

NORMAN EDWARD WEISBORD (1901 -1990) "The Cabo Blanco Malacologist"

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Born on October 1st, 1901 in Jersey City, New Jersey, Norman Edward Weisbord received the B.A. degree in geology from Cornell University in 1923, and that year became employed by Atlantic Refining Company, as a paleontologist and geologist. He remained 9 years with that company, exploring oil fields in Venezuela, México, Colombia, Guatemala and Cuba until 1932. During that period, he continued his formal education, and in 1926 he received a M.A. degree from Cornell University (Ithaca, New York), in stratigraphy and paleontology under Professor G.D. Harris, who had been working on the geology of Trinidad Island and British West Indians, during the 20's.



Photo of Norman Edward Weisbord (peccatum fecha).

Source: <http://purl.flvc.org/fcla/dt/124970>

In 1932, he joined the Standard Oil Company where he was an exploration geologist assigned to the city of Tartagal, northern Argentina. Two years after that, in 1934, he was transferred to the Standard-Vacuum Company as Senior Geologist in the Dutch East Indies, where he explored for oil in Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Papua and New Guinea until 1942. Later that year, after the Japanese invasion of this region (January-March, 1942) Weisbord was again transferred, this time to Socony-Vacuum Company Venezuela as Chief Surface Geologist, a position he held during 14 years, until his retirement from the oil industry in 1957 (In 1955 Socony-Vacuum was renamed Socony Mobil Oil Company). An insightful and meticulous investigator, Weisbord's career spanned 55 years and included 38 papers on the systematics of a number of invertebrate taxa.

THE VENEZUELAN WORK

The Field trip to Falcón

In 1923, once in Venezuela working with the Atlantic Refining Company, Weisbord had the opportunity to participate in a geological field trip to the Falcón state area (MOODY 1996). The expedition started 18 July 1923 in Maracaibo and included the geologists J.E. Brantly, A.H. Garner, and two gentlemen, Luman and Gray (no additional information about them). Several stops were made by the group, along significant places like: El Concejo, Maticora, Dabajuro, Urumaco, Coro, Jebito, Sabaneta, Taratara, La Puerta, Churuguara and Topeye. At these localities, many detailed geological observations regarding the stratigraphy, the structure and paleontology, were recorded by the group. The trip itinerary also included oil field stops at Sun Oil (Urumaco well) and Standard Oil (La Vela well). At many of these localities, diverse invertebrate fossils were systematically collected, noted and numbered for later analysis. In Brantly's field notebook, at least 42 collections of samples were recorded, and Weisbord's name was noted beside several of those collections, probably for future geological age analysis. The field trip finished most likely around 3 August 1923, and the group returned to Maracaibo (MOODY 1996).

The Devonian in Perijá Mountains

During 1926, Weisbord presented to the Graduate School of Cornell University the work: "Venezuelan Devonian Fossils" in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree. He also published that work in the *Bulletin of American Paleontology* 11: (46), on December of the same year.

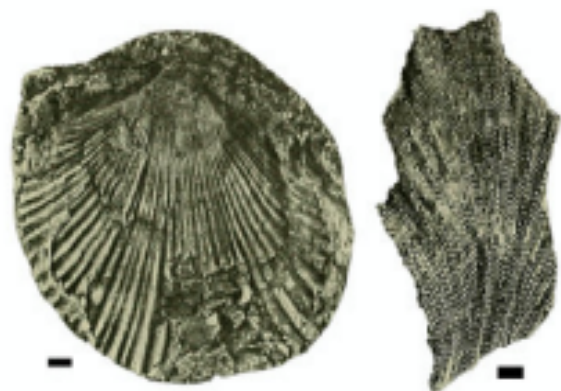
Some years before, in the early part of 1924, an expedition by C. Yeakel, P. W. McFarland, and Ralph A. Liddle, traversed Río Cachimí, located in western Venezuela (Zulia state); from its mouth, westward into the Perijá Range, almost to the source of its north fork (referred in some maps as Caño del Norte). An important number of fossils were collected by the mentioned expedition, from the Eocene, Cretaceous, and the "Old Red series" (provisionally placed in the Permian), and from the Lower-Middle Devonian.

Because the knowledge of Paleozoic history in northwest Venezuela had been quite obscure at that time and because the literature was nearly barren of information concerning these older deposits, Norman Weisbord envisioned the opportunity to provide a comparatively new field of investigation in Venezuela for Paleozoic paleontology and sedimentation. Weisbord stated that the Venezuelan Devonian series were found in place, assured by various investigators, and from a communication with Ralph Liddle, who accompanied Mr. Yeakel, during the mentioned field trip. Some of the fossils were collected from floats, and some of the specimens were from the shale phases in the sedimentary series. A number of the specimens were in a fairly good state of preservation to be studied. In a general statement, Weisbord said in his work that it seems reasonable to assert that those fossils showed a closest relationship to Upper-Lower and Lower-Middle Devonian species from the type localities of eastern United States. In his published work, Weisbord thanked J. E. Brantly and C. R. Rider from his Company, the Venezuelan Atlantic Refining, for their kindnesses in facilitating the shipment of the fossils to him and for the permission to use the material for his thesis and to publish the previously mentioned article.

In his 1926 publication, Weisbord described for the first time in these Devonian series: three new species of coelenterata (Anthozoa); two new species of bryozoa; fifteen species of Brachiopoda (nine of them new); four species of pelecypoda (two new); two new species of gasteropoda and one trilobite. At the end of his

publication, Weisbord stated: "The Venezuelan fossils have a Devonian expression unmistakable, though at present it is somewhat premature, with the limited number of forms we have studied. Considering the fossils as a whole, however, and assuming the homogeneity of the fauna despite its occurrence in somewhat varying rock matrices, it would seem as if the stratigraphic position of the beds ought to come between the Oriskanian and Onondagan formations as known from the type section in New York. The Corals, *Cyathophyllum venezuelense* and *Diphyphyllum vermetuin*, exhibit resemblance to known forms in the middle Devonian beds of eastern United States".

Weisbord never forgot his love for the Devonian rocks from Perijá, and in 1967 he had the opportunity of participating in the International Symposium of the Devonian Systems in Canada. He published in that symposium "The Devonian System in Western Venezuela", a synthesis of all his knowledge about the Río Cachimí Group. In that work, he stated that the rocks and fossils between North America and Perijá in South America during mesodevonian times, were so similar, that the 2 continents had to be closer, and only a narrow seaway separated both. That theory was finally confirmed in the 90s, when more advanced paleomagnetic and biostratigraphic data were available.



Two of the new Devonian species described by Weisbord in 1926. To the left: *Aviculopecten yeakeli*, To the right: *Fenestella venezuelensis*, both collected from Río Cachimí, Perijá. Scale bar = 1 cm. Source: WEISBORD (1926).

The Tertiary and Recent, in Northern Venezuela

Between 1955 and 1956, the last 2 years of residence in Venezuela and still working with Socony Mobil Oil Company de Venezuela, Weisbord spent a number of weekends mapping the geology of the Cabo Blanco area, and in 1957 published a paper with the results of the investigation: "Notes on the Geology of the Cabo

Blanco area". His remarks were based on independent field work, but as he stated, guided by the contributions of his predecessors, especially those affiliated with the Universidad Central de Venezuela. Cabo Blanco was a small, low-lying cape, fronting the Caribbean Sea, 33 kilometers northwest of the capital city Caracas (Venezuela). Just south of the cape, and extending parallel with the shore in an east-west direction, are a series of hills composed of Tertiary and Quaternary sediments to which the name Cabo Blanco was first applied by Humboldt in 1801. Weisbord's work was a detailed description of the Cabo Blanco Group in the area, composed of: Las Pailas, Playa Grande, Mare and Abisinia formations.



Geological map of the Cabo Blanco area (Maiquetía). Source: WEISBORD (1957).

In 1956, the first Venezuelan Stratigraphic Lexicon (Léxico Estratigráfico de Venezuela) was published and WEISBORD (1956) formally described the Guárico Formation (Paleocene), even though the formation was first named and described by E. Mencher in 1950. In a personal letter to his friend Weisbord, dated April 4th, 1954, Mencher discussed this formation in greater detail, and most of the remarks from his letter, were included by Weisbord in the Venezuelan lexicon.

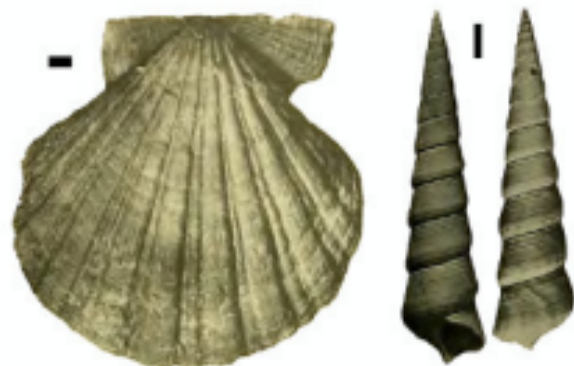
In 1962 Weisbord published a very important monography: "Late Cenozoic Gastropods from northern Venezuela" (Bulletins of American Paleontology, 42). 672 pages, describing 287 species of gastropods, ranging in age from Late Miocene to recent. From the total, 163 species or subspecies were new at that time, 63 were collected in La Salina de Guaiguaza (Carabobo state) and 224 from Cabo Blanco area (Distrito Federal). The collection of his work was partly acquired in 1943, where he performed a field trip to the Cabo Blanco area, with his friend Ely Mencher, former professor of Geology at the Universidad Central de Venezuela, and during his field trips between 1955-1956. All his collection was deposited in the Paleontological Research Institution at Ithaca, New York.

In 1964, continuing with his series of monographs dealing with late Cenozoic and Recent invertebrates collected from Venezuela, Weisbord published "Late Cenozoic Pelecypods from northern Venezuela" (Bulletins of American Paleontology, 45). 564 pages describing 172 species of pelecypods. From the total, 121 were new for the science. Many of the fossils described in this work by Weisbord, were collected during a field trip to Cabo Blanco area on 19 February 1955, accompanied by Professor Jose Royo y Gomez (faculty of the Universidad Central de Venezuela), who pointed out to Weisbord the best fossiliferous localities.

Another important monography was published in 1967: "Some Late Cenozoic Bryozoa from Cabo Blanco Venezuela" (Bulletins of American Paleontology, 53). 247 pages describing 28 species of Bryozoa, where 9 of them were new. Most of the bryozoans were collected by Weisbord, in Mare and Abisinia formations, during his years in Venezuela. 2 specimens of bryozoan fossils from Cabo Blanco, were donated to Weisbord by Dr. Robert Lagaaij, who worked at that time for Koninklijke/Shell Exploratie en Productie Laboratorium.

Four more monographies (corals, scaphopods, cirripeds and echinoids), completed the amazing work published by Norman Weisbord, based upon Venezuelan material. This monumental literature is the consequence of the extraordinary amount and variety of invertebrate marine fossils, found mostly in the Cabo Blanco Group. The significance of this important literature is even more relevant and invaluable, because of the fact that most of those outcrops were destroyed at the end of the 60's due to a major airport expansion of the Maiquetía International Airport.

Weisbord described, compared, and illustrated in the Bulletins of American Paleontology, a total of 539 species of Pliocene to Recent invertebrates, collected during 1955 and 1956 in northern Venezuela, at three different coastal localities: La Salina de Guaiguaza (Carabobo state); Cabo Blanco (Distrito Federal); and Higuerote (Miranda state). Among the classes represented in his publications we can mention: Gastropoda (1962, 285 species); Pelecypoda (1964a, 172 species); Scaphopoda (1964b, 15 species); Polychaeta (1964b, 7 species); Cirripedia (1966a, 9 species); Gymnolaemata (1967, 28 species); Anthozoa and Hydrozoa (1968a, 14 species); and Echinoidea (1969, 8 species).



Two species described by Weisbord between 1962 and 1964. To the left: *Lyropecten ornaldi* (Mare Formation). To the right: *Turritella maiquetiana* (Mare Formation). All collected at the Cabo Blanco Group, Maiquetía. Scale bar = 1 cm. Source: WEISBORD (1962a) and WEISBORD (1964a).

THE RETURN TO USA

Upon his return to the United States, Norman Weisbord became associated with the Geology Department of Florida State University, first as a research associate (1957), and finally as Professor of Geology in 1965. During this time, he focused his efforts on writing all his findings and discoveries in Venezuela; and in helping guide the research of a number of graduate students with much appreciated criticism and significant amounts of enthusiasm. He also contributed to the faculty, in upgrading the Geology Department's collections of fossil macroinvertebrates. These collections were greatly expanded upon by the addition of gastropods, corals, mollusks, echinoids, scaphopods, serpulid polychaetes and barnacles, immense amount of material that Weisbord collected from Venezuela and late Tertiary localities in Florida for many years. In his 10 publications on the fossil barnacles, he described over 15 species of thoracic cirripeds from South America, the Caribbean region, and USA. His splendid compilation of the Recent Cirripedia of Florida, published in three volumes, provided the most comprehensive entry to the literature of the Western Atlantic region to date.

Professor Norman Weisbord was the recipient of an important number of grants in support of his research in invertebrate paleontology. Always eager to contribute with the geologic and palaeontologic knowledge, he served on the editorial committees of several important journals that included the *Bulletins of American Paleontology* and *Tulane Studies in Geology*

and Paleontology. Declining health forced him to leave his work at Florida State University in 1982, at age 81.

THE SCIENTIST AND THE MAN

Norman Weisbord was active in many scientific societies including: the American Malacological Union, the American Association of Petroleum Geologists (AAPG), the Paleontological Society of the United States, the American Geophysical Union (AGU), the American Society of Photogrammetry, and also a member of the Sociedad Venezolana de Geólogos (SVG). He was a life fellow of the Geological Societies of America, Switzerland, London and France; and a fellow of the American Geographical Society. Weisbord was a founding member and for many years, a trustee of the Paleontological Research Institution of Ithaca, New York (1951-1963). He also served this organization as its vice-president (1955-1959) and as president (1959-1961).

As SPIVEY *et al.* (1991) wrote in "Notes and News" about Norman Weisbord: "Weisbord was not a tall man, neither was he large. He spoke and moved with vivacity, and his kindness and genuine concern for others commanded the respect of students, staff and colleagues. On a typical day during his last ten active years, he would arrive at 7:30 in the morning, wearing a vested suit and necktie. He would work quietly in his office, make a trip to the library, meet with one or two members of the faculty, check the day's mail, and leave for the day promptly at 11:30 to return home and to his wife Nettie, who suffered a chronic and fatal illness".

Professor Norman Edward Weisbord, "Wiry" as he was known since his time at Cornell University, died in Tallahassee, Florida on August 21, 1990, as a consequence of complications, arising from his Alzheimer's disease. His mortal remains rest in the Oakland Cemetery, Tallahassee, Florida.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks to Dr. Franco Urbani, for having planted the seed of curiosity about the life and work of pioneering geologists such as Norman Weisbord, whose work has been an obligatory reference for countless generations of new geologists in Venezuela.

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