

Chicago Natural History Museum

FOUNDED BY MARSHALL FIELD, 1893

Roosevelt Road and Lake Shore Drive, Chicago 5

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Members are requested to inform the Museum promptly of changes of address.

KARL PATTERSON SCHMIDT

1890-1957

WITH THE DEATH on September 26, 1957, of Karl Patterson Schmidt, Chicago Natural History Museum lost a most distinguished staff member.

Karl Schmidt was born in 1890 at Lake Forest, Illinois, and attended the public schools, Lake Forest Academy, and then Lake Forest College, where he won three freshman prizes for scholarship. His schooling, but not his education, was interrupted at the end of his freshman year by six years of true pioneer farming in Wisconsin. In 1913 he returned to school, this time to Cornell University, and received his bachelor of arts degree in 1916.

Following his graduation, Karl Schmidt became Assistant in Reptiles and then Assistant Curator of Reptiles at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In 1922 he joined the staff of Chicago Natural History Museum as Assistant Curator of Reptiles, later became Curator of Reptiles, and, in 1941, was appointed Chief Curator of Zoology. In 1955 he retired to become Curator Emeritus of Zoology.

During his years in the Division of Reptiles, the collection was multiplied tenfold, and the Museum became one of the im-

portant centers of herpetology in the world. As Chief Curator of Zoology, Karl Schmidt stimulated the growth of those divisions of zoology that had previously been relatively small, encouraged work in the large divisions, and developed a marvelous co-operative spirit among the staff members of his department.

Research workers who write a great many scientific articles without producing a single worthwhile idea unfortunately are not rare. Other scientists have ideas that die with them because they never complete any work. Only rarely is a scientist able both to turn out a great deal of work and to produce ideas that stimulate other scientists. Karl Schmidt was one of these unusual and valuable men. He was not a narrow specialist and, besides the nearly 150 herpetological articles he wrote, he was co-author of two books that are the most important recent works in the broad fields of animal geography and animal ecology. His worldwide reputation led to his election to the National Academy of Sciences, the greatest honor that can be given an American scientist.

Yet Karl Schmidt was more than an accomplished scientist. He was a great human being. It is extremely difficult to explain to anyone who did not meet Karl exactly what I mean by that. Perhaps one measure of his greatness is the large number of people who met him just once and never forgot the experience. The number of lives that were affected critically by one encounter with Karl Schmidt is remarkable. And these people are found from South America to Canada, from China across the United States to Europe. Some of them are biologists, but many are not.

It is well-nigh impossible to account for this influence by listing a man's qualities. Nevertheless, I think that what people responded to in Karl Schmidt was the example of a man using the potentialities of human existence to the fullest. He lived more in a week than most of us do in a year. And his life had emotional as well as intellectual content.

Lest I convey the impression that we are dealing with a paragon, let me hasten to add that Karl had his biases, and some of them were amusing. An editorial in *Harper's Magazine* criticizing American farmers, one of Karl's favorite groups, so aroused his righteous indignation that we were grateful that the editor was far removed from the Schmidt home. Karl was no more capable of being analytical in political and economic matters than most of us. When a political figure irritated him, the irritation was tremendous, for nothing about Karl Schmidt was petty or small. Those are words that one could never apply to him.

A streak of the mischievous and the perverse in Karl's character both amused and defeated those of us who knew him well.

"PEOPLES OF THE WORLD": FRIDAY EVENINGS

Four more lectures in the series "Visits with Peoples of the World" will be given on Friday evenings during November in the James Simpson Theatre of the Museum. Distinguished anthropologists, including one from the staff of the Museum, will appear. The course is offered by University College of the University of Chicago. On the Saturday following each lecture there will be a field trip to the Museum, where members of the audience may view exhibits correlated with the subject of the lecture.

All these lectures begin at 8 P.M. Following are the dates, subjects, and speakers:

November 1—Middle America: Descendants of the Maya. Sol Tax, Chairman, Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago

November 8—South America: Native Peoples and Their Culture. Donald Collier, Curator of South American Archaeology and Ethnology, Chicago Natural History Museum

November 15—The Peoples of West Africa. Warren d'Azevedo, Department of Anthropology, Northwestern University

November 22—The Negro and His Music in the New World. Alan P. Merriam, Professor of Anthropology, Northwestern University

Price of admission to single lectures is \$1. Students' single admissions are 75 cents. Tickets may be purchased at the door.

But these two characteristics enabled him to take a detached and analytical view of his science and to stick to his guns when he knew he was right. And he usually was.

Most men of outstanding ability and achievement gradually assume a sense of infallibility. This weakness was escaped by Karl Schmidt because he was so modest. Honors that came his way seemed always to surprise him, when his associates were astonished only because the honors always seemed so overdue.

How can these and other of Karl Schmidt's qualities be summarized? Passion, compassion, vitality, humor, modesty. No matter how many words are added they still will not explain or describe Karl adequately. For a great man's character cannot be circumscribed by words.

Therefore, to tell people who did not know him what Karl Schmidt was like is impossible. And those who did know him need not be told. We who were privileged to be closely associated with Karl feel sorry for everyone who was not.

—R.F.I.



Inger, Robert F. 1957. "Karl Patterson Schmidt, 1890-1967." *Bulletin* 28(11), 2-2.

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