

Perry Webster Gilbert

December 1, 1912 — October 15, 2000

At the time of his death, Perry Gilbert had been continuously affiliated with Cornell for 64 years. He was an inspiring teacher and lecturer, an internationally recognized expert on sharks, a gifted administrator, and a master of public relations. His death brought to an end a long career, which saw him achieve distinction in each of these areas.

Perry was born and brought up in North Branford, Connecticut, the only son of Scott and Hester Gilbert. After graduation from high school he entered Dartmouth College in 1930. There he formed an enduring friendship with Harlan Banks, his college roommate who was eventually to become the Liberty Hyde Bailey Professor of Paleobotany at Cornell. At Dartmouth, Perry came under the tutelage of Professors William Ballard and Norman Arnold, who sparked and nurtured his interest in their respective disciplines of Vertebrate Anatomy, and Histology/Embryology. After two postgraduate years as an Instructor at Dartmouth, Perry began a program of graduate study at Cornell in 1936 with mammalogist William J. Hamilton as chairman of his committee. With his doctorate in hand in 1940, and an unexpected vacancy at Cornell as the new school year began, Perry was immediately hired as an Instructor in the Department of Zoology by Chairman Benjamin Young. His principal duties from the beginning involved teaching the course in Comparative Vertebrate Anatomy. This course had a large enrollment because, along with Organic Chemistry, it was required for entrance to most Medical Schools. Perry was to continue teaching this course with dedication and distinction, often in Summer Session as well as in the Fall and Spring terms until 1967. The constant need for Teaching Assistants in this popular course provided his graduate students with a role model and the first-hand experience they needed. Most of his graduate students became college teachers. Perry was tenured as Associate Professor in 1946, and became Professor of Zoology in 1952. With the establishment of the Division of Biological Sciences and the elimination of departmental designations, Perry elected to affiliate with the then Section, now Department of Neurobiology and Behavior, and assumed the title of Professor of that specialty.

Soon after arriving at Cornell, Perry met his future wife, Claire Rachel Kelly, and they were married in 1938, with Harlan Banks, who was also here as a graduate student, serving as Perry's Best Man at the wedding. The young couple began married life on Linden Avenue in Collegetown, later moving to a farm on the Coddington Road, and ultimately settling down in a spacious home on the Parkway. Claire and Perry's union was blessed with eight children: five sons and three daughters. In addition to being a busy, caring mother, serving as an always

gracious hostess, and enthusiastically performing all other duties of a faculty wife, Claire served as Perry's "keel and rudder" in his endeavors, editing or often co-authoring his many publications.

As a teacher, Perry was noted for the excellence and clarity of his lectures; his prowess at the chalkboard was legendary for his ability to produce symmetrical drawings using both hands simultaneously. As thesis advisor to his graduate students, he was a rigorous and demanding mentor, but always kind and helpful. His Ph.D. students, well prepared, entered the teaching profession imbued with a love for books and academic excellence as well as compassion for students. One of Perry's outstanding attributes was introducing his graduate students and junior colleagues to his wide circle of professional friends, both at scientific meetings and in his home. He enjoyed a good story and could tell one as well.

In the 1950s, the Gilberts bought a farmhouse in the Danby Hills surrounded by considerable acreage with a view of the valley. Through the years, they improved the property, known as "The Nob," modernized the house, and built a deep pond. It was a seasonal vacation retreat for the family, as well as the site of many social gatherings of Perry's colleagues and students, and his and Claire's many friends. The property remains in the family, much of it enrolled in the Finger Lakes Land Trust.

As a scientific investigator, Perry ranged widely. His doctoral dissertation (1940) had dealt with the anatomy of burrowing squirrels, the woodchuck in particular. On his first sabbatical leave (1949), he was appointed as a Carnegie Fellow in Embryology, working with Dr. George Corner in Baltimore. Several publications resulted, among them a beautifully illustrated monograph on the origin and development of the human extrinsic eye muscles. A subsequent sabbatical (1957) found him studying sharks at the Lerner Marine Laboratory on Bimini, with a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 1963, he was continuing shark studies with a fellowship at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, La Jolla, California. When Cornell established the Isles of Shoals Marine Program in 1966 on Star Island in the Gulf of Maine, Perry was one of the founding faculty. He continued for the next several years as a Visiting Lecturer on the anatomy and behavior of sharks and rays.

By 1967, various aspects of the biology of sharks had become the focus of his future research endeavors. His reputation for expertise in this subject attracted the interest and support of governmental funding agencies, notably the Office of Naval Research, which encouraged and supported his experimental studies of ways to protect people in the water (downed aviators and shipwreck survivors) against attacks by sharks. Building on his interest in these matters, he established the National Shark Attack File, which focused attention on experiences of many survivors of encounters with aggressive sharks. During these years, he traveled widely to coasts of the world where

sharks were a problem and he served as editor of two authoritative publications: *Sharks and Survival* (1963), and *Sharks, Skates, and Rays* (1967).

In the 1960s, Perry carried on research as a Visiting Fellow at the Cape Haze Marine Laboratory in Placida, Florida, which was then under the direction of Eugenie Clark. He continued this relationship after the laboratory's move to Siesta Key and in 1967, while on leave from Cornell, he was invited and agreed to become its Director. Under Perry's leadership, the name of the laboratory was changed to the Mote Marine Laboratory, in recognition of the generous financial support provided by William R. Mote and the Mote family. The Gilberts moved from Ithaca to Sarasota, and through an ingenious arrangement, Perry retained his Cornell Professorship, becoming in essence a Professor in absentia. Each year he spent some weeks in Ithaca, giving lectures and consulting with students and colleagues. The university gained from policies established at the Mote Lab providing no-cost access to research equipment and teaching facilities for Cornell faculty and students. Perry, of course, treasured the distinction of his Cornell title, which also lent prestige to the Mote laboratory.

Under Perry's leadership, the laboratory flourished and became known as a center of excellence in a broad variety of disciplines in marine research. During these years, he demonstrated his rare talents as an administrator, in addition to continuing his own active research. In the mid-1970s, it became obvious that for a variety of reasons, chiefly resulting from problems of coastal erosion at the Siesta Key site, the Laboratory needed to be moved once again. Perry directed the planning, design, local politicking, and fund-raising leading to the construction of an elaborate new facility on City Island in Sarasota. Following the laboratory's successful move to this vastly superior location in 1978, Perry retired as Director and at the same time he was also named Professor of Neurobiology and Behavior, Emeritus, at Cornell.

Throughout his retirement, he continued his work at the laboratory as Mote Senior Scientist and as a member of its Board of Trustees. Upon the occasion of his retirement from Cornell, his friends honored him with a symposium of distinguished speakers, a banquet, and the establishment of an endowed "Perry Gilbert Lectureship in Comparative Anatomy and Behavior". Likewise at the Mote Laboratory, in recognition of his devoted service and successful leadership, the new Education Building was named in his honor. For the continuation of studies he had initiated, the Mote Marine Laboratory established an endowment for the "Perry W. Gilbert Chair in Shark Research". Perry is survived by his wife, Claire; and seven of his eight children.

Kraig Adler, John Anderson, Samuel Leonard, Howard Evans