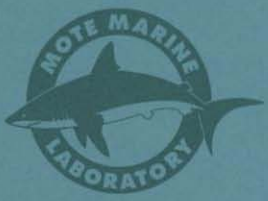


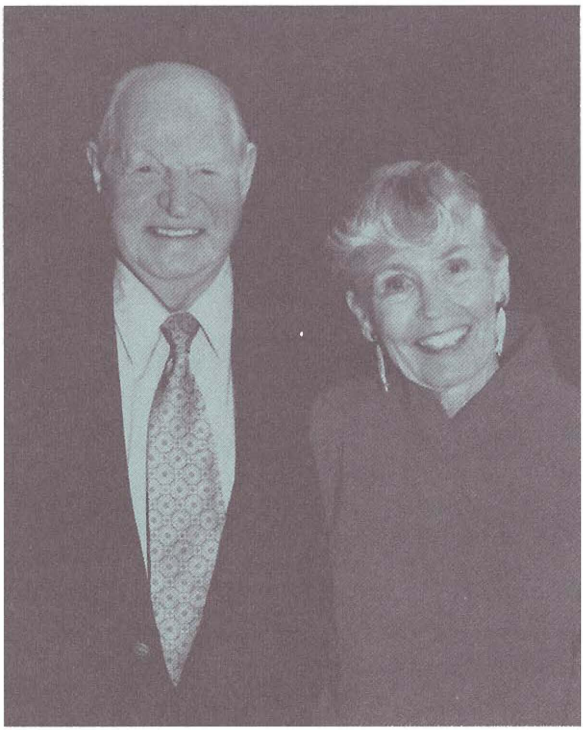
Mote Marine Laboratory

proudly announces the endowed

Perry W. Gilbert Chair in Shark Research

to Support the Study of the Biology, Behavior, and Conservation of Sharks, Skates and Rays

April, 1999
Sarasota, Florida



Dr. Perry W. & Claire Gilbert

A Profile of Dr. Perry W. Gilbert

Perry W. Gilbert was born in Connecticut in 1912, the son of Scott and Hester Gilbert. As a boy, Perry developed an insatiable curiosity for the natural world, especially for the form and function of animal life. That curiosity led him to Dartmouth College, and after earning his degree in biology was hired to teach there. Perry soon realized that to go far in the field, he needed a Ph.D. degree, and so he enrolled in the graduate program at Cornell University. In 1940, Perry received his doctorate in vertebrate biology and was immediately hired by Cornell to teach comparative vertebrate anatomy.

Thus began Dr. Perry Gilbert's long, prestigious career of teaching and research in comparative anatomy, a legacy which was to influence the education of thousands of students and an entire field of biological science. Through his years of teaching and research in comparative anatomy, Perry supervised the dissection of over 5,000 sharks, thereby gaining a detailed knowledge of shark anatomy. This was to lead to Perry's first love in his scientific studies--the biology and behavior of sharks.

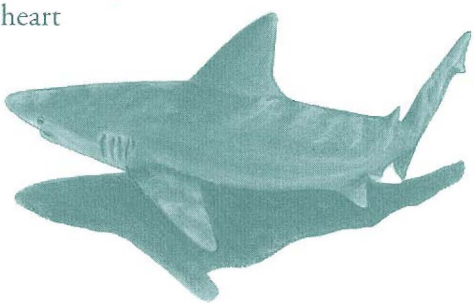
Thanks to Cornell's liberal attitude of granting time for research--long vacations, free summers, and sabbaticals every seventh year--Perry was able to follow his scientific interests all over the world. During these periods away from Cornell, he worked at the Lerner Marine Laboratory in the Bahamas, the Mt. Desert Island Biological Laboratory in Maine, the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in southern California, and various laboratories in South Africa, Australia, Japan, Hawaii and the South Seas.

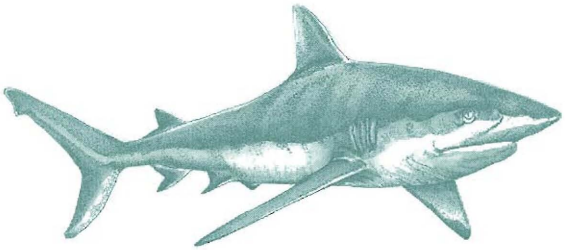
In 1949-50, Dr. Gilbert was a Carnegie Fellow to pursue research at Johns Hopkins University on the early development of eye muscles in the human embryo. Twice he was awarded Guggenheim Fellowships for his shark work, first at the Lerner Marine Laboratory in Bimini, Bahamas in 1957, and then at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography in La Jolla, California in 1963.

During World War II, the U.S. Navy had been troubled by accounts of shipwrecked sailors and downed aviators attacked by sharks. In the post-war years, the Navy searched the world for someone who knew about these predators--a rather rare expertise in those days. In 1957, Dr. Gilbert was chosen to head up the Navy's Shark Research Panel and, as a result, organized and coordinated shark research programs around the world for thirteen years. These programs as well as his own personal research during this period were supported by the Office of Naval Research.

One of the many places that Perry's shark research led him was the Cape Haze Marine Laboratory in Placida, Florida, where he befriended its first director, Dr. Eugenie Clark, herself an eminent shark researcher. When Dr. Clark decided to take a university professorship in the mid-1960's, the Laboratory looked to Perry for leadership, and he answered the call. In 1967, while still a professor of anatomy and neurobiology at Cornell University, Dr. Gilbert also became director of the now renamed Mote Marine Laboratory. The new name honored the Laboratory's major benefactors, the Mote family, and Perry struck up a deep friendship with businessman William R. Mote, the driving force behind the Laboratory's new era.

Perry Gilbert and Bill Mote became a remarkable team with their distinctly different backgrounds and talents. Together they visited many marine labs along both U.S. coasts in order to plan Mote Marine Laboratory's future course. As the Laboratory developed under Perry's direction, it attracted eminent visitors including Nobel Laureate scientists and heads of state. Meanwhile, Perry worked out a relationship with Cornell that enabled him to keep his professorship and return four times a year to lecture in neurobiology, behavior, and marine biology--a sweetheart deal for both Cornell and Mote.





Under Dr. Gilbert's scholarly leadership, Mote's legacy of ground-breaking shark research gained worldwide recognition. Perry also expanded the Mote research program to include not only shark biology but also biomedicine, microbiology, neurobiology and behavior, ecology, and environmental health. He invited specialists in these fields to become visiting investigators, and his offer was accepted by scientists from universities, museums, and federal laboratories such as the National Institutes of Health. Meanwhile, Perry's own research flourished at Mote. He worked on the biology and behavior of sharks in just about every way imaginable, from the structure of their eyes to the biting force of their jaws.

Dr. Gilbert officially retired in 1978, but for the past 20 years he has continued his career as part of the Mote resident scientific staff and Board of Trustees. In his many years of scholarship and research, Perry has written over 150 articles and edited two books. Most of this work has revolved around, in his own words, "understanding what makes sharks tick." This long and distinguished legacy of shark research is now being carried forward by Mote's Center for Shark Research, a designation bestowed by the U.S. Congress as a national research center for global studies of sharks. Scientists in today's Center strive to emulate Dr. Gilbert's example of world-class research combined with political and social graces and a flair for presenting science to the public.

Dr. Gilbert's passion for life goes well beyond his prestigious scientific career, and his hobbies exemplify his adventurous spirit. While at Dartmouth, Perry took up downhill ski racing. Mountain climbing came next, and Perry climbed all the major peaks in the Adirondacks, New England's Green and White Mountains, the Rockies, and four mountains in the Tetons, including Grand Teton. He hunted deer and bear with a long bow and, of course, scuba diving was a must for studying the behavior of sharks. Perry also is a true bibliophile, amassing a book collection that has included all of Charles Darwin's and Alfred Wallace's first edition works and most of Thomas Huxley's. During all of his pursuits, Perry's lovely wife Claire supported his endeavors and in many ways helped to distinguish his era as laboratory director, not to mention rearing a remarkable family of eight children. Today, Perry and Claire reside in their beautiful home by the water in Sarasota, Florida.

The Perry W. Gilbert Chair

Mote Marine Laboratory is proud to honor Dr. Gilbert's scholarship, leadership and scientific legacy with the establishment of the Perry W. Gilbert Chair in Shark Research. Income from this endowment will support the research of a distinguished scientist at Mote Marine Laboratory in the areas of biology, behavior and conservation of sharks and their relatives, the skates and rays. This continuing support of an internationally recognized senior scientist in shark research will ensure that Dr. Perry Gilbert's legacy lives on at Mote Marine Laboratory, assuring the Laboratory's role as the world's leader in shark research.

Gilbert Chair Donations

We thank those who have generously contributed to the
Perry W. Gilbert Chair.
We welcome additional donors as we strive toward our
ultimate goal of $1,000,000.

Please send your donations to:
The Perry W. Gilbert Chair
Mote Marine Laboratory
1600 Ken Thompson Parkway
Sarasota, Florida 34236

For additional information:
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