

PERCY VIOSCA, JR. — NATURALIST

The death of Percy Viosca, Jr. on August 27, 1961 marks the passing of one of the last of America's great naturalists. Viosca, unlike the vast majority of today's highly specialized biologists, was a man whose uncanny ability to observe and interpret all manner of diversified natural phenomena, and whose dedicated interest to the whole glorious world of the great outdoors, ranks him inevitably with such great naturalists as Audubon, Rafinesque, Say, Agassiz, Cope, and Jordan.

Born in New Orleans sixty-nine years ago, Viosca was one of a large family whose modest means early instilled in him as a youth, and in his brothers and sisters, the knowledge that all would have to work hard for what they wanted in life. Percy and his brother, Civil District Judge René Viosca, knew that they would go to college, and they did by the hardest.

From early childhood, these two with family and friends, had fished and seined for the shrimp and crabs that are such an important part of a Louisianian's diet. Thus, naturally the two turned their love of the outdoors to practical application. For many long years the two brothers arose before dawn, bicycled from their home on what was then the swampy eastern fringe of New Orleans, to the shore of Lake Pontchartrain. There they would fish and seine with nets they had knited themselves. From this early morning activity the next stop was the French Market where their catch was sold to Covington and Mandeville resort owners who catered to the vogue of steamboat excursionists. Each day, by the time the brothers arrived for classes at Tulane University, they had completed, in addition to their commercial fishing chores, thirty to forty miles of rough peddling over cobblestone and other rough streets.

Such was the spirit of Percy Viosca, the youngster and the man, an ebullient personality, indefatigable despite the handicap of a bad knee suffered in an automobile accident in his young manhood. He could never be slowed down. Under the guidance of George E. Beyer, then chairman of biology at Tulane University, Viosca's restless energy was channelled into a formal morphological and taxonomic knowledge of the local animals and plants, and most importantly their ecology. Later his interests turned primarily to the fields of herpetology and marine biology in which he received his widest recognition.

At Tulane in 1913 he was awarded the B.S. degree, and then instructed undergraduate classes under Beyer for two years. He received the M.S. degree in 1915. At the age of 23 in 1915, seeing the practical possibilities of commercially sending Louisiana's vast store of animal life all over the world, he established the Southern Biological Supply Company (still in existence), and was its president many years.

From here on Viosca's life was a potpourri of interests and activities. In 1915, almost simultaneously with his first commercial venture, he became curator of reptiles, amphibians and fishes at the Louisiana State Museum. In 1917 he added to these other activities the duties of biologist for the Louisiana Department of Conservation. This association with the state lasted until his death, although it was never permanent. He was in and out dependent upon the turbulent clime of Louisiana politics. During one short period, from 1923 to 1926, he returned to Tulane as an instructor. Coincident with this he served as entomologist for the New Orleans Board of Health in 1923 and 1924. In 1939 he conceived, organized, and directed Ganivory Crafts, which was a small business carried on in his home and employing several workers fashioning clever costume jewelry and other artistic articles from Louisiana garfish scales. For a few years, beginning in 1942, he worked independently as a consulting biologist. This work was mostly for industries having stream pollution problems. When he quit this and last returned to the Louisiana Wildlife and Fisheries Commission as its marine biologist he admitted that although this venture had been lucrative it involved entirely too much of his time serving as an expert witness in the courts.

Being in a conservation department of a state that year by year was becoming more conscious of its potential of vast untapped biological resources, Viosca had ample opportunity to delve at length into many problems. His research interests ranged greatly, he



PERCY VIOSCA, JR.
(1892 - 1961)

was not known as a specialist. His diligence and constant search for truth was all the more amazing in view of the fact that his position as biologist in the state conservation effort was one that all too often had been awarded as a political plum.

Describing himself as a "field naturalist" he was an observer, not a mere collector. He was widely recognized as an authority on the biology of shrimp, crawfish, oysters, fish, and mosquitoes, but his first love was for frogs and salamanders. Viosca poured out countless articles for scientific journals, conservation magazines, and newspapers. Despite this productivity those who bemoan his passing know that he stored countless treasures of natural observations in his fertile brain that are forever lost. As one example, he was particularly fascinated by the incredible migration of the fragile monarch butterflies and the timing of their departure from the northernmost part of the country early enough that their arrival in Louisiana coincided with the arrival of the non-stop-flying geese. Unfortunately these data remain unpublished, although popularly circulated via news interviews.

Viosca was also an authority on the wild flowers of Louisiana; particularly the ecology and hybridization of irises which reach a breathless profusion of beauty in the southern part of the State. In 1935 he published a lengthy article straightening out the taxonomic jumble in which hitherto a multitude of species had been described in Louisiana. After years of crossbreeding and countless observations in the wetlands his deduction that there were only four species of Louisiana irises was surprising, but remains undisputed by taxonomic botanists.

The reasons for the reduction of the last several years' take of commercial shrimp in the Gulf of Mexico was a far-reaching research program he was engaged in at the time of his death. This study, when completed, will stand as yet another monument to his perception. Ironically, had his data on the life history of the white shrimp, published in 1920, been recognized then, the shrimp decline might well have been avoided and the shrimp fishery could have been forty years ahead of the present situation.

Although Percy Viosca was never able to afford a pursuit of the Ph.D. degree, he had been initiated into Phi Beta Kappa at Tulane. In the year of his death he received two honors that he was deeply proud of. He was selected "Conservationist of the Year" by the Louisiana Outdoor Writers Association, and he was proclaimed "Tulane Biologist of the Year" by the Department of Zoology at Tulane. He was always in demand for lectures before scientific societies, sportsman's groups, and garden societies; all of his lectures were profusely illustrated with slides made from pictures he had taken in the field with a variety of cameras. Of himself, he often said that he received his highest degree from the "University of Hard Knocks" for studies in the unique wilds and waters of the Gulf Coast, but particularly in the vicinity of Lake Pontchartrain.

Raconteur par excellence, one of his typical stories involved an incident in 1948 (when he was 56) in which he wrestled a five-foot alligator in the Honey Island Swamp near New Orleans for the benefit of a visiting biologist from Holland. The visitor had expressed a desire to see a Louisiana alligator, and as Viosca put it, "Rather than take him to Audubon Park I thought he would enjoy seeing them in their native haunts. After waiting several hours for a large enough alligator we finally spotted one. I was so glad that I jumped out of the boat, landed on his back, and caught him between the shoulders with both hands so he couldn't bite me."

Despite his serious scientific dedication, Viosca's personal spirit and gaiety always showed through as when he won a crawfish eating contest at the old French Market in New Orleans; he was triumphant, although some of his irate competitors claimed that sometimes he ate shells and all! Just before his long drawn out and painful death, an amusing little personal vignette was revealed about the true story of the Louisiana crab that won the world's speed championship race. Favored to win was the personal entry of the Governor of Maryland, but Viosca had selected a fleet-footed male fiddler crab, fastest of the thousands scurrying at night across the sand beach of Grand Isle. The race was not even a contest for Louisiana's standard bearer.

The writer, too, remembers countless examples illustrating both the warm, gentle man that Viosca was, and the biologist. On a fishing trip in Lake Pontchartrain when I was a stripling some twenty years ago, he claimed he could catch just about anything he wanted to with his casting rod simply by adjusting the length of the leader, distance from hook to sinker, and variations of these. I had been for some time without even a nibble and questioned these claims. Twice in succession he made the necessary adjustments, stated what he would catch and did so: a gaff-topsail catfish and a speckled trout. Dismayed, I demanded a sheephead. He said, "This is not just the right place; how about a croaker?" And you can guess the result—a beauty of a croaker!

Viosca for several years had a radio program, a jambalaya of Louisiana nature lore, current to the season, accurate as to content, and spliced with his inimitable personality. Typically Viosca, the program signature was a series of frog calls recorded by him in the Louisiana wetlands.

The list of his many technical and popular articles is an impressive one. In addition he wrote several books, the more important of which were *Louisiana Out-of-Doors* (1933) and *Pondfish Culture* (1937). He held membership in a number of scientific societies, took the responsibility of an officer in several, and was a Fellow in the AAAS since 1933. He was vice-president of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists (1939), vice-president (1947) and president (1948) of the Louisiana Academy of Sciences, president of the New Orleans Botanical Society (1955), and served on important committees of a number of other biological organizations.

As an indication of the esteem in which he was held, several animals were named for him by his colleagues. These include: the salamander *Pseudotriton ruber vioscai* Bishop, 1928; the turtle *Pseudemys vioscana* Brimley, 1928 (now relegated to synonymy with *P. floridana mobilensis*); the shrimp *Solenocera vioscai* Burkenroad, 1934; and the crawfish *Procambarus vioscai* Penn, 1936. Viosca also named a few species. These are: the frog *Hyla avivoca* (1928); the rockbass *Ambloplites ariommus* (1936); and the salamanders *Necturus alabamensis*, *Necturus beyeri*, *Necturus lodingi* (1937); and *Necturus louisianensis* (1938).

Percy Viosca, Jr. will long be remembered, not only by those with whom he personally shared his knowledge of biology, but by innumerable others who must consult his publications. Because of his contributions toward a knowledge of the biology of the Gulf Coast area, and as an inspiration to students, this special issue of *Tulane Studies in Zoology* is dedicated to him.

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