jittery clumps, shuffling our feet and staring off into the greening woods. We made halting conversation with one another as we waited for our guide to arrive.

My mental image of an iceberg-sized Greek hero assumed its true human form. An aged, frail-looking, stooped-back man came gingerly toward us, leaning on his well-used walking stick. He stood in a beam of morning sunlight, like an ancient turtle basking himself into wakefulness and optimum mobility. My companions and I eased back a bit, yielding him as much of the sun’s energy as possible. Yet we remained close enough that our sight and hearing could still perceive every particle of him.

Here was Fitch, at last! The Legend. A frail little man?

Nevertheless, all that I had been led to believe proved true. Meeting him that day, with no exchange of words between us, told me something of the mystery surrounding that particular tone of voice, that air of inner contemplation and silent reverence that surrounded any mention of the name “Fitch.” Cumulative, spontaneous honor and respect rippled through and around our little group like an invisible wave.

I don’t remember what Dr. Fitch said to us that morning before we set off on our hike through his beloved woods. My ears, I think, went deaf in the midst of marvelous wonder. With the sun backlighting his thin body and his white hair aglow, dozens of butterflies suddenly appeared, lighting on his shirt, at his feet, or hovering around him. As he turned to go, he did so with awareness of this tender entourage, moving gently and carefully so as not to harm or frighten his little friends. Once in motion, however, his winged shroud dissipated as quickly as it had arrived. We loaded into two vans and headed deeper into the Reservation.

Dr. Fitch was the first to disembark. He wasted no time shepherding people, counting heads, or acting the tour guide. Once his feet touched the earth, he moved — and he moved like Gandhi, striding in a long-practiced rhythm that took him almost out of sight before we followers could assemble our thoughts. Across the meadow, up the hill, through the briar patch, over the crest, into the mixed-oak woodlands, and skimming the talus and limestone boulders, he traveled with all the ease of a field mouse on familiar terrain.

Awkwardly, we straggled into the small clearing beneath a copse of trees where Dr. Fitch stood smiling, patiently waiting, observing with some amusement each person’s breathless arrival. We gathered around him, anxious to quell our huffing and puffing and miss nothing of what the soft-spoken man had to say. We tottered on the sharp-edged boulders that ringed the tiny clearing, jockeying for a somewhat level place to stand in an effort to disguise our mere-human condition.



A permanent array of drift fences and traps led to many captures and recaptures during the 50-year study of the Reservation’s snakes and lizards. Checking the traps was a daily ritual.

¹ The University of Kansas renamed its Natural History Reservation in 1986 to honor Henry Fitch.



Dr. Fitch measuring a Common Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*).

“This,” Fitch said when all had arrived, “is a good place for Copperheads.” Several eyes rolled downward toward feet now frozen and precariously perched atop countless pockets where slender Copperheads might easily coil. I mentally calculated the difficulty I had in getting *downhill* to this scenic glen, and the likelihood of sure failure in getting my now-wearied, oxygen-deprived, flatlander’s hide *up-n-out* in the event that such a beastie lay under *my* boulder.

“Here’s one,” Fitch announced calmly. His eyes were focused on a smallish boulder near his own feet. “I’ll get it,” he offered, slowly leaning toward the ground. One thin arm stretched out invitingly toward the snake as he leaned his bent frame ever closer to Mother Earth and Eden’s scourge, his hand, arm, and face coming incrementally nearer to his deadly goal.

An audible, collective gasp rose from the circle of on-lookers. “Dr. Fitch,” someone squeaked, “let one of us get it.”

“No,” replied the unperturbed leaning man. “I’ll get it.”

And so he did. As calmly and gently as a mother with a newborn, Fitch made his acquaintance with the Copperhead by the rock, picked it up without the use of hook or staff, and revealed his prize, face beaming with pure joy. He held it firmly behind the head in a well-practiced, strong, and confident hand. We all breathed again, but the frowns of concern for his safety did not relax.

“Oh,” he said, and my heart skipped a beat (as I’m sure many others did), fearing that he had been bitten. But, no, his exclamation had simply been one of mild self-admonishment. “I forgot my snake bag,” he said. “I’ll have to take this old girl back to the van to get her stats.”

Copperhead securely in hand and without further adieu, Dr. Fitch *set to* again with his Gandhi-stride. Skimming over the talus, he led us another merry chase . . . up the slope, beneath the trees, through the briars, over the crest, down across the meadow. By the time we all had reassembled on the road by the two vans, Dr. Fitch had found his snake bag and had half the stats recorded.

“Done,” he announced, beaming at us all with his smile. “I’ll take her back now.”

“Let one of us,” someone offered, perhaps concerned for the thin legs that would have to traverse the route back . . . and likely Copperhead cousins camouflaged in the dappled light beneath the trees.

“I’ll do it,” Fitch stated gently, but with a firmness that broached no discussion. “She and I are old friends,” he added, in that same tone of reverence for the snake with which I’d heard his own name spoken. And off he went, across the meadow, over the crest into the briars, and out of sight. A few heartbeats later, his hoary head again topped the horizon. His mission accomplished, I saw him pause briefly on the crest amidst the briars, his face turned skyward with a look of love that encompassed the whole earth.

Dr. Henry Fitch. The name echoes in my memory with a tone of honor and a kind of love that I can’t explain. Words cannot describe what I (and doubtless so many others) continue to feel for the man, the scientist, and (Yes!) the Legend. Every butterfly reminds me of that grand adventure in the Kansas woods on a summer day in 1996. Those lucky enough to have met him understand my inability to describe him. No one can put Henry Fitch into mere words; he had to be *experienced*.

Those who will only meet him through reading his biography, his lifetime of scientific writings, or others’ memoirs will not begin to understand even half the man behind the name — but those who take the time to hear the subtext within the stories of this remarkable giant among men will doubtless be blessed for the effort. They and future generations may only make a tip-of-the-iceberg, second-hand acquaintance with the marvelous Henry Fitch, but oh what a discovery that will be! That sort of experience will still your heart, turn your thoughts inward, and broaden your vision to encompass the whole earth. It will make you smile into the sky, call all the little living things “old friend,” and cause you to stare at your own two feet in silent wonder, hoping that you too can learn to walk with a Gandhi-stride and make a Fitch-difference in a world mostly unseen and un-experienced by the “civilized” masses.

Could there be any better way to honor the man than to walk in his legendary footsteps?



An “old friend.” Dr. Fitch came to know many of the residents of the Fitch Natural History Reservation.



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