

Presentation of the 2009 Gilbert Harris Award to

William J. Zinsmeister

by

The Paleontological Research Institution

October 19, 2009

Portland, Oregon

The Gilbert Harris Award is presented annually by PRI in recognition of career excellence in systematic paleontology. It is named after the founder of PRI, whose commitment to systematic paleontology was legendary. The recipient is a scientist who, through outstanding research and commitment to the centrality of systematics in paleontology, has made a significant contribution to the science.

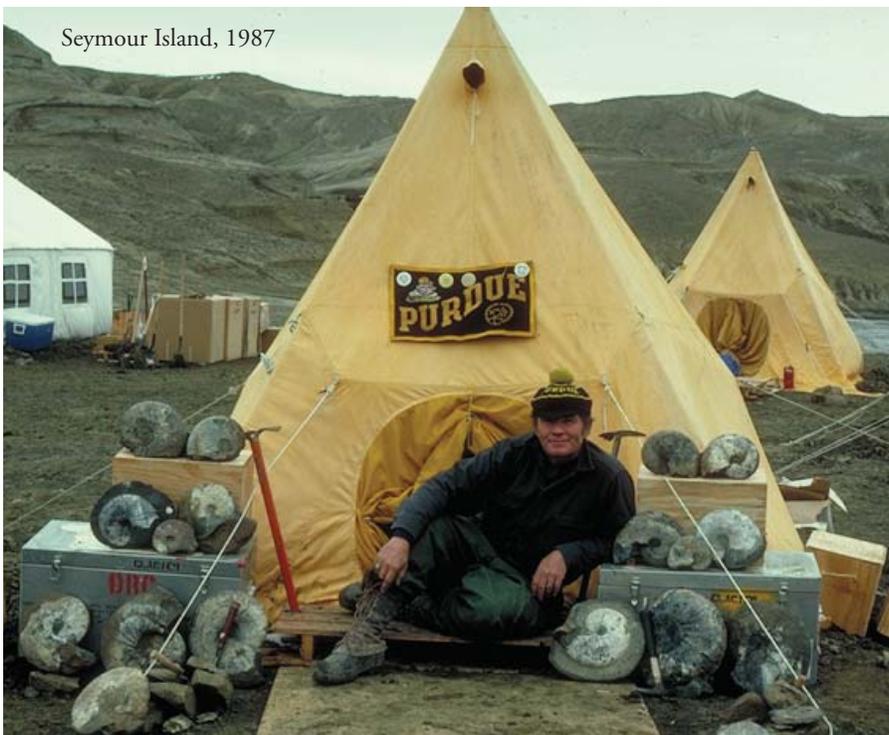
Bill Zinsmeister received his bachelor's degree in geology from California State University at Long Beach in 1968 and his Ph.D. from University of California-Riverside in 1974. After receiving his doctorate, he moved to Ohio State University where he had a variety of posts in the Institute of Polar Studies. He moved to Purdue University in 1983, and became a full professor in the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences there in 1991, a position he still holds.

Bill is a passionate explorer, and for two decades, beginning in 1975, he participated in or led numerous field parties to the southern end of the world, including ten trips to Antarctica and six to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. Eight of these trips were to Seymour Island, on the tip on the Antarctic Peninsula. Although he has also worked and published extensively on fossils from the Pacific coast of North America and the Canadian Arctic, it is with the fossils of Seymour Island that Bill's name will always be associated.

Marine fossils (mostly invertebrates) have been known from Seymour Island since the first years of the twentieth century. It was not until the 1970s and 1980s, however, that they were collected and studied in a detailed and comprehensive way. To date, dozens of paleontologists have worked on Seymour Island fossils, especially the mollusks, but also echinoderms, fish, reptiles, mammals, and many others. Much of this work is based on the pioneering efforts of Bill Zinsmeister. The spectacular collections he made, now permanently housed at PRI, will be a resource for researchers for many years to come.

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Bill's research – which has produced more than 100 peer-reviewed papers – has been a combination of the discovery of scores of taxa new to science and an appreciation of “big picture science.” He has always used his newly gathered data to refine the biostratigraphy of targeted rock units, and to better understand palaeobiogeographic distributions of ancient organisms. For example, his Weddellian Biotic Province hypothesis for the rim of the southwestern Pacific has stood the test of time (over 30 years now), and many different researchers have corroborated his ideas and have independently arrived at similar conclusions.



Bill was an early skeptic of the Alvarez impact scenario for the Cretaceous-Tertiary mass extinction, not because he doubted that the impact occurred but because he saw in the fossils of Seymour Island a more complex biological process. His discovery of the “fish bed” at the boundary – which covers more than 12 square kilometers of the island and rests directly above a layer of iridium – and the surrounding patterns of extinction and recovery were important contributors to our current understanding of this interval.

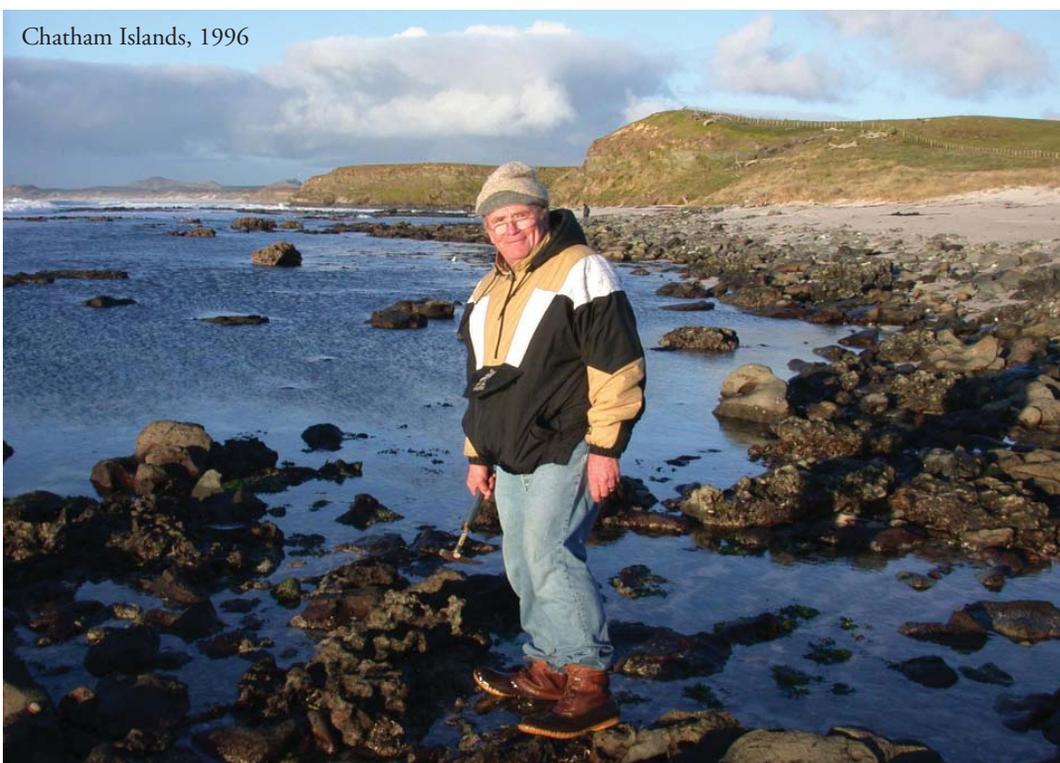
Bill is described by former students as “a big man with great sense of humor” who demanded a great deal of them but was also very supportive. When an enthusiastic student brought him a fossil, he would take a minute to examine it with a very serious expression on his face and then, with a single swift motion would throw it over his shoulder, telling the student in his low pitch voice – “I am sure you can do much better than that!” He calls such tossable specimens “Leaverite,” short for “Leave it right there.”

He has a habit of giving his graduate students a small graduation gift – a silver pencil, because Charles Darwin during the voyage of the “Beagle” made his notes with a silver pencil. Darwin has always been a hero of Bill’s, and it is especially appropriate for us to celebrate Bill’s career of accomplishment in the bicentennial year of Darwin’s birth.

It is with pleasure and honor that the Paleontological Research Institution presents its 2009 Gilbert Harris Award to William J. Zinsmeister.



Seymour Island, 1994



Chatham Islands, 1996