

# OBITUARIES

## Richard Haven Backus (1922–2012)

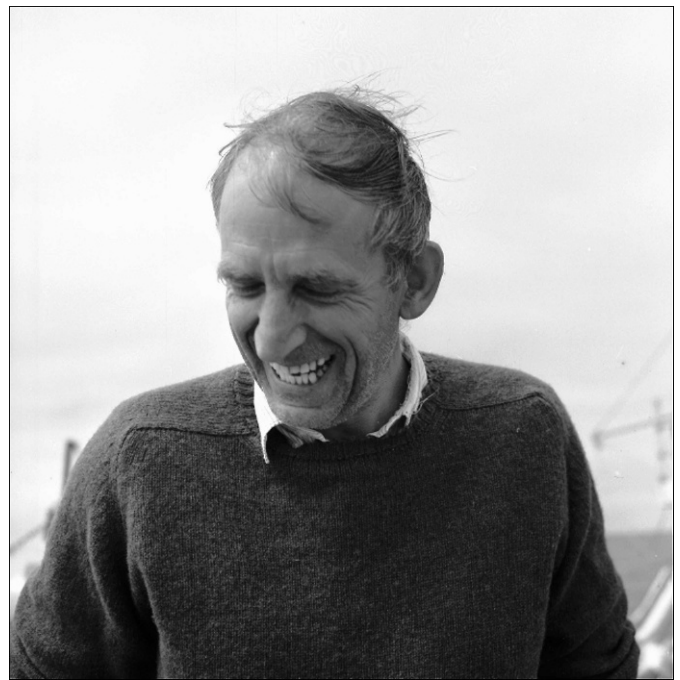
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**P**ROMINENT Biological Oceanographer Emeritus RICHARD HAVEN BACKUS died on 15 September 2012 from complications of pneumonia during a West Coast stopover on a cross-country train excursion to visit his son Ed and daughter-in-law Jessica Miller in Oregon. Dick was born in Rochester, NY to Ruth Bowne Haven Backus and Sidney Kinney Backus on 5 December 1922. He spent his happy childhood and youth in West Webster, NY roaming the fields, orchards, and shores of Irondequoit Bay and Lake Ontario. He graduated from The Harley School (1940) in Rochester, and Dartmouth College, A.B. Botany (1947), earned an M.S. in Vertebrate Zoology (1948) and Ph.D. in Ichthyology (1953), both from Cornell University under Edward C. Raney (see Robbins et al., 1992 for an obituary of E. C. Raney).

Dick was President of the Outing Club at Dartmouth and spent much time enjoying work on Mt. Moosilauke, NH. His college years were interrupted by WWII, during which he became a B-24 navigator (1<sup>st</sup> Lieutenant) in the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force based in England during the intense air campaign over Germany. After an emergency landing in Switzerland, Dick escaped internment to fly again in the Pacific/Japan theater in the Military Air Transport Command.

As a doctoral student, Dick explored and studied the coasts of Labrador and Newfoundland, spending some of the happiest days of his life in the small outport communities sailing on the schooner *Blue Dolphin* and resulting in several publications, particularly his 1957 “The fishes of Labrador.” During graduate school he met Nell Jane Griffin of Winston-Salem, NC whom he married in 1949, and while completing his doctorate accepted a position at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) where he worked his entire career. He served as a Biology Research Associate in Dr. J. Brackett Hersey’s underwater sound group studying the occurrence and transmission of sound in the sea and its application to oceanographic problems, and published more than a dozen papers on the scattering layer from 1954–1972. Dick was appointed as a Marine Biologist in 1959 until 1963 when he was appointed Senior Scientist. In 1967, Dick and the rest of his group transferred from Geophysics into Biology. Establishing his own laboratory, Dick conducted a long-term research program on mesopelagic (midwater) fishes and the zoogeography of the pelagic Atlantic Ocean. This research resulted in eight papers from 1965–1986, of which his multi-authored 1977 chapters on lanternfishes and mesopelagic zoogeography in part 7 of *Fishes of the Western North Atlantic* are particularly important. He served as Chair of the Biology Department from 1970–1974 and



**Fig. 1.** Dick Backus at sea during RV *Atlantis II* Cruise 49 in 1969. Photo by Jan Hahn, courtesy of WHOI.

from 1985–1988. He was an Associate in Ichthyology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University.

Dick participated in and led many research cruises on a variety of WHOI vessels including the original *Atlantis*, was first chief scientist on the newly acquired vessels *Chain* and *Knorr*, and sailed on the *Atlantis II*, *Oceanus*, as well as earlier vessels *Caryn*, *Bear*, *Crawford* among others. An accomplished naturalist, he also published interesting and ‘amusing’ papers on birds (1954), bats (1956), sharks (1956, 1957, 1960), whales (1961, 1964, 1966), and other animals he encountered at sea. Also a student of human nature, Dick relished the companionship, knowledge, and wisdom of the wonderful staff of engineers, mechanics, vessel masters, welders, boatswains, sailors, and other colorful ‘garage gang’ characters inhabiting WHOI. He co-authored the 1970 book *The Natural History of Sharks* with Thomas H. Lineaweaver, III, one of the first general books on shark natural history. When the film *Jaws* was released in the United States in 1975, WHOI was inundated with calls from people curious about sharks. All such calls were directed to Dick, who was also featured in *People* magazine and interviewed for

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newspapers, radio, and TV programs that summer. In 1973, his first marriage ended in divorce, and in 1974 he married Denise Shea Franklin. Dick's last major effort in the marine realm and one of his most outstanding achievements was the organization and editing of the massive 593-page multidisciplinary book *Georges Bank* which was published in 1987 by MIT Press.

Retiring from WHOI in 1988, Dick returned to his botanical interests, working to develop a comprehensive plant list for Barnstable County and acting as Curator of the Gray Herbarium at the Marine Biological Laboratory in Woods Hole. Dick was a co-founder of the Botanical Club of Cape Cod and the Islands and a member of the Board of the Penikese Island School and trips to the island were special to him. In 1999, he led the fifth survey of the flora of Penikese Island which resulted in his last scientific publication (2002). Dick spent many hours in the summer of 2012 working on updating and posting an annotated list "The Vascular Flora of Falmouth (Barnstable County) Massachusetts" (<http://hdl.handle.net/1912/5331>) and reorganizing the Herbarium collection. At age 89, he was still collecting specimens and adding to the knowledge of our local botany.

Dick sang for many years in the Greater Falmouth Mostly All Male Men's Chorus and never tired of listening to Benny Goodman and other big band greats. An avid 'green thumb' horticulturist and gardener he grew landscapes at successive houses in Woods Hole and Quissett, Massachusetts. He subtly and successfully transferred his love of reading, academic inquiry, language, geography, the outdoors, gardening, cooking, and natural wonder among his five children. He was very active in maintaining his extended family network including connections to a long-time rustic family camp in the Adirondacks of New York. He was a great storyteller and a number of his stories were published in *Annals of Earth*. He also spent much of his retirement writing a blog-based memoir which contains many of his stories from all periods of his life and recorded many for the local public radio station in Woods Hole. Just a few years ago WHOI lost another oceanographer and a colleague of Dick's, Jim Craddock (see obituary by Hartel and Polloni, 2012). Dick was preceded in death by a sister Priscilla Holden Backus Welsh. He is survived by his wife Denise, sister Anne Huntington Backus Wanzer, former wife Nell Jane Griffin Backus, children Jane Hamilton Backus Gelernter, Edward Holmes Backus, David Hunt Backus, Adah Shea Franklin Wright, and John Curtis Franklin as well as numerous grandchildren, nieces, nephews, and cousins.

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