

Spotlight | Notes on the early history of HBES. Part I

by Richard D. Alexander, William G. Irons, & Napoleon A. Chagnon



An HBES Hero:

A Special Tribute to Dr. Billy E. Frye

Dr. Frye was University of Michigan Professor of Biology; Dean of the U-M College of Literature, Science, and the Arts; U-M Vice President for Academic Affairs; U-M Provost; subsequently, Emory University Vice President, Provost, and Chancellor.

Sometimes a university administrative officer goes well beyond the call of duty because he or she recognizes a special opportunity to assist a faculty group in establishing and maintaining what seems to be a particularly worthwhile project. Depending on the administrator's actual contributions, the continuing growth and worthiness of the project may to an important extent become a product of the insight and effort of the administrator. Such assistance was essential in more than one of the early stages of what eventually became the Human Behavior and Evolution Society. The administrative contributor was Professor Billy E. Frye, while he was U-M Dean, Vice President, and Provost.

In 2008, Richard D. Alexander suggested, in his introduction to the HBES keynote presentation in Kyoto, Japan, that because of the importance of generating a detailed knowledge and broad understanding of the evolutionary background of the human species, HBES has the potential to become the most important scientific society in the world. If this optimistic prediction is ever realized, it might be just as appropriate to view Dr. Frye, at that time, as the most important person in the world supporting science. To prepare for this delightful possibility, we have compiled the following list of Dr. Frye's contributions to the beginnings of HBES, occurring mainly in the 1980s.

1. From the beginning of the rise of interest in an evolutionary approach to human behavior at Michigan, Dr. Frye became an openly concerned, cooperative, and beneficent observer. His

attention and strong support, virtually alone among U-M administrators, gave heart to the small number of faculty who braved the generally hostile environment toward early efforts to connect the evolutionary process to the makeup and potentials of human behavior.

2. When informed that two recently graduated anthropology PhDs from Northwestern University, Paul Turke and Mark Flinn, had received 3-year Junior Fellowships at the U-M to pursue the new field of human behavior and evolution, while a third Northwestern graduate with the same professional interests, Laura Betzig (Paul Turke's spouse), had no such financial support, Professor Frye provided a three-year Vice Presidential Postdoctoral Fellowship for Dr. Betzig.

3. When William D. Hamilton, often referred to as the most important evolutionary biologist of the twentieth century, informed a U-M faculty member, by letter, of his strong interest in finding a position in the United States, Dean Frye promptly facilitated the hiring of Hamilton as a faculty member in the U-M Museum of Zoology and Department of Biology. Dean Frye did this, despite strong and organized objections by a small minority of faculty opposed to evolutionary investigations of human behavior.

4. When the Department of Anthropology sought to hire a primatologist, after some discussion Dr. Frye replied that he would support the request, but only if an evolutionary biologist were placed on the search committee. As a direct result, Dr. Richard Wrangham was contacted, in England, interviewed at Michigan, and hired as an anthropologist.

5. When at least one faculty member with an interest in evolution and human behavior encountered continuing direct hostility from multiple fellow faculty members, and (unknown to the faculty member) the existence and nature of

this hostility were mentioned to Dean Frye by the director of the faculty member's unit, Dean Frye emphatically stated that the faculty member was to be allowed to follow his research and teaching interests without interference. It was later reported that during this discussion the Dean's finger was pointed rather sharply, and wagged, at the director! Every faculty member who has ever had an experience of this sort knows the incredibly positive long-term effect of such support.

6. As Dean, Dr. Frye established an organization of faculty from science and the humanities that met monthly, with dinner and a presentation from an inside or outside speaker, to generate understanding and fellowship among diverse faculty. On one occasion he explicitly sought a speaker on evolution and human behavior. Napoleon Chagnon, the anthropologist to whom the 2005 Austin, Texas, meeting of HBES was dedicated, accepted the invitation to speak.

7. Dr. Frye agreed to allow the U-M Museum of Zoology to use funds that were orphaned in a faculty change to bring a succession of visiting distinguished professors to the UMMZ for a term or a year. Among those accepting these invitations from Donald W. Tinkle, Director of the UMMZ, were William D. Hamilton, George C. Williams, John Maynard Smith, and Mary Jane West-Eberhard.

8. On his own initiative Dr. Frye eventually indicated to relevant U-M faculty his interest in providing financial support for a program in Evolution and Human Behavior. Richard Wrangham was eventually placed in charge of the initial funds of that program. The program expanded, began to sponsor annual meetings, and, with special organizational efforts from Professors Randolph Nesse, William Irons, and Bobbi Low, formed the Human Behavior and Evolution Society, with William D. Hamilton unanimously elected as the first president (Low and Nesse 1989).

There can be no doubt that Dr. Frye was responsible for numerous other positive contributions, involving evolution and human behavior, that none of us knew about, or

remembers now. When he departed from the U-M for his alma mater, Emory University in Atlanta, every U-M person known to those of us in HBES, who spoke of his departure, expressed the highest respect for his performance at the U-M. With very few exceptions, probably all resulting from the continuing general reluctance to delve deeply into the relationship between the evolutionary process and the behavior of humans, Billy Frye was regarded as a serious loss to the University of Michigan's administrative organization.

After rising to the Emory Chancellorship, Billy retired, and now lives with his wife, Elisa, in the mountains of north Georgia, on the property, and near the farmhouse, where he was reared. Among his current enterprises are enjoying his and Elisa's two daughters and one granddaughter, staying abreast of changing aspects of the social and biological sciences by "reading biographies of founding fathers and early American history, books on world religions, and anything that purports to interpret human nature and culture in biological and evolutionary terms." He also continues to grow roses and orchids, win prizes with his watercolor paintings of orchids, write stories from his childhood, and listen to and play classical music.

RDA Note: Billy Frye is a modest person. Some time after he had read this essay and thanked those responsible for it, he wrote me, quoting with obvious feeling a comment made at the party for him when he was preparing to leave the University of Michigan for Emory University. A distinguished law professor and former Dean of the Law School said to him, "When you leave, all our candles will burn less brightly." Billy said the memory of that unusual remark still brings tears to his eyes.

Reference: B. S. Low and R. M. Nesse. (1989). Summary of the evolution and human behavior conference: Ann Arbor, Michigan, April and October 1988. *Ethology and Sociobiology* 10: 457-465.



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**The next HBES Conference will be held at California State
University, Fullerton May 27-31, 2009.**

Abstract deadline is April 1, 2009.

See: <http://anthro.fullerton.edu/hbes2009/> [Read more...](#)

**Submit your nominations for the HBES Lifetime & Early
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View

From the President's Window
Steve Gangestad

Our HBES president is Steve Gangestad, Distinguished Professor of Psychology at the University of New Mexico. In this issue, Steve reveals news of our upcoming HBES conferences including plans to hold a joint conference with ABS.

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Spotlight

Billy E. Frye

In this edition, Richard D. Alexander, Bill Irons, and Nap Chagnon share some notes on the history of HBES. They pay special tribute to Dr. Billy E. Frye, a former University of Michigan administrator who played a critical role in the birth of HBES.

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Interview

Napoleon A. Chagnon

In a special interview, Nap Chagnon answers questions from leading scientists on the Yanomamö on topics ranging from the possibility of peace to kin term manipulation to the role of women. Thank you to Ed Hagen and Nicole Hess for organizing this interview.

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Students

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It is time to select a new HBES Student Representative. Please read the profiles of the two candidates for HBES Student Rep, Thank you Aaron for serving as HBES Student Representative for the past few years.

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