

MYRA KEEN, 1905-1986: AN APPRECIATION

BY

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When I first visited Stanford University in 1962, where I later attended graduate school, I didn't know Myra Keen, and I was in awe of anyone who could personally know and have compiled so much information about mollusks. My heart beat rapidly as I climbed the two flights of stairs to the third floor of the old Geology Building. How would Dr. Keen treat me, an undergraduate student with a very limited knowledge of mollusks and only a half-formed desire to be a malacologist?

My concern about how I would be received was, of course, completely unnecessary, and she quickly put me at ease. Myra Keen was, above almost all else, highly skilled at making people feel appreciated. She was a master at it. To her, every person was to be treated with the greatest respect and patience. Needless to say, that visit proved decisive in the direction my life took for several years to come.

Other accounts to be published in the next few months will no doubt detail her many accomplishments. My purpose here is to point to some general themes about her contributions.

What many of us will remember most of all is her character. She gave individual attention to each person with whom she had contact -- both in person and in her thorough, carefully phrased letters. Her valuable criticisms and suggestions often had to be searched for between the lines of understated conversation and text.

She had a strength of character and determination seldom matched. No matter what the job -- from tasks of a magnitude that might have discouraged Sisyphus to routine correspondence from those who should have known better than to trouble her about trivia -- her approach was the same: a serene resolve to do the best job possible with the tools at hand -- and to do this day after day, month after month, until the job was done.

The role of synthesizer and compiler is not as popular these days as it has been in the past. Professional acceptance and advancement now seem to demand specific contributions to knowledge using fashionable techniques. Yet, great compilations, such as those for which Myra Keen is deservedly famous, serve to advance science in many, sometimes unappreciated ways: (1) to make such information available to a diverse audience and to provide entree into more detailed literature; (2) to facilitate identification of material, both by those whose central interest is mollusks and by those whose chief interests lie elsewhere; (3) to pose an array of unresolved questions to catalyze investigation and to challenge potential contributors to knowledge, both professional and amateur; (4) to provide data for ecological and biogeographical analysis and comparison; and (5) to popularize scientific information, thereby helping to establish the constituency and public acceptance so essential in ensuring adequate funding and recognition for malacological institutions and researchers.

We cannot ignore her major contributions to specific groups that set precedents for their time -- the Vermetidae, the Cardiidae, Juliidae, Typhinae, and the many groups on which she prepared manuscripts for the Treatise on Invertebrate Paleontology. She had formidable patience and thoroughness in working out long-ignored nomenclatural problems, laying many such difficult questions to a final rest.

All the ways she touched the lives of so many of us -- her unwavering kindness and strength of character, her major compilations, and her contributions to our knowledge of certain groups -- ensure her an enduring place in the history of malacology.

Editor's note: Photo and original slide by David K. Mulliner -- Dr. Keen at WSM meeting at Redlands, June 1982.