

## **Presentation of the 2010 Gilbert Harris Award to**

**John Pojeta, Jr.**

**by**

**The Paleontological Research Institution**

**November 1, 2010**

**Denver, Colorado**

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, in honor of his passionate commitment to that field. 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.

This year's recipient has a particularly close relationship with PRI. John Pojeta is an "intellectual grandson" of Gilbert Harris, served on the PRI Board of Trustees for many years, and this year marks his 50<sup>th</sup> year of PRI membership.

John received his bachelor's degree from Capital University in 1957 and his doctorate from the University of Cincinnati in 1963. At Cincinnati, he studied under Kenneth Caster, who received his Ph.D. from Cornell under Gilbert Harris in 1933. In 1963, he became a paleontologist with the U.S. Geological Survey in Washington, DC, where he spent his entire career, retiring in 1994. John served as Chief of the Paleontology and Stratigraphy Branch of the Survey from 1989-1994. He served as both Secretary and President of the Paleontological Society, and he and his wife Mary Lou continue, as they have for decades, to manage publication sales at events and meetings for the Society.

John has long been one of the world's preeminent experts on Paleozoic mollusks, and a leading theorist on early molluscan evolution, especially as it is revealed in the fossil record. In the 1970s and early 1980s, together with Bruce Runnegar, John carried out a series of landmark studies that have few equals in the recent paleontology. In 1972, he and Runnegar described the *Rostroconchia* as a new and extinct class of mollusks. (Unlike many such proposals, rostroconchs continue to be widely recognized today by most paleontologists.) In 1973, they described what is still the oldest known bivalve, *Fordilla*, from the Cambrian of upstate New York. The recognition of rostroconchs was a major motivation for Runnegar and Pojeta as they forged a highly original and influential synthesis of then-known fossil and neontological data into a model of higher-level molluscan evolution. Although later fossil finds and especially molecular data have altered our understanding of molluscan phylogeny, many key elements of the Runnegar-Pojeta model still hold today. Along the way, John produced scores of papers on the systematics of Paleozoic bivalves, chitons, and other fossil mollusks. His most recent monograph on Upper Cambrian chitons, was just published [September 2010] by PRI.

John served as a PRI Trustee from 1975 to 1984, serving as President from 1980-1982. He returned to the Board as an Emeritus Trustee in 1998. He played a key role in steering PRI through a leadership crisis in the 1970s, and orchestrated the decade-long business relationship between PRI and the Paleontological Society, which did much to stabilize PRI finances in the 1980s. Over the past decade he has been a particularly valuable voice for collections and science on the Board, including especially during the design of exhibits for the new Museum of the Earth

at PRI, which opened in 2003, as well as a crucial source of institutional memory. He and Mary Lou have over the years also been extremely generous with numerous gifts to PRI of books, specimens, and funds. This extraordinary record of service has been equaled by few other people ever connected with the organization.

It is with particularly great pleasure and honor that the Paleontological Research Institution presents its 2010 Gilbert Harris Award to John Pojeta, Jr.



Left: John Pojeta receives the 2010 Harris Award from PRI Director Warren Allmon.  
Right: John and Mary Lou Pojeta and Bruce and Maria Runnegar celebrate John's achievement.

### **Pojeta Comments on Receiving the PRI G. D. Harris Award, “In Recognition of Excellence in Systematic Paleontology”**

**November 1, 2010  
Denver, Colorado**

I'm very pleased to be the 2010 PRI Harris Awardee. Thank you all for being here. I'd like to take a little of your time to chat about my 50-year association with PRI, paleontology, and the impact of serendipity on me and Mary Lou.

Serendipity I – On June 23, 1957, Mary Lou and I went off to try and find our corner of the World. We met two years before at Capital University in Bexley, Ohio, a suburb of Columbus. Capital is one of those excellent church-founded liberal arts institutions with which Ohio is blessed by at least 50 of them. At Cap, I was a biology/chemistry major and Mary Lou was in nursing. I became interested in evolution and reckoned that fossils were the best way to study this phenomenon.

Serendipity II – However, biologists also need a geology background to study fossils. Tom Cobb, a faculty paleobotanist at Cap suggested that I visit with Ken Caster at the University of Cincinnati (UC). That worked – Ken got me a TA in biology while I made up the requisite geology courses. As an aside, in those days, TAs got tuition and fees, and \$100 a month. Mary Lou went to work, first at Sears complaint department (at \$40 a week before taxes) – a very

special introduction to the American public – and then she became Secretary to the newly formed Biology Department at UC.

Ken and Annie Caster studied with G. D. Harris, who founded PRI, and Ken was Harris' last Ph.D. student. Ken and Annie were also close friends of Katherine Van Winkle Palmer who was Director of PRI following Harris' death in 1952. I joined PRI in 1960 – it doesn't seem like 50 years ago. My first two monographs were published in PRI's *Palaeontographica Americana* series about Ordovician pelecypods from Cincinnati.

Serendipity III – In 1962 or 1963, as I was finishing my degree work – as Mary Lou and Jo Ann Osgood were producing an original and 4-5 carbons of my thesis on old monster mechanical type writers – Ken Caster told me that there was a job in Washington at the U. S. National Museum of Natural History in mollusks; he was a mentor who kept track of job opportunities.

Serendipity IV – Tom Dutro hired me as the USGS Paleozoic pelecypod-man at the USNM in September 1963. **WOW!!** What a change from a university environment. There were almost 50 paleontologists working for the USNM and USGS at the museum. In fossil mollusks alone, there were: Gibson, Gordon, Imlay, Kauffman, Ladd, Sohl, Wilson, Woodring, Yochelson, and shortly Waller, plus the folks studying Holocene mollusks in the Department of Invertebrate Zoology. SPECIMENS GALORE AND UNRIVALED LIBRARY FACILITIES – a systematist's paradise. I often walk out of the museum and stand on the National Mall, I look at the Capitol Building to the east and the Washington Monument to the west and think, "How did we end up here?"

My jobs were basic research and the paleontology and biostratigraphy for the USGS' new mapping project in Kentucky. I worked south of Cincinnati in the Ordovician rocks that I had studied as a student, but to the south of the Ohio River the fossils were silicified. Another **WOW!!**

I joined the PRI Board in 1976 and became President of the Board 1980-1982. I helped get PRI through a leadership crisis in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I left the Board in 1984, just about the time Tom Dutro came onto the Board. Tom and the Board finished solving the leadership crisis by hiring Warren Allmon who has turned PRI into a small empire on Lake Cayuga. From 1982 through 1991, I was on the Council of the Paleontological Society as Secretary and President.

Mary Lou and I had our daughter Kim (1965) and our son John (1970). They were not serendipity – we planned to have a family.

Serendipity V – In 1969, a major event in my professional life was the coming of Bruce Runnegar to the USNM as a post-doc. We became close friends as did our wives, Mary Lou and Maria. Between about 1972 and 1992, Bruce and I averaged close to a publication a year dealing with who are the rostroconchs and why are they important, Cambrian pelecypods, why the hyoliths stand alone, and hypotheses of early molluscan evolution based on fossils. And, two evenings ago we had the pleasure of seeing Bruce receive the Paleontological Society Medal.

Serendipity VI – In 1996, I rejoined the PRI Board just in time to take part in creating the Museum of the Earth. This was a wonderful and tumultuous undertaking and experience. But there it now stands a PRI/Allmon establishment. **WOW!!**

In the more than 40 years of being at the USNM, I've had the pleasure of working with American, Australian, Canadian, Chinese, Czech, Mexican, Russian, etc. paleontologists and producing a number of specimen-based monographs and many other papers now totaling 144. The papers were based on material from Africa, Antarctica, Australia, China, Europe, and many

parts of North America. The latest monograph returns me to PRI, it is a coauthored publication in the *Bulletins of American Paleontology*, number 379, "Upper Cambrian Chitons from Missouri," published in September 2010.

Thank you for coming to help us celebrate, for listening, and thanks many times for the Harris Award in Systematic Paleontology. **KEEP SUPPORTING PRI.**