

Coker, Robert Ervin ^[1]

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by Martha B. Caldwell, 1979

4 June 1876–2 Oct. 1967

Robert Ervin Coker, Kenan Professor of Zoology at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[2], founder of the [Institute of Fisheries Research](#) ^[3] at Morehead City, and a pioneer in the development of marine sea-life conservation in American coastal waters, was born at Society Hill, S.C., the son of William Caleb and Mary Ervin McIver Coker. William Caleb Coker was a captain in the Confederate Army and later president of the first cotton mill in northeastern South Carolina. Coker's brothers were Francis W., professor of political science and chairman of the department at Yale, and Edward C., professor of mathematics and astronomy at the University of South Carolina. A cousin, [William C. Coker](#) ^[4], was professor of botany at The University of North Carolina.

Coker was educated at St. David's Academy in Darlington, S.C., and spent a year at South Carolina College (1892–93). From The University of North Carolina, he earned his bachelor's degree and Phi Beta Kappa honors in 1896 and his M.S. in 1897, serving as an assistant in biology from 1895 to 1897. He taught in South Carolina for a year and from 1898 until 1901 served as principal of the Goldsboro public school, where he instituted a plan of student government.

Beginning his scientific studies of oysters and the diamond-back terrapin in 1902, Coker put together a plan to develop North Carolina's coastal fisheries. In 1905 he submitted the plan, asking that state laws be changed so that private individuals could lease oyster beds. He felt that oysters could be grown at a profit under well-defined conditions that maintained a balance of all factors involved. During the years he worked on this study (1902–4), he was custodian of the U.S. Fisheries Biological Laboratory in Beaufort, N.C., and biologist of the North Carolina Geologic and Economic Survey Center.

After completing his Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins in 1906, he turned down the offer of the prestigious Bruce Fellowship for postdoctoral study and instead accepted a position from the [government of Peru](#) ^[5] to develop the country's nitrate industry and marine fisheries. From 1906 to 1908, by balancing all factors, he and his associates boosted the guano bird population 300 percent and raised the fertilizer output from 25,000 tons to 125,000 tons annually.

Coker served as the official representative of the Peruvian government and as vice-president for the Fourth International Fisheries Congress in Washington in 1908. Remaining in the United States, he joined the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries Biological Laboratory at Fairport, Iowa, in 1909, as a scientific assistant. During his years there he studied fish and mussels in the Mississippi basin, trying to determine under what conditions mussels, then the basis of the button industry, could survive and increase. From 1915 to 1922 he was chief of the Division of Scientific Inquiry of the Bureau of Fisheries, and from 1920 to 1922 he served as chairman of the International Marine Fisheries Commission.

In 1922, Coker accepted a position as a professor of zoology at Chapel Hill. Generations of the university's biology and premedical students took his general survey of vertebrate zoology. He pioneered the courses in hydrobiology in the 1920s and, later, introductory courses in oceanography. From 1935 until 1944 he served as chairman of his department, and during the same period he was chairman of the Division of Natural Sciences. He was on the Chancellor's Advisory Committee from 1945 to 1947 and also served on the Advisory Board of the School of Medicine (1930–47) and on the University Research Council (1936–47). In 1939 he was awarded a Kenan Professorship.

During the twenties and thirties, Coker spent summers at Biological stations at Mountain Lake, Va.; Beaufort, N.C.; and Woods Hole, Mass. Between 1927 and 1935 he directed and taught summer sessions at the Allegheny School of Natural Science at Quaker Bridge, N.Y.

In 1947, at the time of his retirement from teaching, he accepted Dr [Frank Porter Graham](#) ^[6]'s offer to organize an Institute of Fisheries Research. In 1946 he was chairman of the Survey of Marine Fisheries; he served as director of the institute in 1947 and 1948 and as chairman of the executive committee from 1948 until 1953. The institute building was named in his honor, and in 1950 he received the O. Max Gardner Award for service in the organization of the fisheries survey and the institute.

From 1954 until 1963, Coker served as visiting professor and consultant in marine biology at the University of Puerto Rico, playing a leading role in the founding of a new laboratory, the Institute of Marine Biology at Mayaguez, and in the organizing of the International Association of Island Marine Laboratories in the Caribbean.

From 1926 to 1929, Coker was chairman of the Committee on Aquiculture of the National Research Council. Out of the committee grew the [Limnological Society of America](#) ^[7], which he served as vice-president in 1935 and president in 1938. During his career he was president of two other national societies, the American Society of Zoologists in 1941 and the Ecological Society of America in 1937. In 1939 he was elected president of the American Biological Society but resigned

because of university and National Research Council responsibilities. He was president from 1929 to 1930 of the Elisha Mitchell Scientific Society ^[8] and in 1941 of the North Carolina Academy of Science.

In addition to the Aquiculture committee, Coker was chairman of the Division of Biology and Aquiculture of the National Research Council from 1936 to 1940. He was a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and a member of its Council on Human Relations. He worked with the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Public Health Service and from 1940 to 1942 served as a member of the National Advisory Committee on Gerontology. He was a member of the Chicago Academy of Science of the American Fisheries Society and the Association of Southeastern Biologists. He also belonged to Sigma Xi, Phi Beta Kappa, and Chi Psi.

Coker published extensively. His major contributions to scientific research dealt with life in fresh and salt water, especially with the oyster, freshwater mussels, and small freshwater crustacea. Two of his books are basic to the field of zoology, *This Great and Wide Sea* ^[9] (for which he received the Mayflower Cup ^[10] in 1947) and *Streams, Lakes and Ponds* ^[11]

In 1948, Coker was awarded an honorary Sc.D. from the University of South Carolina; in 1959 he received an honorary LL.D. from The University of North Carolina. A Commemorative dinner was given by The University of North Carolina on 4 June 1966 to celebrate Coker's ninetieth birthday, which coincided with commencement and with the seventieth reunion of his class.

Coker was an Episcopalian ^[12]. On 11 Oct. 1910 he married Jennie Louise Coit (24 Mar. 1883–9 June 1972) of Cheraw, S.C. There were two children, Robert Ervin (3 Aug. 1911–31 July 1966) and Coit McLean (11 Jan. 1914–19 Mar. 1960). Coker died in Chapel Hill and was buried in the old Chapel Hill Cemetery. The Institute on Fisheries has an oil portrait by Isabel Bowen.

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