

HOW I GOT TO WHERE I AM TODAY

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My love of fishes began innocently enough at the age of 12 with the gift of a pregnant female Guppy from a friend in Lake Charles, LA, where my dad (an Air Force pilot) was stationed at Lake Charles AFB. That night, the female Guppy gave birth to 28 babies and I was forever hooked on fishes! Later, another friend introduced me to *Tropical Fish Hobbyist Magazine* (TFH) and I spent my time dreaming of joining Dr. Herbert Axelrod on his ichthyological expeditions to South America in search of new fish species for the aquarium trade. It was in TFH that I first read about the ichthyological giants, Drs. George Myers at Stanford University and Carl L. Hubbs at Michigan, and their contributions to ichthyology. By age 14, I had fully decided to become an ichthyologist and attend the University of Michigan where I would study under the legendary Drs. Hubbs and Robert Rush Miller.

As we all know, life has a way of getting in the way of personal dreams. By the time I was actually in high school, my dad was stationed at Blytheville AFB in Arkansas where I met my future wife when she was in the 9th grade and I was in the 11th. When it was time for college, it became obvious that I was not going to Ann Arbor, so I attended nearby Arkansas State University. Following my dad's assertion that I needed to be an aeronautical engineer, I majored in engineering for one semester. I quickly realized that engineering was not for me, so I changed to business, which lasted another semester. I also took a freshman biology course that second semester and, one night after class, I asked my instructor, Mr. Bill Byrd, what career paths I might have with a biology degree. He convinced me that biology was a plausible option, and I decided to give biology a shot. However, just as I was discovering my preferred field of study, my dad was told he was going to be transferred to Shreveport, LA, so I transferred to Louisiana Tech for my sophomore year. Unfortunately, my dad was actually sent to Norfolk, Virginia, so I was stuck in Louisiana. In the Spring of 1964 while in the LTU library one day, I had an epiphany of sorts when I went to the science section, and happened to pick up a copy of something called *Copeia*. I had never heard of *Copeia*, but I just happened to open the pages right to a paper titled "History of Ichthyology in the United States after 1850" by Carl L. Hubbs (the guy I had read about in *TFH* as a kid) and I started reading. As I continued to read, I discovered a second paper titled "A Brief Sketch of the History of Ichthyology in America to the Year 1850" by George S. Myers. It was electric!

I was totally mesmerized, and knew instantly exactly what I needed to do in my life! I would transfer back to ASU, where I could return to my friends, major in biology, and continue my quest to be an ichthyologist! So in the Fall of 1965, I began my biology program at ASU. I got married to my high school sweetheart at the end of my junior year and graduated with a B.S. degree in Biology in 1967. Following my Bachelor's degree, I accepted an assistantship to graduate school at ASU where I finished my Master of Science Degree in Biology (1968) in one year and two summers.

In grad school I fell under the tutelage of Dr. George L. Harp, a dynamic young aquatic biologist, who guided me through my thesis research entitled "A Limnological Study of the Strawberry River in Northeastern Arkansas." Under George, I learned academic rigor and attention to detail and I gained a vast knowledge of the aquatic biology of lakes and rivers, and aquatic insects. Following my Master's Degree, I moved on to Oklahoma State University to fulfill my delayed dream of becoming an ichthyologist. At OSU, I studied under the renowned and brilliant Dr. Rudolph J. Miller, a prominent fish ethnologist and systematic ichthyologist, who had previously studied under both Drs. Royal D. Suttkus at Tulane and Edward C. Raney at Cornell University. Dr. Miller had replaced the legendary Dr. George A. Moore, who retired at OSU shortly before I arrived. Dr. Moore was a former student of Carl Hubbs at Michigan and student peer of Reeve Bailey while there.



Rob and a friend.

When I arrived at OSU, I originally had hoped to work on a systematic ichthyological study of Oklahoma fishes; however, I found that Rudy had a dissertation project already in mind for me. He had a large NIH grant on the agonistic behavior of anabantoid fishes and needed someone to finish the last species, *T. pectoralis*, the Snakeskin Gourami, of his larger overall study on the anabantoid fish genus *Trichogaster*. In fact, on the very first day I went to the old OSU Aquatic Lab to meet the famous Dr. Miller, he was busy taking quantitative data on agonistic encounters of various gouramis, so I had to wait to see him. When he emerged in his immaculate white lab coat from the curtained-off research area full of aquaria with anabantoid fishes, he shook my hand politely, handed me eight master's theses and doctoral dissertations, and said curtly, "Read these and come back in a week and we will decide on a dissertation topic!" That was it! Dutifully, I went back to my apartment and poured over the eight scholarly works he had given me, not understanding a bit of the scientific terminology of "lateral spread display, opercle spread, incipient spawning bout" that was contained in the multitude of pages I was reading. However, I returned in a week, and my dissertation project, "An Ethological Study of the Snakeskin Gourami, *Trichogaster pectoralis*, with Comments on Phylogenetic Relationships among Species of *Trichogaster*" was set in motion. Dr. Miller did not like to fool around, and neither did I. I knew I was in for three years of work!

I got off to a terrible start in my dissertation research as I almost killed all my fish. You must remember that 1968–1970 were years during the Vietnam War, and, since no one could breed the fish I was going to work with, *T. pectoralis*, I literally had to get them flown in from the rice paddies of Vietnam and Thailand through a dealer in Florida. I picked up my first batch of 25 adult fish at the small Stillwater, OK, airport and took them to the OSU fish lab, where I had a large holding aquarium ready for them. In 1968, we had a large reservoir of unchlorinated tap water in a separate room that was heated and supplied all our laboratory aquaria. I had filled up the large holding aquarium before I went to get the fish at the airport and, upon returning, gently netted my fish one by one from the styrofoam container into the large holding tank. As I relaxed and watched my new recruits, I noticed they appeared to be struggling, and then one by one began to turn on their side and float to the surface, obviously about to die! Stunned, I could not figure what the problem was, as the water was chemically correct from the reservoir; however, when I started to dip my net into the water to quickly transfer the fish to other nearby aquaria, I was shocked to feel the water was ice cold! The airmailed fish out of Florida had gone from 80 degree warm water to 58 degree chilled water...no wonder they were going into shock! During the night, the heater had gone out on the reservoir holding tank and I had not thought to check my aquarium temperature in the excitement of receiving the

fish from Vietnam. To my amazement, every single fish lived! It showed me that the Snakeskin Gourami was one gritty fish.

During the next three years, I became the first person to ever breed the Snakeskin Gourami and raise them to adult size; we later published my dissertation and associated joint research (Miller and Robison, 1974; Robison and Miller, 1975). Fortuitously, in my second year at OSU, Dr. Miller came to me with a fish project that I had really wanted to do earlier, a book project on the "*Fishes of Oklahoma*." Naturally, I jumped at the chance and thereby ended up doing two dissertations at OSU in three years. Rudy proved to be the perfect academic and professional mentor for me as he skillfully taught me systematic ichthyology, fish behavior, fish ecology, and natural history of fishes, in addition to showing me how to sight identify every fish species living in Oklahoma. He also taught me how to read manuscripts/scientific papers critically, to publish papers myself, to attend national American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (ASIH) meetings, and, most importantly, he fully treated me like a younger colleague rather than just another student. Rudy even became like a second father to me during my three years at OSU while I worried daily about the fate of my own dad who flew 158 combat missions over Hanoi. During the holidays, he and his wife Helen insisted that my wife and I have Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners at their house, so that we would not be alone, and they always made us feel a part of his family.

In May 1971, having just turned 26, I graduated with my Ph.D. in Zoology and accepted a summer teaching position at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, arranged for me by Rudy. I taught both ichthyology and animal behavior during the summer term as the instructors in both courses wanted the summer off. I made more money teaching that one summer term than I had in a whole year previous as a grad assistant at OSU! The very day I arrived at SIU to begin teaching summer school, I received a phone call offering me a biology position at Southern Arkansas University, which I accepted immediately. A few weeks later in August 1971, we packed up and headed to Magnolia, AR, where I taught the next 37 years before retiring in 2008. Due to my training at OSU, my future plans as I headed south to SAU were originally to continue my study of anabantoid fish reproductive behavior and to set up a fish behavior lab where I would also study reproductive behavior of Arkansas native cyprinid and percid fishes; however, reality soon set in and lack of space and resources, a heavy teaching load, and lack of time for research prevented that from occurring. Instead, I turned my attention to the geographic distribution and natural history of the state fish and herp fauna where I could involve my students on my field trips and personal research studies.

While teaching at SAU I was fortunate enough to team up with my great personal friend and esteemed colleague, Dr.

Thomas M. Buchanan, to write the first edition of *Fishes of Arkansas (FOA)*, a book both of us had been dreaming about writing for years. Currently, Tom and I are finishing the second edition of *FOA* for the University of Arkansas Press. Early on when I came to Magnolia, I drove down to Monroe, LA, to meet Dr. Neil Douglas, an OSU alum and former George Moore student, who would become a wonderful friend, gracious mentor, and steadfast colleague over the years. Neil had assembled a fabulous fish collection at the University of Louisiana at Monroe with lots of Arkansas fish collections housed there. Neil unselfishly allowed me to prowl through his expansive fish collection to use the data from all of his many Arkansas fish collections made previously by him and his many graduate students. These collections formed the basis for the first *Fishes of Arkansas*. During those wonderful 37 years at SAU, I was fortunate enough to discover and describe several Arkansas fishes including the Bluehead Shiner, *Pteronotropis hubbsi* with Reeve Bailey, the Ozark Sculpin, *Cottus hypselurus* with Dick Robins, Ouachita Mountain Shiner, *Notropis snelsoni*, and most recently, Ouachita Darter, *Percina brucethompsoni* with Bob Cashner and Tom Near. Describing those four new fish species was of course an incredible high-

light of my career; however, being able to honor the famous ichthyologist Carl L. Hubbs, who I had read about as a kid in *TFH* by naming a new fish species after him and coauthoring it with none other than Reeve Bailey, another of the Michigan elite, is still sometimes difficult to believe. I even got to show Dr. Hubbs a jar full of about 40 of his namesake (*P. hubbsi*) at the 1975 Williamsburg, VA, ASIH meeting where I took them on board a plane with me when I flew up there! Can you imagine doing that today?

Midway through my career, I became extremely interested in biodiversity through reading the enthralling writings of E. O. Wilson. I realized that although I was not going to the tropics, I could have an effect by turning my full attention to the biodiversity of Arkansas. To date I have published over 350 papers and seven books on fishes, herps, various invertebrates, plants, and other aspects of the wonderful biodiversity of the great natural state of Arkansas and I continue to do research on the state biota. My career as a zoologist and ichthyologist has been thoroughly rewarding, incredibly enjoyable, always exciting, and more than I ever thought possible for that 12 year-old boy in Lake Charles who was given the gift of a pregnant Guppy by a childhood friend so long ago back in 1957.