

# **Scripps Benefactions: the Role of the Scripps Family in the Founding of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography**

**Deborah Day, Scripps Archivist**



**William E. Ritter**, founder of SIO, 1897

In nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, scientific institutions were often founded by a determined scientist with a good idea working with an entrepreneur with a good income. There are many examples of this type of collaboration, for instance the Carnegie Institution of Washington, the University of Chicago, Lick Observatory. It is no surprise then to find that when William E. Ritter decided to found a marine biological station on the west coast, his first plan was to find a millionaire who would be willing to fund it. It took him ten years to accomplish this goal. William E. Ritter (1856-1944) was a zoologist at the University of California in Berkeley when he decided that his life's work was to found a marine biological station on the west coast. He had worked at a number of marine stations as a graduate student -- at Alexander Agassiz's laboratory at Newport and at the Stazione Zoologica and other European stations during his 1894 post doctoral year in Europe. As early as 1892, Ritter quietly began to contact a number of

wealthy businessmen in the San Francisco region to see if he could find funds to make his dream a reality. The economic panic of 1893 limited his prospects in San Francisco, so he then turned to Los Angeles and E. H. Harriman. Ritter was a member of the Harriman Alaska Expedition of 1899, but ultimately Harriman declined to support Ritter's station. By 1903, Ritter was discouraged but still searching for financial backing (1). It was then that he met E.W. Scripps (1854-1926) and his sister Ellen Browning Scripps (1836-1932).



**Edward Willis Scripps c1903**

Beginning in the 1870s the numerous Scripps family of Rushville, Illinois established a powerful chain of midwestern newspapers based in Detroit. This enterprise was founded by the eldest son of the family, James E. Scripps, who published a penny paper for the working man. James gradually brought his brothers and sisters into the company. The youngest son of the family, E.W. Scripps, eventually established his own newspaper empire and fortune and built a winter home in San Diego. In 1900, his brother George Scripps died and left a fortune of some six hundred thousand dollars to his sister Ellen Browning Scripps. In 1903, E.W. and Ellen Browning Scripps were pondering how to use this money.



Schooner LOMA donated to SIO by E.W. Scripps in 1905 and fitted out with a working boom, dredge and hoisting apparatus. Photo taken at Point Loma. Large house in background is the residence of Fred Baker

The three main histories of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography (SIO) by Ritter, Raitt and Moulton, and Shor <sup>(2)</sup> all record the generous benefactions of the Scripps family to SIO. The Scripps family provided almost all of the operating funds for the station from 1903 to 1912. From 1912, when the station became part of the University of California, until their deaths, E.W. Scripps and Ellen Browning Scripps matched the state support for the institution. E.W. Scripps personally donated over forty thousand dollars. He donated his yacht LOMA as the institution's first ship. He initiated the idea of operating a public aquarium at the station, and he convinced Ritter to purchase the one hundred and seventy acre pueblo lot in La Jolla where the institution stands today.



**Ellen  
Browning  
Scripps 1919**

Ellen Browning Scripps created an endowment and donated over four hundred thousand dollars to the institution. She built the roads and the pier, designed the campus, built the first laboratory and the library.



**R/V  
ALEXANDER  
AGASSIZ.**

November 1907.  
Ketch built by  
Lawrence Jensen,  
San Diego.

Ellen Browning Scripps provided the funds to build a vessel for SIO; R/V ALEXANDER AGASSIZ was launched on August 21, 1907.



Group photo on R/V ALEXANDER AGASSIZ. The boy second from the left is **Robert Paine Scripps**, son of E.W. Scripps, who occasionally went out on cruises on the vessel his father donated to SIO

E.W. Scripps' son Robert Paine Scripps donated over one hundred thousand dollars to the institution after his father's death, and he provided the funds to SIO to purchase a yacht, E.W. SCRIPPS.

After Robert Paine Scripps' untimely death, the Ellen Browning Scripps Foundation came to the rescue and provided operating funds for the E.W. SCRIPPS until 1940 when wartime funding began flowing to the institution. (3)

So, like a good newspaper story, we know the who, the what, and the where of the benefactions of the Scripps family. But the why is less clear. Why did the Scripps family invest their resources in the first American oceanographic institution? What influence did they have on the scientific program of the institution?



R/V E.W. SCRIPPS, September 1938

## **ORIGIN OF SCRIPPS FAMILY INTEREST IN MARINE BIOLOGY**

Ellen Browning Scripps and her sister Virginia Scripps had a very genuine interest in marine biology. Ellen Scripps was college trained <sup>(4)</sup> and Virginia read broadly in science. The sisters collected specimens of algae and sea life on their frequent walks along the La Jolla shore. The Scripps family has always credited the sisters as the source of the family interest in the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Ritter noted that Ellen and Virginia Scripps first called E.W. Scripps' attention to the effort to establish a marine biological station.<sup>(5)</sup> Ellen Scripps noted in her diary that Ritter visited her home on July 12, 1903 and

"graciously attended to Jenny's specimens, and took home several to work with." <sup>(6)</sup>

It is more difficult to say what motivated E.W. Scripps. One important element in E.W. Scripps' decision to participate in the development of the station was his friendship with William Ritter. Ritter's wife used a biblical analogy of friendship when she referred to the two men as David and Jonathan. Oliver Knight, editor of E.W. Scripps' *Disquisitions*, says that Ritter was E.W. Scripps' only

"genuine and close personal friend." <sup>(7)</sup>

They had a common background: both were middle western farm boys who rose through hard work.

When Ritter was asked in 1941 why Scripps became interested in the effort to found a marine biological institution, he replied:

"At the very outset, I am quite sure it was the novelty...that appealed to him. Here was a small group of earnest university men trying to start an enterprise for making scientific investigations on the life of the Pacific Ocean....This was the sort of thing that he had never come in contact with before, and that...was calculated to appeal to his curiosity. ...[V]ery soon he began to wake up to the meaning of the term, biological. Taking notice of the fact that it had to do with life, he recognized that it must include men as well as fishes.... Accordingly, his life-long interest in the intimate association with men made the biological aspect of the enterprise the center of his interest." (8)

Ritter used the word "enterprise" twice. Enterprise was something that E.W. Scripps understood and relished. The Ritter-Scripps correspondence shows that E.W. Scripps, the capitalist, the businessman, immediately grasped what was needed to start the sort of institution Ritter wanted. In fact, Scripps understood better than Ritter what was necessary to found such a station. When Ritter first met with Scripps, he had only a vague idea of the amount of capital that would be necessary to realize his dream of a Pacific marine biological station. He was hoping for a promise of something between five thousand and twenty thousand dollars. (9) It was Scripps who decided that such a station required a capital of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. (10) Scripps concentrated on the essentials: capital, property, a ship, the right leadership.

## **INFLUENCE OF THE SCRIPPS FAMILY ON SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY**

E.W. Scripps wanted to begin a new enterprise, but he was not planning in 1903 to provide the capital himself. He advised the Marine Biological Association to write to Andrew Carnegie for funds and pressed a number of wealthy men in San Diego to get involved with the station. It was Ellen Browning Scripps, however, who decided by January 1906 to create an endowment for the marine station. (11) Ellen provided the capital, while E.W. provided the muscle. He approved of his sister's decision to endow the station. He knew that one family, however wealthy, could not alone sustain a growing laboratory. It needed permanent support. Ritter had made it clear at their first meeting that he hoped the station would eventually become part of the University of California. However, the University of California had limited resources and was not anxious to assume responsibility for unendowed laboratories.

E.W. Scripps made it clear to the President of the University and the Governor of California that his sister's gift was dependent upon the station also receiving support from the state and university. (12) The marine biological station was to become part of the University of California and was to have a regular budget. Beginning in 1912 when the station became the Scripps Institution of the University of California, Scripps family contributions were matched by state funds. This also established a family precedent. When Robert P. Scripps made contributions to the Institution after his father's death, he made them conditional on the state of California appropriating an equal sum. (13)

Management, capitalization and the creation of new enterprises --these were subjects that interested E.W. Scripps, and it is the management structure and style of the marine biological station that shows the Scripps influence. There are significant similarities

between the early organization of the marine biological station and the E.W. Scripps newspaper organization.

Scripps followed a number of management principles in his newspaper business. He believed in promoting able young men from within his organization rather than hiring expensive talent from without. <sup>(14)</sup> He believed in living within the real resources of an organization, not going into debt for fancy buildings and equipment. <sup>(15)</sup> He believed that each of his papers should be clearly divided into editorial and business departments, with the editorial department in control. <sup>(16)</sup> These management principles are reflected in the Scripps Institution. The first faculty consisted of largely local young men trained by Ritter. Scripps insisted that the young marine biological association live within its means. He opposed the construction of elaborate laboratory buildings and even threatened to end his association with the station if building costs were not better controlled. He insisted on the appointment of a business manager for the institution, but made it clear that the scientific director, Ritter, was to be the chief administrative officer. <sup>(17)</sup> Scripps took a very personal interest in the young institution. <sup>(18)</sup> He visited the marine station often and attended weekly staff meetings. He kept very well informed about both the business and scientific affairs of the station, and he began to develop an interest in science.



SIO in 1909

Ellen Browning Scripps stayed well informed about the business decisions and organization of the marine biological station, but she generally deferred to her brother in matters of management. She never attended staff meetings. However, she assumed a decisive role in the resolution of conflicts. Ritter and Scripps disagreed only occasionally, but when it happened, it was usually over an issue of budget or management rather than scientific policy. In 1907, E.W. Scripps insisted that the station needed more land and pressed Ritter to purchase a one hundred and seventy acre pueblo lot outside of La Jolla - the present campus. Ritter hesitated. He and other station officers considered the resources of the station inadequate for such a purchase, and the land too raw, too distant from La Jolla, and too large to suit the station's needs. Miss Scripps was convinced that her brother was right to insist on the land purchase. She wrote to Ritter and Baker and asked them to reconsider their opposition. <sup>(19)</sup> She then provided the funds for the land purchase.



## **INFLUENCE OF THE SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY ON E.W. SCRIPPS**

E.W. Scripps was initially attracted by Ritter and the excitement of founding a marine biological station, and then gradually developed a serious interest in science, especially biology. Ritter's student and literary executor, Edna Watson Bailey, credits Ritter with influencing Scripps to study and ultimately to support scientific inquiry. <sup>(20)</sup> Ritter remarked that Scripps had

"an enormous belief in science as an instrument for human welfare." <sup>(21)</sup>

Ritter felt that Scripps' interest in biology stemmed in part from his efforts to understand mankind and, ultimately, himself. <sup>(22)</sup> It is interesting to find that E.W. Scripps personally financed the work of two scientists -- George McEwen whose study of physical oceanography focused on weather prediction, and Francis Sumner whose study on the effects of environment on successive generations of field mice touched on eugenics.

Scripps' interest in biology was very broadly cast. He preferred the generalist to the specialist. Ritter noted that problems of reproduction and heredity, particularly those that concerned higher animals, were a special interest of E.W. Scripps. Scripps read the work of Malthus and was concerned about population growth and the allocation of resources to support population. He raised questions about population and heredity at station staff meetings. <sup>(23)</sup>

Scripps urged Ritter to apply his findings in biology to society at large and to write about science for a general audience. This is an important point, for Scripps clearly encouraged Ritter to develop his "biological philosophy" and write books with a philosophical bent. Ritter specifically cited E.W. Scripps' influence in several of his books. <sup>(24)</sup>

### **E.W. SCRIPPS' VISION OF THE SCRIPPS INSTITUTION OF OCEANOGRAPHY**

Scripps also encouraged Ritter toward a broad biological program instead of a scientific program more narrowly focused on marine biology. It was Scripps who proposed a resolution at a meeting of the Marine Biological Association on July 20, 1907 that "It is the purpose not to restrict biological research at the station to marine organisms as has thus far been done, but to extend it to land plants and animals as well." <sup>(25)</sup>

Ritter and Scripps agreed that the station should emphasize research rather than teaching. Scripps described his vision of the station in 1915:

"I wish to gather together at this institution a number of men of strong minds and force who are eager for research work--eager to penetrate the, as yet, unexplored realms of knowledge. I think of this body of men being organized into separate groups, the groups themselves being composed of different individuals, each group working in a special department, and each individual having some special work to do. ... The association should be personal and continuous and very close, so that there would be, naturally and by necessity, a constant comparison made between individuals and groups of their respective discoveries and theories, so that each could gain valuable suggestions from others." <sup>(26)</sup>

This vision of the station as a research institution was realized, but Scripps did not realize all of his dream. He once characterized his vision of the institution as utopian. By 1920, Scripps hoped that the institution would enlarge its mission in science to encompass

social science. He considered persuading psychologist Robert Yerkes to pursue his primate studies at the biological station. He even thought of locating a botanical park near the station. (27)

Scripps felt that science could and should make authoritative statements on broad issues of public policy, including population, sex education, and world peace. He read broadly in anthropology, economics, psychology and sociology. Scripps personally provided the funds to support two summer conferences held at the station in 1919 and 1920. The 1919 conference was described as a "Chautauqua in Science," (28) and included philosophers, economists, and psychologists.

Ritter's publications in philosophical biology certainly grew out of his discussions with E.W. Scripps, but his vision of the Scripps Institution remained focused on the oceans. He quietly opposed Scripps' idea for primate research. The idea of a botanical park was never realized. Ritter and his successor Vaughan decided together in 1923 that the Scripps Institution should become an oceanographic institution rather than a broad biological laboratory. There were to be no more Chautauquas in science.

Scripps was disappointed that the institution did not adopt a more general program. After the entrance of the United States into the Great War, Scripps returned to business and had less time for the marine station. In November 1917 he suffered a stroke. He recovered his health at sea. Virginia Scripps died in 1921. In 1923 William Ritter retired as director of the Scripps Institution. Advancing age and heart trouble largely confined Ellen Browning Scripps to her home after 1924, and she devoted her remaining energy to the founding of Scripps College. (29) Ritter continued to correspond with E.W. Scripps and Ellen Browning Scripps until their deaths. In 1921, he even had the temerity to chaff E.W. Scripps about giving less money to the marine station than his sister.

Scripps replied:

"I have freely admitted to you and others that Ellen was a good deal better giver than I was. But then it is possible that you never considered the fact that in those years in the past when she was giving so wisely and I was refraining from giving, that I had the job, not only of making the money that Ellen gave you, but also the job of making the money that I kept. (30)

Ellen Browning Scripps was a philanthropist, but E.W. Scripps was and remained throughout his life an investor. He invested not only hard earned assets, but also his time, in the Scripps Institution, in the confident expectation that the investment would yield a world class research institution for the benefit of mankind. Scripps left his stamp on the administration of the station, and he influenced its scientific mission, even if some of his utopian ideas were not realized. As an investor, Scripps would have been satisfied to find that the marine station he capitalized at \$250,000 in 1903 expended over seventy six million dollars for research some ninety years later.

The relationship between scientist and philanthropist is one that has engaged the interest of many historians of science, but few historians of science have yet examined the career of William E. Ritter and his collaboration with the Scripps family. Eric Mills's lecture on William E. Ritter and the meaning of his "philosophical biology" was the first attempt to evaluate Ritter's career and place his research within a historical context.(31) Much

research remains to be done on the Scripps family, especially the complex E.W. Scripps and the cerebral Ellen Browning Scripps.

---

## REFERENCES

1. Ritter referred to his many previous disappointments in his diary in an entry dated August 2, 1903. William E. Ritter Papers, 71/3, Carton 9, Diary 1901-1903, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
2. William E. Ritter, "The Marine Biological Station of San Diego: Its History, Present Conditions, Achievements and Aims." University of California Publications in Zoology 9 (1912): 137-248; Helen Raitt and Beatrice Moulton, Scripps Institution of Oceanography: First Fifty Years. San Diego: Ward Ritchie Press, 1967; Elizabeth Noble Shor, Scripps Institution of Oceanography: Probing the Oceans, 1936 to 1976. San Diego: Tofua Press, 1978.
3. The sums of donations to the institution by various members of the Scripps family presented in this paper were drawn from the original account books of the Scripps Institution which form part of the Records of the SIO Office of the Business Manager, 1903-1947, AC 4, housed at the SIO Archives UCSD.
4. Ellen Browning Scripps entered Knox College's Female Collegiate Department in Galesberg, Illinois in 1856 and took courses in mathematics and chemistry, as well as Latin, German, elocution and theology. She received a "certificate of completion" in 1859. Edward Dessau Clarkson, Ellen Browning Scripps: A Biography. La Jolla: By the Author, 1958, 30-39.
5. Letter, William E. Ritter to J.H. Sorrels, 31 October 1941, William E Ritter Papers, MC 4, Box 1, folder 66, SIO Archives UCSD, La Jolla, California.
6. Diary of Ellen Browning Scripps, 12 July 1903, Ellen Browning Scripps Papers, Ella Strong Denison Library, Scripps College, Claremont, California.
7. Oliver Knight, ed., I Protest: Selected Disquisitions of E.W. Scripps. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966, p. 84.
8. Letter, William E. Ritter to J.H. Sorrels, October 31, 1941, William E Ritter Papers, MC 4, Box 3, folder 16, SIO Archives UCSD.
9. William Ritter mentioned five thousand dollars in his diary entry dated 28 July 1903. He mentioned an annual expenditure of between five and nine thousand dollars for operating expenses and eleven thousand dollars for a ship in an undated document entitled, "Prof. Ritter's Report to Marine Biological Association of San Diego," which was written after September 1903, Scripps Family Papers 92-38, Box 1, folder 1, SIO Archives UCSD.
10. Letter, E.W. Scripps to William E. Ritter, 25 February 1909, SIO Biographical Files AC5, Box 15, folder 487, SIO Archives UCSD.

11. Letter E.W. Scripps to Benjamin Ide Wheeler, 9 January 1906, SIO Biographical Files AC5, Box 15, folder 487, SIO Archives, UCSD.
12. Letter, E.W. Scripps to William E. Ritter, 25 February 1909, SIO Biographical Files AC5, Box 15, folder 487, SIO Archives UCSD.
13. "Minutes of Special Board of Trustees," SIO Archives/UCSD, Records of the SIO Office of the Director (Sverdrup) 82-56, Box 1, s.v. "Correspondence, January-June 1938." SIO Archives, UCSD.
14. Oliver Knight, ed., *I Protest*, p. 285.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 266. See also Disquisition by E.W. Scripps entitled "The Biological Station Begins to be a Disappointment," June 2, 1909, S.I.O. Biographical Files AC5, Box 15, folder 485, SIO Archives UCSD.
16. Oliver Knight, ed., *I Protest*, p. 187.
17. William E. Ritter, "A Business Man's Appraisal of Biology," *Science* 44 (1916): 822.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Letter, Ellen Browning Scripps to Fred Baker, May 1, 1907 and Letter, Ellen Browning Scripps to William E. Ritter, May 1, 1907, S.I.O. Biographical Files AC5, Box 15, folder 491, SIO Archives UCSD.
20. Frank E.A. Thone and Edna Watson Bailey, "William Emerson Ritter: Builder," *Scientific Monthly* 24 (1927):260.
21. William E. Ritter, "The Relation of E.W. Scripps to Science," *Science*, 65 (1927): 291.
22. William E. Ritter, "The Man, E.W. Scripps: An Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Ellen Browning Scripps Residence Hall, Scripps College, Claremont, California, September 30, 1929." Claremont: Scripps College, 1929, p. 2.
23. William E. Ritter, "Philosophy of E.W. Scripps," unpublished manuscript, 1944, William E. Ritter Papers, MC 4, Box 2, folder 95, p. 22, SIO Archives, UCSD.
24. For instance, E.W. Scripps' conception of biology is discussed in William E. Ritter, *The California Woodpecker and I: A Study in Comparative Zoology in which are Set Forth Numerous Facts and Reflections by One of Us about Both of Us*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1938, 3-4.
25. Ritter, *The Philosophy of E.W. Scripps*," p. 19.
26. Disquisition, E.W. Scripps, "The Scripps Institute for Biological Research," September 15, 1916, William E. Ritter Papers, Box 2, folder 95, p. 9, SIO Archives UCSD.

27. Letter, E.W. Scripps to Ed Fletcher, April 2, 1920, Fletcher Family Papers MSS 81, Box 63, Mandeville Department of Special Collections, UCSD, La Jolla, California.
28. "Annual Report, Scripps Institution for Biological Research," in Annual Report of the President of the University of California, 1919-1920. Berkeley: University of California, 1920, 167.
29. Memoranda of Conference between J.C. Harper and Mary B. Eyre at Claremont, California, March 4, 1934, p. 10, S.I.O. Biographical Files AC5, Box 15, folder 494, SIO Archives UCSD.
30. Letter, E.W. Scripps to W.E. Ritter, November 18, 1921, p. 2, E.W. Scripps Papers, Ohio University Archives, Athens, Ohio.
31. Eric L. Mills, The Scripps Institution: Origin for a Habitat for Ocean Science. La Jolla: Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UCSD, 1993.