

Paul B. Sears: Professor

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ABSTRACT. As a professor at Oberlin College and Yale University, Paul B. Sears taught principles that influenced his students throughout their careers. These included the obligation to disseminate knowledge to others. However, he also believed that no one could teach another all that he or she knew and, rather, should impart an attitude, an approach. He advised students that they must be respected in a specific area of expertise before they could pursue broader interests. The Conservation Program that Sears established at Yale was innovative by accepting students from varied and nontraditional backgrounds, in accepting women (the author was the first) and in allowing students to take courses in other colleges and schools at the university. Thirty-six years later, the first graduates of the program were able to have reunion at Sears' home in Taos and realized that they had been privileged to study with a great man.

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SEARS' TEACHING

I believe I am unique, being the only person to have studied with Paul Sears both as an undergraduate at Oberlin College and as a graduate student at Yale University. My first class with Sears was in the old wooden botany building at Oberlin in 1943. My last field trip under his tutelage was at Taos, New Mexico in 1986. During the intervening 43 years, I have always been Sears' student. My father was a biology professor at Swarthmore College, a field biologist whose doctoral research was on the mammals of Ohio (Enders 1930). As a high school student considering various colleges, he said, "You should study with Paul Sears." What good advice!

I remember Sears' classes and laboratories with great pleasure. They were relaxed, rigorous and sometimes surprising. Toward the end of the hour on one hot afternoon in early spring, Sears' eyes wandered over our heads toward the trees and shrubs coming into bud beyond the closed window. He paused in his lecture and said "I'm bored. I don't like to be bored. Why don't you all leave?" With that, he turned and walked into his office. We picked up our notebooks and savoring the extra few minutes, went outside to chat and bask in the springtime sun.

I remember how flattered I felt when he asked to borrow my notes to prepare the final exam. He lectured extemporaneously so it made sense when he explained that he needed to jog his memory about what he discussed that term. I also remember that he explained to me that even though a student had an A-plus average, he never gave an A-plus unless that student published a paper during the term. Knowing the material was not enough; one also had to disseminate knowledge and to share it with others. However, Sears did not believe that imparting facts was the highest calling of teaching, because no one who was "worth his salt" could teach another person all he knew. The most a teacher could do was to impart an attitude, an approach. This awareness infused each course I taught; each lecture cannot contain all the information I feel it should. It spared me the anguish so many professors seem to feel when they must give up even one lecture in their carefully prepared syllabus. It has been many years since I thought about the details of the cambium layer, but the attitudes and the approach I learned from Sears have informed much of what I see. He expanded my understanding and enlarged my vision.

THE CONSERVATION PROGRAM

When I was applying for graduate school in zoology at Harvard University, my Oberlin professors, including Sears, suggested that instead I apply for the new program in conservation Sears was establishing at Yale. I entered a socially traditional enclave as the only woman with the first class. The Conservation Program was stepchild in the rigid academia of Yale in the 1950s. G. Evelyn Hutchinson was instrumental in founding the program. His vision, imagination, and intellectual daring brought a breath of fresh air and considerable controversy into a graduate school that strove for perfection, but not change. Sears and Hutchinson shared a certain iconoclastic intellectual vigor and possessed great respect for one another professionally. However, their personalities were almost diametrically opposed. Hutchinson enjoyed being esoteric and accepted the fact that there were only a few people with whom he could work closely. Sears strove to be understood by literate people and enjoyed working with a large variety of both academics and nonacademics. He was willing to expend his time and energy on students from varied and nontraditional backgrounds. He liked to admit students who did not fit the Yale mold. Although he was able to find some with unexpected backgrounds, Yale insisted that every student admitted meet all the graduate school criteria. Throughout his life, Sears was willing to take risks for interesting and interested individuals.

The Conservation Program was very innovative. In an era when most departments had rigid boundaries and strict course requirements, students in this program could take almost any course in the college, as well as courses in the various schools. Thus, many of us studied in the School of Forestry and the Law School as well as in a college. My only problem in being admitted to any course of my choice was my gender. I wanted to take a course on the history of the modern Middle East that was scheduled to meet in a building to which women were not admitted. I was told, therefore, that I could not take the course. I went to see the dean of the graduate school to request special permission to enter the building. It seemed to me a perfectly reasonable request, but I was asked in a somewhat hostile way if I were trying to challenge 300 years of Yale tradition. I had not thought of it that way, but when confronted with the question, I had to admit that perhaps I was, because I really wanted to take that course. The situation was resolved by rescheduling the class in the rather neutral, relatively nontraditional Hall of Graduate Studies. This episode made me keenly aware of the tremendous resistance Sears and Hutchinson

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faced at every step in trying to establish a “new” and unconventional area of study.

In addition to being generalists, both Sears and Hutchinson were world-renowned experts in their own fields. This acknowledged expertise and respect earned them an audience even outside of their well-defined areas of biological research. It demonstrated another academic “truth” that Sears informally taught us: one has to prove oneself in traditional science before conducting research in non-traditional areas of knowledge. It was necessary to be respected in a specific area before one’s generalizations could be heard. Sears recommended that each of his students develop a specific area of expertise within a traditional discipline in addition to exploring broader areas of interest he or she wanted to pursue.

SEARS’ LASTING INFLUENCE

I do not know how much Sears influenced my decision to study the Amish. I was born in Wooster, Ohio, on the edge of the largest Amish community in the world and had known Mennonites all my life. When I was at Oberlin, one of Sears’ graduate students and our laboratory assistant was a woman named Alta Schrock,

who discussed with me her efforts to learn more about her Amish grandparents. In his book *This Is Our World* (Sears 1937), Sears’ delightful line drawings contrasted the by-products of horse versus car transportation. Perhaps more profoundly, it was Sears’ teaching on the importance of attitudes that led me to study a group of people who, despite the vicissitudes of the culture around them have in general maintained a constructive relationship with the land.

A tribute to the lasting influence Sears had on his students was the reunion at his home in Taos of the first class in conservation that graduated from Yale. Thirty-six years after they received their Master of Science degrees, most of the members of that class gathered for 3 days to sit for the last time at the feet of the man who had so greatly affected each of our lives. As we basked in one another’s company, we realized much more profoundly that, as students, we had been privileged to study with a great man.

LITERATURE CITED

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