

Fig. 1.1. Malcolm Carnegie McKenna.

## Chapter 1

## Malcolm C. McKenna: A Biography and Bibliography

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Malcolm Carnegie McKenna was born on July 21, 1930, in Pomona, California, and grew up in Claremont where he attended the Webb School, a high school that produced many future paleontologists and geologists. With biology teacher Raymond Alf, he took summer field trips to Nebraska and Wyoming, as well as many shorter trips into the nearby desert, and by the age of seventeen he was "hooked" on fossils. In his late teens, McKenna contracted tuberculosis and spent close to a year in a sanitarium. During this time he did a prodigious amount of reading and became thoroughly familiar with the paleontological literature.

Soon after McKenna enrolled in the undergraduate paleontology program at the University of California at Berkeley, he was made a teaching assistant for graduate students because he already "knew fossils backwards and forwards". During his undergraduate years he married Priscilla Coffey, whom he had known since nursery school, became a father with the birth of Douglas in 1954, and began the research for his Ph.D. In 1954 McKenna received his B.A. in paleontology and in 1958 he was awarded his doctorate under the tutelage of Don Savage, R. A. Stirton, Charles Camp, and Sam Welles. The work for his dissertation on the Fossil Mammalia from the early Wasatchian Four Mile fauna, Eocene of northwest Colorado was especially notable because of the large number of tiny fossils he was able to recover by turning Claude Hibbard's screen washing technique into mass production.

After receiving his graduate degree, Mc-Kenna was an instructor for a year in the Department of Paleontology at the University of California until George Simpson, with whom he had done fieldwork for a number of summers, invited him to come to the American Museum of Natural History.

McKenna, who claims to have never "worked" a day in his life, began his career at the American Museum in 1960 as Assistant Curator in the Department of Vertebrate Paleontology-the youngest curator in the museum at the time. Concurrently he became Assistant Professor of Geology at Columbia University, inheriting some of Simpson's former students. During his early years at the museum, McKenna continued his fieldwork in the American West, applying his screening techniques to the recovery of Cretaceous mammals. Having arrived at the museum already outfitted with a field crew of four-Priscilla, Douglas, Katharine (born 1956), and Andrew McKenna (born 1958)-he augmented the crew with new graduate students and a third son, Bruce, born in 1962.

At this time McKenna took on Simpson's former project, the classification of mammals. He also became interested in the collections made in Mongolia in the 1920s by the American Museum's Central Asiatic Expeditions, an interest that he shared with his graduate students. The McKennas learned some Russian, and in 1964, visited Mongolia by way of the Soviet Union.

Following the death of Childs Frick in 1965, McKenna was named Frick Associate Curator and Chairman of the Frick Laboratory. In this capacity he was instrumental in making certain that the Frick collection of fossil mammals came to the AMNH. The American Museum–Columbia University paleontology program was a beneficiary of this incomparable gift as the vastly augmented collection of fossil vertebrates attracted many graduate students. In 1968 McKenna became Frick Curator at the American Museum and, four years later, Professor of Geology at Columbia.

Particular interests, among many, during the 1970s and 1980s included the study of



Fig. 1.2. Malcolm and students in the field ca. 1980.

Tertiary primates and insectivores, and the paleogeography of the North Atlantic. Mc-Kenna spent field seasons on Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg islands in the Canadian Arctic and on Greenland. He also carried out fieldwork in South America, both in Patagonia and the Chilean Andes, as well as continuing his work in western North America. Intrigued by the Grand Canyon, the McKennas ordered a couple of dories and spent several summers running the river with family, students, colleagues, and friends.

In 1990, 26 years after Malcolm's first visit to Mongolia, the Mongolian People's Republic invited representatives of the AMNH, including McKenna, to visit and to establish a cooperative program with the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. Since then, joint Mongolian-American expeditions have visited the Gobi annually, working sites discovered earlier by the Central Asiatic Expeditions and discovering many new highly productive localities as well. Malcolm, Priscilla, and a number of graduate students have focused on the search for mid-Tertiary mammals.

After 35 years of "progress" reports and a decade of allusions to its imminent publication, the long-awaited *Classification of Mammals above the Species Level* was published in 1997 with myself as coauthor. The project continues online.

In January 2001 McKenna retired from the American Museum of Natural History but not from paleontology. His subsequent move to Boulder, Colorado, has placed him within a day's drive of many of his favorite fossil localities in northern Colorado and Wyoming. Students—former, present, and future—continue to be welcome at his summer digs. Recent travels have taken him to both northern and southern polar regions, where evidence of climatic change has heightened his longstanding concerns about the environment. McKenna's lengthy bibliography, which attests to his broad interests and productivity, continues to grow. Malcolm McKenna was awarded the Romer-Simpson Medal by the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology in October 2001. In accepting the award he noted, "In my association with the Columbia Geology Department I've advised 25 [actually 34] PhDs and have been on a lot more advisory committees. That has been extremely rewarding for me, and I thank the victims for teaching me a lot."

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