

Awards and Citations

Presentation of the 2015 Harrell L. Strimple Award of the Paleontological Society to Jack Wittry

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This year's recipient of the Harrell Strimple award is Mr. Jack Wittry. Jack is a resident of the Chicago area, and long-time volunteer at the Field Museum of Natural History, where he became a specialist in the flora and fauna of the world-famous Mazon Creek biota.

The Strimple Award is being given to Jack for his many activities in public education and outreach, service to the scientific community, and scientific accomplishments, particularly in the area of paleobotany. He started his work at the Field Museum on September 12, 2001. His principal task at that time was reorganizing the gigantic Mazon Creek fossil collection, which includes both plants and animals of late Middle Pennsylvanian age. Mazon Creek, an iconic fossil assemblage, has been collected for over 100 years by amateurs and professionals alike. The fossils occur in shales (the Francis Creek Shale, specifically) above the Colchester (No. 2) Coal bed in northern Illinois. Strip mining of this coal at numerous places, particularly before the mining regulations of recent years, allowed mass collecting of the ironstone nodules in which the fossils are preserved, and these fossils include a diverse array of plants and animals. Because of this accessibility, the Mazon Creek flora is one of the taxonomically richest and most heavily collected assemblages of fossils in North America. The animal collections contain many unusual soft-bodied creatures and provide an important look at the fauna from a rarely preserved, near-shore, lagoonal environment. The Field Museum holds the largest collection of Mazon Creek specimens in the world, so reorganizing that collection was a huge task.

Two products of Jack's work were the monographs *The Mazon Creek Fossil Flora*, 2006, and *The Mazon Creek Fossil Fauna*, 2012, both published by the Earth Science Club of Northern Illinois (ESCONI). These are not only practical manuals, but lavishly illustrated "coffee table" books. With the release of the fossil flora, Jack's work and his thinking about fossil plant affinities came to the attention of many professional paleobotanists, which has since led to a number of scientific publications, including a senior-authored paper on the taxonomy and nomenclature of tree-fern foliage, which is one of the

nightmare groups of Pennsylvanian plants. He also has coauthored papers on Pennsylvanian plant biodiversity. His collaborators are both American and European. Most recently, he has turned his attention to the study of Permian plants and is working on a flora from the type Wolfcampian in Texas.

Jack has done much more than research. At the Field Museum, he organized and distributed fossil kits for teachers in the Chicago area, recognizing that the public fascination with fossils is a gateway to both public engagement with science and scientific education and careers for young people. Jack designed, wrote and did all the photography for the Field Museum Quick Reference Guide #534, *Field Guide to Fossils of NE Illinois, Mazon Creek Area*, which is available online. As a short-term visitor to the National Museum of Natural History, Jack organized a synoptic collection of Mazon Creek fossils, photographed the key specimens, and worked with NMNH Museum Specialist Finnegan Marsh to build a Mazon Creek web site, which also has many links to Mazon Creek resources at other institutions.

Jack is, by trade, a master mechanic and machinist who specializes in marine engines. His work involves a high-level of technical expertise and has become increasingly reliant on computer technology. He is, however, expert also in the older technologies that remain important. During his career he has had quite a number of experiences that have taken him far from the world of the typical paleontologist, including service as the chief mechanic of a racing boat team. His natural curiosity, love of complex, challenging problems, and willingness to devote himself to finding solutions to these problems "preadapted" him to paleontology. These paleontological stirrings began at a young age, about 5, when he began walking railroad tracks near his home in Aurora, Illinois, searching for trilobites. His return to this interest of his youth has been of great benefit to the paleontological community and to the public at large. It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I present him to you to receive this tribute.

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