

PRESENTATION OF THE HARRELL L. STRIMPLE AWARD OF THE PALEONTOLOGICAL SOCIETY TO JOHN AND MICHAEL TOPOR

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IT IS a great pleasure to introduce John and Mike Topor as the 2011 recipients of the Paleontological Society's Strimple Award recognizing outstanding contributions to our field by avocational paleontologists. Nearly 40 years ago, John and Mike, two brothers from Hamtramck, Michigan, were encouraged in their interest in paleontology by Professor Robert Kesling of the University of Michigan. Kesling and others, including Ruth Chilman, Jean Wright, and Aurèle LaRocque, had just started a group called the "Friends of the University of Michigan Museum of Paleontology" that met monthly in Ann Arbor and provided an informal setting in which a cross-section of professional and avocational paleontologists from southern Michigan and northern Ohio discussed specimens and ideas, planned field trips, and generally shared knowledge of our field. John and Mike soon became two of the most conscientious and energetic supporters of this group, managing work and family obligations so that they could attend these meetings each month, despite the two hour round trip. They continue today as core contributors to this group, frequently having served as its president and on its board of directors.

John and Mike have collected fossils at many localities in the U.S. and Canada, but they soon developed a special affinity for Middle Devonian exposures along the Ausable River near Arkona and Thedford, Ontario. For over 30 years, they have maintained a three-season program of weekend fieldwork in one or another of the Arkona-area quarries, systematically collecting the full range of its marine fauna. Tireless, observant, and ingenious in the field, they realized that the disarticulated and fragmented remains that were abundant on surface exposures and that had satisfied other collectors for generations were the end-products of weathering and disaggregation of initially much more intact specimens preserved at depth in poorly indurated shales. By taking the time to excavate more deeply into outcrops, they recovered less weathered material and discovered associations and anatomical detail that could never have been anticipated from the residue evident on outcrop. They also developed methods for field-stabilization of specimens that had already been compromised by wetting and drying of their clay-rich matrix. Many of their specimens from the Arkona mudstones and shales would scarcely have stood a chance of coming back from the field in recognizable shape had anyone but the Topors encountered them. To complete the picture, Mike and John also added fossil preparation to their skill-set. Many of the specimens they have collected and prepared offer spectacular glimpses of the Devonian sea floor and capture compelling evidence of biotic interactions. Through regular pursuit of these activities, they have developed a collection that rivals even the best representation of this fauna in accredited museums in number, diversity, and quality of specimens. They have likewise amassed a body of information that qualifies them as experts on marine faunas of this age. And most characteristically, they have been unstintingly generous in donating specimens of particular scientific value, so that they can be loaned to appropriate researchers, studied, and published in the scientific literature.

One example of Mike and John's signature combination of luck, patience, technical skill, and generosity is the beautifully prepared, three dimensionally preserved, pyritized polychaete recently described as *Arkonips topororum* Farrell and Briggs 2007. When Mike and John brought this specimen in for us to examine, it was the only comparable material they had found in decades of collecting in the Arkona area. Other collectors, whether avocational or professional, might have guarded such a treasure jealously and surrendered it only reluctantly, but as soon as Derek Briggs expressed interest in examining the specimen, Mike and John donated it to the UMMP, and it was sent out for study. Within the UMMP "Friends" organization and beyond, the Topors have set an example of collecting on behalf of scientific understanding and dissemination of information.

In recent years, John and Mike's field activities have expanded to measuring stratigraphic sections and careful documentation of the stratigraphic distribution of taxa. Interacting especially with Carleton Brett and colleagues, they are doing their best to foster greater understanding of Middle Devonian environments and faunas across the Michigan Basin and adjacent areas. In this same spirit, the Topors played a critical role in developing the web-accessible data repository entitled "Fossils of the Michigan Basin: A Photo Archive" that was initiated in 2007 (<http://strata.geology.wisc.edu/mibasin/>). The site showcases Michigan Basin fossils from FUMMP private fossil collections, as well as specimens from the UMMP. The Topors are also generous with their time and knowledge and have assisted undergraduate and graduate students (two recent examples being Forest Gahn and Megan Tuura) by making their collection accessible, sharing their knowledge, helping with field work, and serving as a liaison with other collectors. They have also worked to promote paleontology in broader contexts. They have made presentations to multiple school and community groups; they, along with other members of FUMMP, helped design, develop, and supply specimens for an exhibit on "Fossils of the Michigan Basin" that has become a permanent fixture—with rotating components—in the University of Michigan Museum of Natural History; and they routinely spend time interacting with Museum visitors during outreach events for the general public.

For all these contributions, John and Mike Topor have earned the respect and thanks of all of us lucky enough to be associated with them. Their energy and enthusiasm for paleontology have been contagious and have stimulated the continued vigor of the "Friends" group over a history that is now moving into its fifth decade and still going strong. Their warm, humorous, and magnanimous personalities have endeared them to their professional and amateur colleagues alike. Mike and John Topor's motivation is a genuine interest in fossils and life's history, in understanding the biological, evolutionary and geological details underlying that history, in sharing their material and their knowledge with others, and in preserving both for posterity. If the Strimple Medal is meant to recognize selfless, life-long dedication to the discipline, no amateur paleontologists we know are more worthy than John and Mike Topor.

RESPONSE BY JOHN AND MICHAEL TOPOR



MY BROTHER Mike and I would like to thank the Paleontological Society for honoring us with this very special award. To be added to the list of distinguished recipients of the Harrell L. Strimple Award is the pinnacle achievement of any amateur fossil collector. We also would like to thank Dan Fisher, Tom Baumiller, and Dan Miller from the University of Michigan, Museum of Paleontology for nominating us. That you considered us is an award in itself. We are also grateful to all the professional and amateur paleontologists that have helped us over roughly forty years.

Back in the spring of 1974, an instructor in a college natural science course noticed that Mike had an interest in rocks and minerals. She thought he would like the basic geology course offered there. Needing science credits he took the course and for extra credit went on a field trip to the Middle Devonian, Arkona-Thedford area of Ontario, Canada. He knew nothing of invertebrate fossils at the time. Upon returning from the excursion, he showed me the horn corals and brachiopods he collected and I was hooked as well. We still have those original fossils in our collection. Thirsty for more information on fossils we kept in touch with Mike's Macomb College geology instructor, Kenneth Vandellen, who suggested we contact Ruth Chilman and Pete Brown. Pete was especially helpful with collecting tips and introduced us to "crinoid lenses" as he called them. He explained what to look for and finished with: "You will know when you find one." Next we called on Ruth Chilman, who encouraged us to join the "Friends," a group of professional and avocational paleontologists at the University of Michigan. Ruth Chilman sponsored our membership in November

of 1977. There we met our mentors, Dr. Robert V. Kesling, Jean D. Wright, George C. McIntosh, and many other members to whom we owe a great deal of thanks. It was obvious to us that a special relationship existed between the professional and amateur fossil collectors here. From that time forward, we have nurtured and preached that relationship to the membership, especially those new to fossil collecting.

At first, we collected at many different localities, but we always favored the outcrops along the Ausable River near Arkona, Ontario. It wasn't long before we decided to focus our efforts on the formations there. Those of you familiar with the Arkona Formation know that it appears to be 37+ feet of poorly fossiliferous shale that turns to mud rather quickly when it rains. We spent many years scouring the surface and digging in the shale pits along the river at Hungry Hollow and eventually began to piece together the key fossil beds and zones of the Arkona Formation. We were very fortunate that during this time the "brick and tile" companies were mining the shale giving us an opportunity to view large sections of the formation in situ. This enabled us to correlate smaller exposures along the river to sections in the pits. Eventually, we measured the section at Hungry Hollow and can relate the fossils there to the horizons in which they occur. We try to collect all specimens with research in mind and decided long ago to eventually donate our entire collection to the University of Michigan for study. This will be our contribution to paleontology.

Last of all, we would like to thank all of the paleontologists who have shared their knowledge helping us to become better collectors. A special thanks to our late mother, Irene Topor,

who raised two very young boys by herself when their father passed away in 1954. She would brag about her sons to anyone who would listen to the point of our complete embarrassment at times. She would have been very proud today. And finally, to my wife, Lori, thanks for understanding my passion for paleontology for the past 30 years and letting me go collecting when there was work to do around the house. Once again,

Mike and I thank you so much for the immortality you have bestowed on us with this great honor.

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Hamtramck
Michigan