

# Alfred Sherwood Romer, President-Elect

Bryan Patterson

His associates have hung two photographs of Alfred Sherwood Romer in his office. One, labeled Alfredum, shows a scholarly individual in the academic regalia of a Harvard Sc.D.; the other, labeled Roamer, is of an unshaven character in battered hat and weather-stained clothes who looks as though he had just been ejected from a box car. They vividly express two facets of Romer the scientist—the field as well as the laboratory worker. What they do not illustrate is the capable administrator. The new president-elect is no stranger to the larger offices. In unwitting preparation for the task ahead he has served as the president of various scientific societies and of an International Congress, and as director of the Biological Laboratories and of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard. All this in addition to, and of course arising out of, a distinguished career as teacher and investigator.

The compiler of this impressive record was born in White Plains, New York, to Harry Houston and Elizabeth Sherwood Romer on 28 December 1894, and spent his early years in various towns in the vicinity of New York City. His introduction to the subject that was to become his life work came about one summer through a bite from a dog. Preventive treatment against the possibility of rabies required trips to Manhattan where he discovered the American Museum of Natural History, in whose halls of paleontology he encountered a new world. After graduation from high school his father, a newspaperman, urged him to get a head start in life and not bother about college (in those days fathers could give such advice in all seriousness), and somewhat reluctantly he agreed to try journalism for a year. During this time he may have been exposed briefly to another profession. In that prehistoric

era there was still a movie industry in the New York area. There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that he was once an extra, a member of a sheriff's posse, in a horse opera—an experience that left him with an abiding distaste for equine transportation.

Convinced by the end of a year that the newspaper game was not for him he entered Amherst College, putting himself through largely by his own efforts. There he came under the influence of F. B. Loomis, who rekindled his early enthusiasm for vertebrate paleontology. By the time he was ready to graduate, the war in Europe had been raging for some years. Having strong feelings about the conflict he joined the American Field Service and saw action with the French army. Following the declaration of war by the United States he transferred to the American forces; he advanced from private to second lieutenant. Among other experiences he was for a while paymaster to a part of the Chinese labor corps. Upon discharge he knew what he wanted to do in life and in further



Alfred S. Romer

preparation for it he entered the graduate school of Columbia University to study under W. K. Gregory.

At Columbia, in addition to the inspiring teaching of Gregory and of J. H. McGregor, he was exposed to the stimulus of fellow students—there was a bumper crop in his time—and of other luminaries on the faculty. Of these, T. H. Morgan stood high on the list; a course under him was an experience in several senses of the word. The class would meet at the appointed hour, but the Professor would not appear; he was off in the laboratory oblivious to everything except the progress of the experiments. The assistant would go hunting and escort Morgan in 10 or 15 minutes late; the lecture would begin, and it might or might not have any connection with the preceding one. As Romer puts it: "None of this mattered. You knew you were listening to a man who was expanding the frontiers, that what you were hearing—even if you didn't fully understand it—might be something not yet revealed in print. It was wonderful." Oddly enough, during his entire student career, he never took a formal course in geology; as regards this important part of a paleontologist's stock in trade he is entirely self-taught, an accomplishment which afforded him some amusement and much satisfaction when two highly esteemed geological medals came his way. His training was almost exclusively in the biological aspects of paleontology. As a result fossils have for him always been parts of once living things. His doctoral dissertation on "The locomotor apparatus of certain primitive and mammal-like reptiles" reflects this outlook precisely. It was a highly successful attempt to trace the history of the limb musculature by study of the anatomy and development of living forms and of muscle impressions on the bones of long dead ones. This line of investigation was successfully continued in later years by him and by several of his students.

After leaving Columbia, Romer accepted the position of instructor in anatomy at New York University where he stayed until 1923, when he was appointed associate professor of vertebrate paleontology at the University of Chicago. From instructor to associate professor is a rather spectacular step up the academic ladder, and it came about in an amusing way. Members of the geology department at Chicago had

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been looking for a man to carry on the work of the late S. W. Williston, the great authority on Permian vertebrates. They decided that Romer was the obvious candidate and delegated the chairman to secure him. As luck would have it, Romer was at the time under heavy medication for a stomach ailment and among the side effects were sleepiness and a fogging of the wits. When Romer and the chairman met, the latter began guardedly to inquire if he would accept an assistant professorship. Romer had no idea to whom he was talking or what was being discussed, and his response was neither enthusiastic nor affirmative. Somewhat taken aback, the chairman reflected that the faculty vote had been enthusiastically unanimous and asked if Romer would accept the position of associate professor. At this point Romer fortunately came to, realized what was happening, and agreed. As he remarked later, it was rather unlikely that a professorship would have been offered had he remained in the fog; you can go just so far by putting your worst foot forward. He became professor in 1931 and remained at Chicago until 1934, when he accepted a position at Harvard as professor of zoology. In 1947 he was appointed Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology. From 1944 to 1946 he served as director of the Biological Laboratories and from 1946 to 1961 as director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology. At the time he assumed the latter office the affairs of the museum were in a critical condi-

tion. By skillful administration, aided by the sympathetic attitude of the University and the assistance of members of the Agassiz family, he was able to surmount the crisis and to turn over, in reasonably flourishing condition, that lively institution to his successor.

A number of the leading vertebrate paleontologists and comparative anatomists now active in North America received their graduate training under Romer. He has imparted his knowledge and enthusiasm to generations of students at Chicago and at Harvard. He has reached a much larger circle through a series of remarkable and widely used texts, all of which have gone through several editions. Two have been translated into foreign languages. One of these books, *Man and the Vertebrates* (recently rechristened *The Vertebrate Story*), has, through its printing in the Pelican series, exerted an influence that extends far beyond classroom and study.

His scientific contributions run the whole gamut of the vertebrates, from origins to man, and range in time from the Ordovician to the Quaternary periods. The main body of his work deals with the origin and earlier evolution of the tetrapods, a time span from Devonian to Triassic. In this area his work has been of fundamental importance. In recognition of such work he has received the Thompson and Elliot medals of the National Academy of Sciences, the Penrose medal of the Geological Society of America, and the Hayden Memorial Geological Award

of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. He has been awarded honorary doctorates by Amherst College, Dartmouth College, the University of Buffalo, Lehigh University, and Harvard. A score of academies, societies, and associations, both foreign and domestic, include him among their membership.

Romer has been as active in the field as in the laboratory. Much of his collecting has been done in the classic late Pennsylvanian and early Permian deposits of northern Texas, but he has also worked in the Devonian of Canada and in the Permian and Triassic of the Rocky Mountain region, of South Africa and, more recently, of South America.

Shortly after going to Chicago, Romer married Ruth Hibbard. Three children and a flourishing crop of grandchildren have resulted. Whenever circumstances permit, Mrs. Romer accompanies her husband into the field. At the moment they are with a party in the Andean region of western Argentina where Romer celebrated his 70th birthday. As a sumptuous birthday present a rich, new and very exciting Triassic fauna was discovered. And so it goes—the pace does not slacken. As Romer has increased in years and strength he has gone from the flatlands of Texas to the Rockies and on to the Andes. At this rate of progress his friends may reasonably hope to send their congratulations on his 80th birthday to an address somewhere in the high Himalayas.

opportunities to cooperate with other organizations on matters of mutual concern.

#### Elections and Officers

The Committee on Nominations and Elections announced that Council had by mail ballot elected Alfred S. Romer as president-elect, Mina S. Rees and John A. Wheeler as members of the Board of Directors, and Stanley S. Ballard, Barry Commoner, and Trevor Lloyd as members of the Committee on Council Affairs. Alan T. Waterman announced that the Board of Directors had reappointed Wallace Givens as secretary of the Section on Mathematics and Richard H. Mahard as secretary of the Section on Geology and Geography, and had selected the following new sec-

## AAAS Council Meeting, 1964

Dael Wolfe

With president Laurence M. Gould presiding, the Council of the AAAS met twice during the course of the Association's annual meeting in Montreal, at 3:45 P.M. on 27 December and again at 9:00 A.M. on 30 December. Attendance at the first session was 165 and at the second session 155.

In a brief report as chairman of the Board of Directors, Alan T. Waterman discussed the importance of the AAAS as viewed from his varied experience in dealing with scientific matters in and out of the federal government. He particularly emphasized the Association's role in science education and its

# Science

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