

Image not found or type unknown



## Coffin, Harold Glen (1929–2015)

---

### JAMES L. HAYWARD

James L. Hayward, Ph.D. (Washington State University), is a professor emeritus of biology at Andrews University where he taught for 30 years. He is widely published in literature dealing with ornithology, behavioral ecology, and paleontology, and has contributed numerous articles to Adventist publications. His book, *The Creation-Evolution Controversy: An Annotated Bibliography* (Scarecrow Press, 1998), won a *Choice* award from the American Library Association. He also edited *Creation Reconsidered* (Association of Adventist Forums, 2000).

---

Harold Glen Coffin was a Seventh-day Adventist scientist, trained as an invertebrate zoologist. He taught high school

and college-level biology, worked as a staff scientist at Geoscience Research Institute, published in peer-reviewed scientific literature, and wrote several books and numerous articles for denominational publications in defense of a recent six-day creation and global Flood.

## Education and Early Career

Harold Coffin was born April 9, 1926 in Nining, China, to American missionary parents.<sup>1</sup> He earned both a bachelor's degree (1947) and a master's degree (1952) in biology at Walla Walla College (now Walla Walla University), and a Ph.D. with a specialty in invertebrate zoology at the University of Southern California (1955).<sup>2</sup>

Coffin completed most of the work for his master's degree during the summers; during the regular school years he taught general science at the secondary level, and botany, genetics, and the philosophy of science at the college level at Canadian Union College (now Burman University).<sup>3</sup> His master's thesis involved a systematic study of the crabs of the Puget Sound region of Washington state.<sup>4</sup>

Coffin was awarded a research fellowship at the University of Southern California where he studied reproduction in hermit crabs. No one previously knew how the female hermit crab transfers its eggs to the back of her abdomen where they are carried before hatching. Coffin employed a glassblower to make artificial glass shells that allowed him to observe and describe the transfer process. He was also the first scientist to raise hermit crabs from eggs to adults in the laboratory.<sup>5</sup>

In 1956, Coffin joined the Department of Biology at Walla Walla College, and from 1958 to 1964 he chaired that department.<sup>6</sup> He often led fossil-hunting field trips with his students, and following retirement he continued to lead field trips with interested former students.<sup>7</sup>

## Creationist Activities, Research, and Publications

In 1964, Richard M. Ritland, director of the Geoscience Research Institute (GRI), invited Coffin to join GRI as a staff scientist, a position he held until his retirement in 1990.<sup>8</sup> During his time at GRI, Coffin studied the famous "fossil forests" of Yellowstone National Park, generally interpreted as having been deposited during the Eocene Epoch, approximately fifty million years ago. Coffin, who embraced the concept of a recent creation and a global Genesis Flood, thought the fossil trees were deposited within the last few thousand years. He cited the parallel orientation of horizontally positioned fossil trees as evidence they had been floated in during the Flood.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Ritland, citing what he interpreted to be soil levels and root zones, believed the trees represented a series of actual forests that had repeatedly been destroyed by volcanic debris flows.<sup>10</sup>

Coffin also studied the multi-layered "fossil forests" in the coal seams of Joggins, Nova Scotia. Once again he interpreted these trees as having been deposited by the Flood. Among the fossil trees, he found fossil shells of marine tubeworms of the genus *Spirorbis* which he said would not have lived in Carboniferous rain forests containing the trees, the usual interpretation for the origin of this ecosystem.<sup>11</sup>

Both the Yellowstone and Joggins fossil forests contain upright stumps and trunks of fossil trees, often interpreted to have been in growth position. Coffin, however, did experiments showing that under certain conditions plants can sometimes float upright.<sup>12</sup> Coffin used the results of these experiments to suggest that just because a fossil tree is oriented in an upright position does not mean it is in its position of growth.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, he demonstrated that many trees floating in Spirit Lake, Washington, following Mount St. Helens' 1980 eruption were floating upright.<sup>14</sup> These experiments and observations have been touted widely by creationists as evidence consistent with belief in the Genesis Flood.<sup>15</sup>

In December 1981, Coffin and Ariel Roth, also employed by GRI, served as expert witnesses on behalf of the defense during the Arkansas Creation trial (McLean et al. vs State Board of Education). They referred to things like rapid fossilization and massive depth of coal beds as bases for believing in a worldwide flood. Under cross-examination, however, Coffin noted that his belief in a young earth was based on the Bible; he said the scientific evidence alone would lead him to believe the earth was very old.<sup>16</sup> He testified that his reading of the Bible and the results of his scientific studies convinced him that the Genesis Flood had taken place five to seven thousand years ago.<sup>17</sup> He believed the Bible's "assertions are historically and scientifically true with the exception of minor problems."<sup>18</sup>

Coffin, in agreement with Robert H. Brown, another colleague at GRI, had "no objection to radiometrically dating ages as far as the inorganic matter is concerned," but life itself was only a few thousand years old. He believed the sun, moon, and stars to be very old as well.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast with many creationists, Coffin believed that "evolution science" is indeed science, and that both "evolution science" and "creation science" are "in the same category." According to Coffin, neither evolution nor creation is falsifiable. He felt, however, "that a person who knew nothing about evolution or creation, if he took the fossil record at face value . . . would come up to the opinion that there was a sudden creative act." As evidence, he referred to the large diversity of complex fossil animals that seem to appear suddenly in the Cambrian level of the geologic column.<sup>20</sup>

Coffin was a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; the Geological Society of America; and Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Society. At one time he also was a member of the Creation Research Society, but he let his membership lapse in part because he did not agree with all its membership tenets. He also

quibbled with some of the scientific conclusions of members of that society.<sup>21</sup>

Many of Coffin's books and articles were written for Adventist and creationist audiences. But he also published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, including *Geology*, *Journal of Paleontology*, and *Palaïos*. These latter articles reported the results of his experiments and observations with upright trees in Yellowstone and Nova Scotia. Although he considered the results published in these journals consistent with his belief in "Flood geology," the articles did not mention this fact.<sup>22</sup>

Coffin's book *Creation—Accident or Design?* (revised and updated with Robert H. Brown and L. James Gibson as *Creation by Design*) examined the creation week depicted in Genesis 1 and 2, the Flood, the structure of the earth, fossils, glaciation, life origins, speciation, the limits of science, and evolutionary theory. In a chapter entitled "Are New Species Forming Today?" Coffin was forthright about his views on the extent of biological change:

Insects and parasites impress a person with what appears to be a tremendous amount of speciation, some of which may be speciation beyond the lower levels. The original created kind may be represented on the species level by mankind; it may be represented on the family level by the Galápagos finches; it may have been on the order level with some insects; and it may have been on the phylum level with the Acanthocephala, which are entirely parasitic.<sup>23</sup>

Most biologists would refer to any change above the species level as examples of macroevolution, a concept often eschewed by creationists. Adventist academicians, however, often have held more open-minded views in areas of their own specialty than in areas outside their training.<sup>24</sup>

## Death and Legacy

Harold G. Coffin died April 25, 2015 at Gordon Hospital near his retirement home of Ranger, Georgia, having influenced a generation of Seventh-day Adventists on the topic of creationism. He was 89.<sup>25</sup>

### SOURCES

- Coffin, Harold G. "Crabs of Washington State." MA thesis, Walla Walla College, 1952.
- Coffin, Harold G., *Creation—Accident or Design?* Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1969.
- Coffin, Harold G. "Erect Floating Stumps in Spirit Lake, Washington." *Geology* 11, no. 5 (1983): 298–299.
- Coffin, Harold G. "Mount St. Helens and Spirit Lake." *Origins* 10 (1983): 9–17.
- Coffin, Harold G. "Orientation of Trees in the Yellowstone Petrified Forests." *Journal of Paleontology* 50, no. 3 (May, 1976): 539–543.
- Coffin, Harold G., Robert H. Brown, and R. James Gibson. *Origin by Design*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2005.
- Coffin, Harold G. "Sonar and Scuba Survey of a Submerged Allochthonous 'Forest' in Spirit Lake, Washington," *Palaïos* 2 (1987): 178-180.
- Coffin, Harold G. "The Biology of *Pagurus samuelis* (Stimpson)." PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1954.
- Coffin, Harold G. "The *Spirorbis* Problem." *Origins* 2, no. 1 (1975): 51–52.
- Coffin, Harold G. "Vertical Flotation of Horsetails (Equisetum): Geological Implications." *Geological Society of America Bulletin* 82, no. 7 (1971): 2019.
- Deposition of Harold G. Coffin in the United States District Court, Eastern District of Arkansas, Western Division, Monday, November 16, 1981. Accessed on May 15, 2017. <http://www.antievolution.org/cs/book/export/html/992>
- Dr. Harold G. Coffin of Ranger, Georgia, 1926–2015, Obituary. Max Brannon & Sons Funeral Home, Calhoun, Georgia. Accessed January 7, 2017. [https://www.meaningfulfunerals.net/home/index.cfm?action=public%3Aobituaries.view&o\\_id=3086520&fh\\_id=10864](https://www.meaningfulfunerals.net/home/index.cfm?action=public%3Aobituaries.view&o_id=3086520&fh_id=10864)
- Edwards, Frederick, "Victory in Arkansas: The Trial, decision, and Aftermath." *Creation/Evolution* 3, no. 1 (Winter, 1982): 33–45.
- Hayward, James L. "Shifting Views of the Past: Adventists and the Historical Sciences." *Spectrum* 28, no. 1 (Winter, 2000): 65–68.
- Numbers, Ronald L. *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*. Expanded edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Oard, Michael J., and Hank Giesecke, "Polystrate Fossils Require Rapid Deposition." *Creation Research Society Quarterly Journal* 43, no. 3 (March, 2007): 232–240.

Ritland, Richard M., and Stephen L. Ritland. "The Fossil Forests of the Yellowstone Region." *Spectrum* 6, nos. 1 and 2 (1974): 19–66.

Roth, Ariel A. *Origins: Linking Science and Scripture*. Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> "Dr. Harold G. Coffin of Ranger, Georgia, 1926–2015, Obituary," Max Brannon & Sons Funeral Home, Calhoun, Georgia, accessed January 7, 2017, [https://www.meaningfulfunerals.net/home/index.cfm?action=public%3Aobituaries.view&o\\_id=3086520&fh\\_id=10864](https://www.meaningfulfunerals.net/home/index.cfm?action=public%3Aobituaries.view&o_id=3086520&fh_id=10864)
- <sup>2</sup> "Deposition of Harold G. Coffin in the United States District Court, Eastern District of Arkansas, Western Division," Monday, November 16, 1981, 13–14, accessed on May 15, 2017, <http://www.antievolution.org/cs/book/export/html/992>
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–17.
- <sup>4</sup> Harold G. Coffin, "Crabs of Washington State" (MA thesis, Walla Walla College, 1952).
- <sup>5</sup> "Deposition of Harold G. Coffin," 15, 37–38. See also Harold G. Coffin, "The Biology of *Pagurus samuelis* (Stimpson)." (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1954).
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19. For start date of 1956, see the 1956-1957 *Mountain Ash*, the annual published by Walla Walla College.
- <sup>7</sup> John T. Baldwin, email message to assistant editor, November 13, 2017.
- <sup>8</sup> "Deposition of Harold G. Coffin," 19; Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*, Expanded edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 324.
- <sup>9</sup> Harold G. Coffin, "Orientation of Trees in the Yellowstone Petrified Forests" *Journal of Paleontology* 50, no. 3 (May, 1976): 539–543.
- <sup>10</sup> Richard M. Ritland and Stephen L. Ritland, "The Fossil Forests of the Yellowstone Region," *Spectrum* 6, nos. 1 and 2 (1974): 19–66.
- <sup>11</sup> Harold G. Coffin, "The *Spirorbis* Problem," *Origins* 2, no. 1 (1975): 51–52.
- <sup>12</sup> Harold G. Coffin, "Vertical Flotation of Horsetails (*Equisetum*): Geological Implications," *Geological Society of America Bulletin* 82, no. 7 (1971): 2019.
- <sup>13</sup> Harold G. Coffin, "Orientation of Trees in the Yellowstone Petrified Forests," *Journal of Paleontology* 50, no. 3 (May, 1976): 539–543. Harold G. Coffin, "Vertical Flotation of Horsetails (*Equisetum*): Geological Implications," 2019. Harold G. Coffin, *Creation—Accident or Design?* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1969), 79–91.
- <sup>14</sup> Harold G. Coffin, "Erect Floating Stumps in Spirit Lake, Washington," *Geology* 11, no. 5 (1983): 298–299; Harold G. Coffin, "Mount St. Helens and Spirit Lake," *Origins* 10 (1983): 9–17; Harold G. Coffin, "Sonar and Scuba Survey of a Submerged Allochthonous 'Forest' in Spirit Lake, Washington," *Palaeos* 2 (1987): 178-180.
- <sup>15</sup> For example, see Michael J. Oard and Hank Giesecke, "Polystrate Fossils Require Rapid Deposition," *Creation Research Society Quarterly Journal* 43, no. 3 (March, 2007): 232–240; Ariel A. Roth, *Origins: Linking Science and Scripture* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1998), 246.
- <sup>16</sup> Frederick Edwords, "Victory in Arkansas: The Trial, Decision, and Aftermath," *Creation/Evolution* 3, no. 1 (Winter, 1982): 33–45.
- <sup>17</sup> "Deposition of Harold G. Coffin," 75.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 129–130.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–138.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–36
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 33. Coffin, "Orientation of Trees in the Yellowstone Petrified Forests," 539–543; Coffin, "Erect Floating Stumps in Spirit Lake, Washington," 298–299; Coffin, "Sonar and Scuba Survey of a Submerged Allochthonous 'Forest' in Spirit Lake, Washington," 178-180.
- <sup>23</sup> Coffin, *Creation—Accident or Design?*, 336–337.
- <sup>24</sup> James L. Hayward, "Shifting Views of the Past: Adventists and the Historical Sciences." *Spectrum* 28, no. 1 (Winter, 2000): 65–68.

<sup>25</sup> “Dr. Harold G. Coffin of Ranger, Georgia, 1926–2015, Obituary.”

---

encyclopedia.adventist.org is an official website of the [Seventh-day Adventist World Church](#)

© 2020 General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 12501 Old Columbia Pike Silver Spring , MD 20904 USA 301-680-6000