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Also in this issue...

Pterosaurs: Flying Giants of the Jurassic page 15

Fossiling England's Jurassic Coast page 23

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*Treasures In Our Collections**The Enduring Legacy of Harold and Emily Vokes, and the Golden Age of Paleontology at Tulane University*

By William Miller, III

Jon Hendricks' recent article "The Orange Pill Bottle" about a single vial containing hundreds of minute *Conus* shells from the Dominican Republic Neogene (*AP* Summer 2010) brought back a flood of memories from my days as a PhD student at Tulane. Before I even read the article, I knew instantly who had processed that particular sample.

Professor Harold Vokes sat for hours at the big table in the lab that he shared with Professor Emily Vokes, sorting shells from various localities while Emily pounded away at another manuscript. This was the Golden Age of Paleontology at Tulane (1960s-1980s), and I was fortunate to have been there — five paleontology faculty, a vast fossil collection, an in-house journal, a free-standing PhD paleontology program, ample support for graduate students, and a university committed to keeping it all alive and well. There was a unique atmosphere about the place. Graduate students could work on any project they felt was important, could count on generous departmental support, and felt part of something unique in the history of American paleontology.

Imagine an August morning in 1983 New Orleans. We make the daily trek from Magazine Street to the Tulane campus. The humidity is oppressive; Audubon Park is lush and still. After 15 minutes of walking, the old fortress-like buildings come into view, partly obscured by big oak trees, not a leaf moving in the heavy summer air. A dark green streetcar, making that absolutely unique New Orleans streetcar sound, zooms down the middle of St. Charles Avenue, producing a little gust of wind and filling the air with the odor of burning wires. We cross St. Charles. It's Saturday, so Dimwiddie Hall is locked. We fiddle with the key, finally opening the heavy door. The cool air rushes out, smelling like evening tinted with naphtha. It is ringing quiet inside.

We pay our respects before going to work, trudging the big staircase to the second floor, down the hallway lined with cabinets of fossils (only the tip of the iceberg — cabinets are everywhere), and knock at the entrance to the Vokes Lab. They've been working for hours already. La Traviata is on the radio. Harold is sorting and labeling small shells by the thousands under a binocular microscope, sowing the seeds of research projects decades from now. Emily is typing fast, gracious and attentive as always, but really can't gab for very long. She has her own sorting to do after this, then a few hours assembling the next issue of Tulane Studies in Geology and Paleontology. "Working today?" She swivels to look at showy muricid snails in cardboard trays on the big table.



Harold and Emily examining a map, contemplating another collecting trip in the 1960s. Photograph courtesy of Emily Vokes.

*Time for me to go to work. My Pleistocene *Mulinia lateralis* specimens are waiting to be counted and measured. Everything is in place; it's going to be a productive day.*

Forgive the purple prose, but that's exactly how it looked and felt. Tulane was a world center of paleontological research in those days. Harold and Emily were the stable *vital coeur* of the program. Hubert Skinner was the micropaleontologist, Bob Horodyski did pioneering work on Proterozoic fossils, and Ron Parsley was (and still is) a prolific world authority on echinoderms. Botanist Steve Darwin, from another department, was also connected to the program. This was one of the strongest lineups of productive researchers in the country. *Tulane Studies* was thriving and the collection (especially that part assembled from Vokes excursions in the southeastern U.S., Mexico, Dominican Republic, Europe, Central and South America) was one of the richest in the world.

The vast numbers of specimens collected over 40 years by Harold and Emily have since been transferred to the Smithsonian, University of Florida, and of course the Paleontological Research Institution, and to good effect. The specimens are more available now for study than when they were stored all over the Geology Department at Tulane. The complete Tulane locality catalogs are accessible online (google "Tulane localities"). But the party didn't last forever: change was inevitable, sped along by shifting university priorities and new faculty with different commitments. Nevertheless, Harold and Emily's contributions to molluscan studies and their collections will continue to provide the raw material for research for many generations of paleontologists to come.



William Miller is Professor of Geology at Humboldt State University, California. Email wml@humboldt.edu.