

## IN MEMORIAM

### HENRY S. FITCH: THE TWILIGHT OF AN INCREDIBLE CAREER

I first met Henry Fitch in 1968, forty-one years ago, while visiting a friend in Lawrence. I'd read many of his papers in the course of my studies, and when I met him again in 1970 two things beyond his vast store of knowledge once more impressed me. At age fifty-nine, he could, while making a round in the field, walk the legs off many people far younger. And, for someone whose many papers had essentially established the field of snake ecology as we now know it, he was incredibly unassuming and reserved (except when playing the, ummm . . . *rules-modified*, basketball games that then were a KU Natural History Reservation feature event).

Many herpetologists accompanied this remarkable man into the field in the course of his long, distinguished career. It was my distinct privilege to be among them at various times, and to work with him during the final few years of that career. Our close professional relationship really began in the mid-1980s with our collaboration on Timber Rattlesnake telemetry. I built an effective (albeit awkwardly maneuverable) antenna. Using that and some transmitters (immense by current standards!) assembled by Tony Shirer and which Henry pushed gently down the throats of large rattlers, we spent a summer gathering movement data that retrospectively turned out more a learning experience about the technique than about the snakes. Henry assimilated all this, and nearly 20 years later, when we had far better equipment and far more background knowledge on the subtleties of using it, we were able to initiate an ongoing study of this species in northeastern Kansas.

In 1987, Henry and I received funding from Oklahoma Department of Natural Resources to study rattlesnake roundups and their effects on populations of Western Diamondback Rattlesnakes. It was no secret that Henry's long-term enthusiasm for rattlesnake study wasn't shared by his wife Virginia, perhaps out of her recognition that his reflexes were slowing, as do everyone's with time, hampering the avoidance response essential for such work. It's one thing to dodge the feint of a 2-foot copperhead, but quite another to dodge the long strike of a five-foot *Crotalus*. Virginia's reaction was subdued apprehension. But after some discussion, we agreed to handle the captive snakes after cooling them, a reassuring model that Virginia accepted and which proved effective for safely gathering the morphological data we sought.

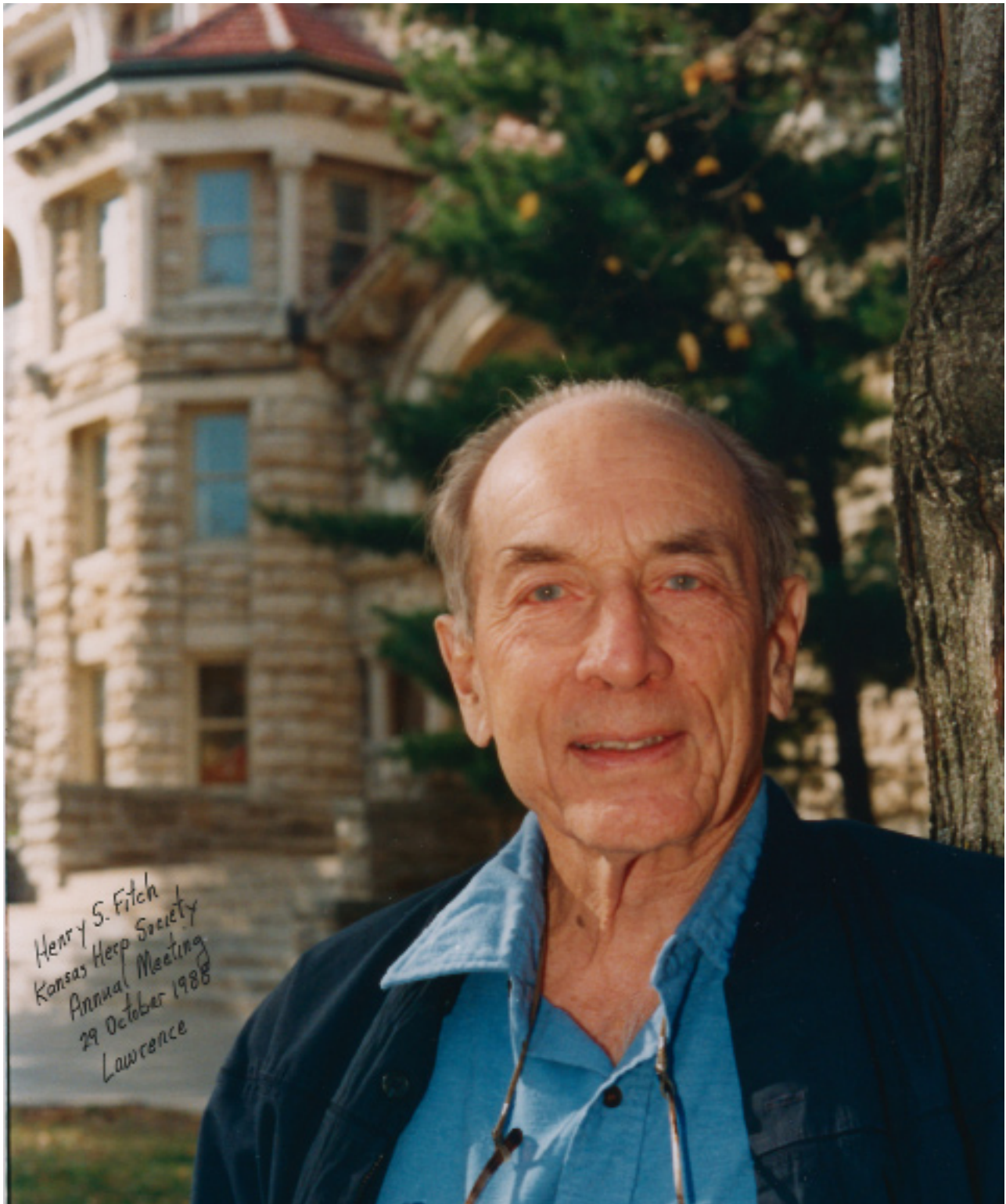
Henry's enthusiasm for field work and for learning all there was to learn about snake ecology never diminished, though by 2002 time plainly was having its inexorable effect of limiting bone and muscle. In these later years of his career, I had retired, and so was able to help him make rounds in the field using one of the field station's "Gator" ATVs. I drove while Henry's gaze was fixed firmly on our destination of the day, wherever it happened to be. By 2003, he was gamely trying to maneuver using crutches on a local ledge that served as a Timber Rattlesnake den. I emphasized to him that I didn't plan to be remembered as the guy who brought him back from the field with a severe envenomation or a broken leg, and so he agreed (perhaps acquiesced is a more accurate term) with a change of model—I'd do the

rough and tumble stuff and he'd wait in the 6-wheeler to share in the results, and we'd collaborate on papers that of course required his incredible store of knowledge. Or if topography allowed, he'd hunt close to the 'Gator while I ventured further. That model worked well through the remainder of the time he was able to live independently on what was to become the Fitch Natural History Reservation (FNHR), and other persons, younger than either of us, pitched in to help Henry make productive rounds in the field safely. Notable among these were Scott Sharp (a high school teacher in a nearby district) and his family, and KU undergraduates Mike Zerwekh and Joey Brown.

As late as 2006, the "Henry and George team" (which I once pointed out to him had an average age of 79, a realization he greatly enjoyed) still made joint rounds, these in my Smooth Earth Snake study area not far from FNHR. This was a species he'd rarely seen, with just three FNHR records. He was fascinated by the fact that the species was so close, yet he'd seen so few. When, on our first trip into that area, I caught the first of several we subsequently found in tall grass habitat, his reaction was to look at it intently and softly remark "Well, I'll be damned." I think it was the only time I heard him say that! I'm glad I sent him the final draft of the article summarizing that research. When I emailed it to his daughter Alice, his primary care-giver by then, I asked her to "tell Henry he has to stick around to see this in print." Planned publication was for December 2009 (see this issue of JKH). Alice read it to him and afterward told me how attentive he'd been and how he'd enjoyed learning about this elusive species.

On 8 September 2009, just a few months shy of his centennial birthday, Henry Sheldon Fitch passed away, leaving for science one of the most outstanding legacies of ecological study ever known. Best known for his extensive long-term study of the herpetofauna of what in 1948 was The University of Kansas Natural History Reservation (renamed in 1986 the Fitch Natural History Reservation), his published studies in animal ecology extending back to 1933 also include a wide range of birds, mammals, and invertebrates, as well as the local successional flora of their habitats. Harry W. Greene, interviewed by the Lawrence Journal-World, accurately reflected on Henry's legacy by stating "It's not an exaggeration to say that Henry's the father of snake biology." His studies on the ecology and relations of so many species were refined through his extensive career to reflect his unique insights regarding the way they form communities of interacting organisms. All of us who continue to build on this legacy, as well as those who follow us and will do the same, owe a tremendous thanks to this modest man of great talent.

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Henry S. Fitch (1909–2009), *Distinguished Life Member* of the Kansas Herpetological Society, shown here in front of the Museum of Natural History at the University of Kansas while attending the annual meeting of the KHS in Lawrence, Kansas, on 29 October 1986. Henry regularly attended the Society gatherings and presented the results of his research on the herpetofauna of the newly-named Fitch Natural History Reservation in northeastern Kansas. He was gracious and patient with the multitude of younger herpetologists that wanted to meet him and have him autograph one of his books for them. He will be missed by so many for so many reasons, but particularly for his kind and gentle demeanor. Photograph by Larry L. Miller, Kansas Heritage Photography, Wakarusa, Kansas; image from the private collection of Suzanne L. & Joseph T. Collins.