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The Cleveland Museum of Natural History  
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# Herman Herzer's Terrible Fish

By Carol Pearson and  
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Herman Herzer at various times was a cobbler, an itinerant preacher, a college teacher, a pastor, a museum curator, superintendent of an orphan home, and Vice President of the Ohio Academy of Science. He was a man of many parts, but he is best remembered for the discovery which bears his name, "Herzer's Terrible Fish." In 1864 he became the first person to find remains of the huge prehistoric fish that dominated the shallow seas which 350 million years ago, covered what is now Ohio.

Herman Herzer was born on July 1, 1833, in the city of Neustadt on the Orla in Saxony-Weimar, Germany. We know that his father, Christopher Herzer, was a tanner by trade, and that the Herzers immigrated to the United States in 1848, settling in Detroit. Young Herzer found a job as a cobbler, the trade he had learned in Germany, and at some time in the next few years he also taught school.

In 1855 Herman Herzer was ordained a German Methodist minister, and for the next 20 years he led the life of an itinerant preacher, traveling on horseback between communities in Ohio, Michigan, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania. It was while on the road as a preacher that Herzer cultivated his love of natural history and geology, paying particular attention to the fossils he came across in his rounds. Mrs. Margaret Fawcett, Herzer's great granddaughter, says that he loved to carry his special field pick along with him everywhere he went.

Herzer had married Pauline Seiberlich in Waterloo, Michigan, in 1859, and seven years later the young Herzer family—eventually there would be nine children—

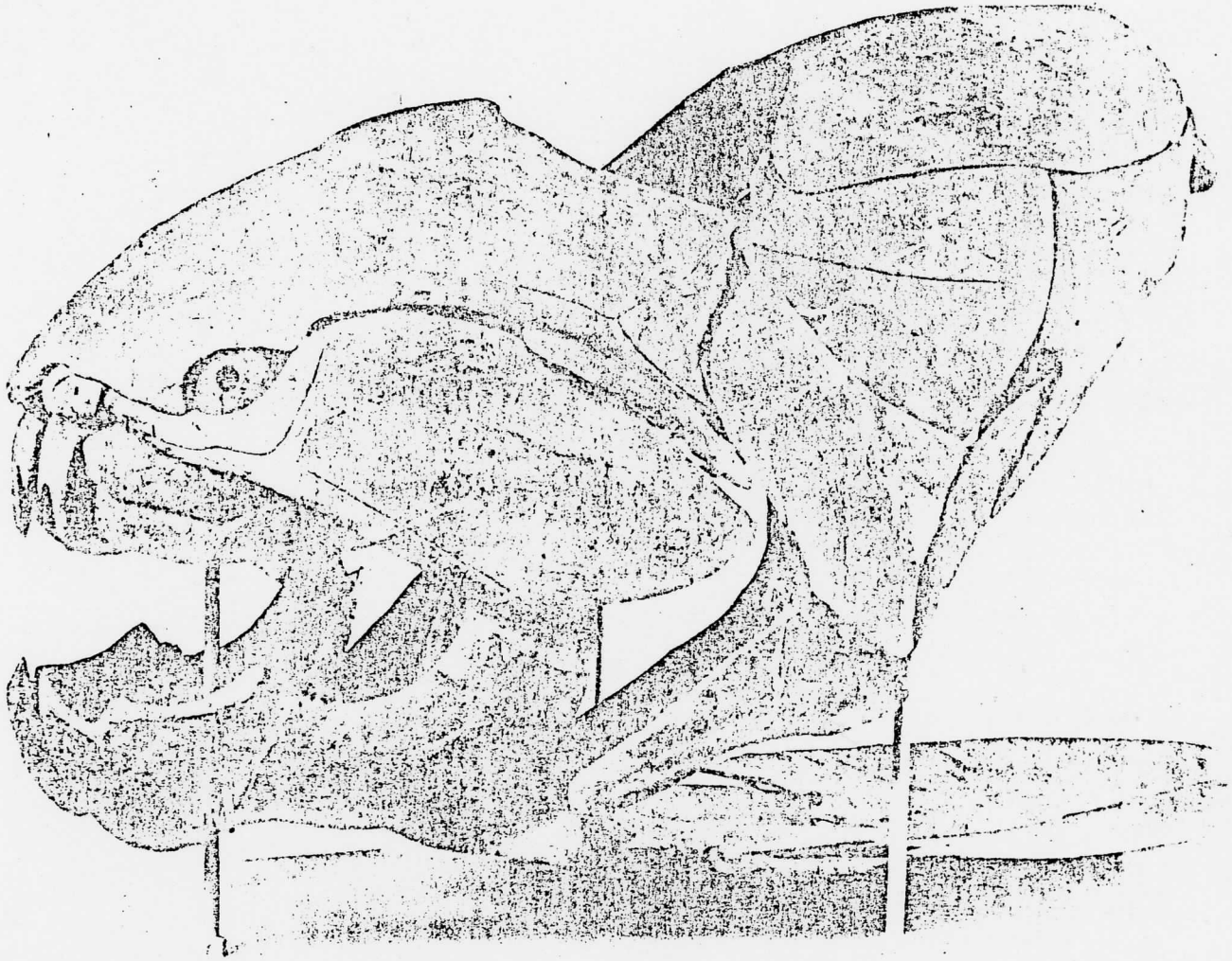


Photo by Bruce Frumker, courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History

was living in Delaware, Ohio. It was there that Herzer found the bones of a large fossil fish. Realizing the importance of these fossils, he brought them to Buffalo and the 1866 meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, where he showed finds to the prominent paleontologist John S. Newberry.

By the next meeting of the association Newberry had described the large fish. The title of Newberry's report, published in the proceedings volume for the 1867 meeting, was "On Some Remarkable Fossil Fishes, Discovered by Rev. H. Herzer, in the Black Shale (Devonian) at Delaware, Ohio." He named the fish *Dinichthys herzeri*, Herzer's terrible fish.

Newberry noted that Herzer found the

remains of this fish, "... while performing his pastoral duties, and living on a very small salary," adding that Herzer, "... had been a most zealous and remarkably successful student of the local geology." Herzer's find was all the more remarkable because he made his discovery in an area considered barren of fossils.

*Dinichthys herzeri* was indeed a terrible fish. One jaw bone alone was about two feet long. Newberry described the fish as having, "... wonderfully strong and massive (head bones)..." and, "... two great incisors."

This fearsome creature with the thick, heavy bones may have reached a length of 15 feet. In the colorful language of the nineteenth century Newberry wrote,

*Herman Herzer's Terrible Fish had a jawbone about two feet long and was a fearsome creature which may have reached a length of 15 feet. The picture above is of a fish very similar to Dinichthys Herzeri.*

"Such was the power of this tremendous dental apparatus, that the bodies of our largest living fishes would be instantly pierced and crushed by it, if exposed to its action."

To this date Herzer's terrible fish survives as a distinct species of fossil fish, and, while it may be the most notable of Herzer's paleontological discoveries, it was not the last. He continued to collect intensely in the quarries of Marblehead Peninsula, in the shales of the Cleveland area, in the limestones north of Columbus, and in many other locations throughout Ohio and other states. Nor was *Dinichthys herzeri* the only fossil named for him. Long dead creatures ranging from a shark to a clam have been given the appellation *herzeri* in honor of their discoverer.

Herzer's collecting earned him an association with the Ohio Geological survey from 1869-1875. In addition to this and his ministry he still found time to become a teacher at German Wallace Col-

lege, where he joined the faculty in 1876. German Wallace was a German Methodist college founded in 1864. It merged with Baldwin University in 1913 to form today's Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio. In 1876 Herzer was hired by the Kentucky Geological Survey to collect fossils, ores, rocks, and other materials.

Continuing to show the diversity of his talents, he began a five-year stint as superintendent of the German Methodist orphanage of Berea in 1878. At the orphanage Herzer guided boys and girls, insisting them to learn projects and trades which would be profitable in the future. Boys were taught farm work and industry and girls were taught essential skills as sewing, as well as other household duties. The orphanage was reputed to be a place of stern discipline and firm management.

It was in 1886 that Herzer became curator of the museum at German Wallace College, a museum which already

A drawing of the jaw bone found by Herman Herzer was included in the Geological Survey of Ohio, published in 1873. The inside face of the mandible is shown at top and the external at bottom.



many of his collecting finds. A decade and a half later, in the College Catalog of 1901-'02 we read that Herzer gathered, "...a very valuable collection of specimens for scientific and ethnological studies..." The total collection consisted of several thousand specimens and included fossils of fishes, corals, clams, sponges, and plants. During his tenure as curator the museum became known as the Herman Herzer Museum.

In his later years Herzer published several scientific papers. He often described specimens in his own collection, and welcomed people into his home to view his finds. In an 1897 paper on fossil plants he wrote, "Some more very remarkable features of these plants can be seen at my house."

Herzer studied plants and various species of birds and owls. He also was a conchologist (conchology is that branch of zoology concerned with shells) and an excellent taxidermist. In 1945 his daughter, Mrs. John C. Otto presented a pair of passenger pigeons to the Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society. The birds had been mounted by her father in 1865.

The Herzers left Berea and moved to Marietta in 1899, where he became pastor of the German Methodist Church. His sermons were well regarded, and he was a respected member of the community. Marietta newspaper reports from 1909 tell of a large family gathering to celebrate the golden wedding anniversary of Herman and Pauline. It describes the party as a beautiful occasion honoring the Herzers for having had a, "...long, happy, and successful journey through life."

Herman Herzer died on May 26, 1912, only a little more than six months after the death of his wife. However, his work has been continued. The Cleveland Museum of Natural History's world class fossil fish collection was built up in large part due to the efforts of Peter Bungart from 1923-1947, and Bungart, as a young child, had watched his father collect fossil fish with Herman Herzer.

A kind-hearted gentleman, Herzer mastered many fields of interest, and the enthusiasm he brought to each has inspired succeeding generations. *Dinichthys herzeri* and the other fossils he discovered are tangible evidence of the accomplishments for which grateful scientific and academic communities continue to re-



member and honor him.

At the Cleveland Museum of Natural History Herzer's picture is included in an exhibit of giant fossil fish, and in 1967 Baldwin-Wallace College dedicated a memorial plaque to him. It says, "This remarkable scholar, whose geological collection won national recognition, pioneered in the study of the earth sciences at this College and helped build an early tradition for great teaching."

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*Herman Herzer lived a long and productive life, making contributions in many fields, but he will always be remembered as the discoverer of Herzer's Terrible Fish (Dinichthys Herzeri).*