



Gilbert D. Harris (*Louisiana*)

Gilbert Dennison Harris was the fourth state geologist of Louisiana, a position he held for 10 years, although he carried the title of geologist in charge. He was born near Jamestown, N.Y., in 1864. He received a scholarship to Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., as an undergraduate in 1883 and graduated with a Ph.D. in 1886. Harris joined the Arkansas Geological Survey in 1888 and a year later began work with the U.S. Geological Survey. He also worked briefly with

the Texas Geological Survey and was hired as an instructor in paleontology by Cornell University in 1894.

He began his work with the Louisiana Geological Survey in 1899. The Survey at that time was part of the Agricultural Experiment Station. He continued this work until 1909, and his was the most productive of the early surveys. The Experiment Station had contracted for Harris to spend his summers working on the geology of the state. Harris was by then a well-known professor of geology at Cornell. According to the transmittal letter for the first report (1899), the director of the Experiment Station stated that Harris was "the recognized authority in this country on Tertiary geology." The final report of the Harris survey was the 52-page Bulletin 8 of 1909, *Oil and Gas in Northwestern Louisiana, with Special Reference to the Caddo Field*, by Harris, I. Perrine, and W.E. Hopper. This report proved of significant scientific interest, not only in paleontology, but also in economic terms, because Harris was among the first to identify a relationship between salt domes and oil and gas accumulation. Harris and his associates authored a number of geologic reports and publications during his tenure at the Louisiana survey.

Harris divided his time for 10 years between the Louisiana survey and teaching at Cornell. Many of his Survey assistants were Cornell students. He obtained the cooperation of the U.S. Geological Survey, the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, and the Bureau of Soils of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Harris's work was very accurate, especially under the conditions of the time. His efforts, and those of his assistants, contributed not only significantly to the geologic knowledge but to the development of the natural resources of the state. Thus, he accomplished much with a very small budget. Each of these federal organizations placed parties in the field, and thereby contributed support many times the \$2,500 that appears to have been the largest amount that the Harris survey received in any year. It was through Harris's determination and the arrangement he made that

a great deal of extremely valuable topographic and cartographic work was accomplished.

The attitude of the geologists of the Harris survey is best expressed in the letter of transmittal for the 1899 report, in which the director of the Experiment Station said "... they have persistently followed their work through freezes and sunshine, over intolerable roads, impelled by an enthusiasm known only to lovers of science." He was a pioneer in Tertiary paleontology. He devoted his life to a study of the rocks and fossils of the Cenozoic Era, first in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas, and later in Europe and various parts of South and Central America and the Caribbean. In association with his students, he amassed a huge collection of specimens and was an author of definitive studies on many Tertiary species.

Harris was also a scientific entrepreneur. He was always interested in economic geology, and throughout his career maintained dual appointments for the academic and the applied aspects of geology. He was granted leave during the spring term in exchange for teaching field studies during the summer term, together with a normal teaching load during the fall term. During the early part of the year he devoted his time to consulting, either working as a member of the Geological Survey of Louisiana or accepting consulting work with a growing number of oil companies in various parts of the world. This combination of activities proved to be very beneficial, bringing hundreds of specimens to Ithaca from every corner of the globe and providing access to geologic information that would otherwise have been unobtainable.

Harris was particularly sympathetic toward the interests of women in geology, and not only enrolled them in field camp before this was an accepted practice, but also supervised their graduate studies when few other faculty would do so. His relations with them were not always harmonious, but he was clearly an early advocate of women's interests.

Harris wanted to be sure that, once he retired from Cornell, his massive collections of Tertiary fossils would be appropriately preserved. For these reasons, he slowly developed the idea of establishing an institution, free-standing and wholly independent of Cornell, that would house his collections and provide a basis for continuing research and study. The germ of this idea had in fact begun in 1895 when he started his own printing operation because he had difficulty in finding copies of older paleontologic publications and getting his own work published in a timely manner. Harris founded two journals, *Bulletins of American Paleontology* in 1895 and *Palaeontographica Americana* in 1916. He printed them on his own presses, and they continue to be published today. It was about this time that the Paleontological Research Institution gradually grew, housed first in a small cinderblock building that

Harris constructed on the grounds of his home in Ithaca, and later moved to the present building on the west shore of Cayuga Lake. The provisional charter of PRI was approved by the New York State Board of Regents in 1933, a year before his retirement, and a permanent charter was granted in 1936. While he was well into his 80's, Harris was still operating the presses of the institution he created.

Harris had a very remarkable career as professor of paleontology, state geologist of Louisiana, international consultant, publisher, and founder of the Paleontological Research Institution. Being a founding member of AASG can also be added to his list of outstanding accomplishments.

Biography adapted from Socolow (1988) and Brice (1996).