

# HERPETOLOGICAL HISTORY

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## *Rhadinaea* “sargenti,” a Misspelled Patronym Honoring Commander William M. Sergeant (1902–1983)

The snake *Rhadinaea sargenti* is endemic to east-central Panama, where it was discovered about 1936 during surveys and mapping of the Río Chagres drainage—a watershed critical for lock operations in the Panama Canal. Type specimens are catalogued in the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) as having been collected by Dr. H.C. Clark, who, however, supplied the material but did not actually collect it. Herbert C. Clark, the first director of the Gorgas Memorial Laboratory (GML), oversaw a snake census in various parts of Panama during 1929–1953 (summary and references in Myers 2003:4–5). Clark’s early material sent to MCZ was turned over by Director Thomas Barbour to his student Emmett Reid Dunn for identification. Dunn started visiting GML in 1939 and had access to background information on Clark’s census. Later that year Dunn and Bailey (1939) described some species that Clark had sent to the MCZ, including *Rhadinaea sargenti*, which was collected by “Sargent’s party.” Dunn and Bailey (*op. cit.*: 4) noted that “Mr. W.M. Sargent, head of “B” [survey] party, was especially interested [in the snake census]. His party took 78 snakes, on most of which we have detailed field data.”

Unfortunately the name of the engineer “especially interested” in collecting snakes was misspelled. His correct name is William Manuel Sergeant (Fig. 1). Sergeant wrote to Ernest Williams at MCZ in 1978, saying that “Sometime between 1935 and 1938, The Panama Canal conducted a field survey to locate the Chagres River divide [requiring] that machete-men cut over 100 miles of jungle trails along the divide . . . Among the snakes caught by my party was a small non-venomous snake [that] turned out to be a new find and my name (misspelled) was included in the classification.” Williams supplied the reference wanted by Sergeant and copied his response to Myers, who picked up on the correspondence, asking Sergeant for further information about his work in Panama. Sergeant provided the following:

In 1906, at age four years, I left New York for the Isthmus of Panama, where my father was employed by the Isthmian Canal Commission on the construction of the Canal. I returned to the States after graduating from the Canal Zone high school in 1922. I received the degree of Bachelor of Civil Engineering from Louisiana State University in 1929. From 1929 to 1941 I was employed by the Panama Canal on engineering projects, including the construction of the Madden Dam on the Chagres River. Upon completion of the Dam I worked on investigations in connection with the Dam, its

appurtenances and its watershed, including the survey to locate and close the gap of the Chagres River divide at the headwaters of its two principal tributaries, the Pequeni and the Esperanza Rivers. Later I worked on the plans for a third set of locks for the Canal.

I resigned from The Panama Canal in 1941 and went on active duty with the Navy. During World War II, I served with the Civil Engineering Corps of the Navy in the Canal Zone, Ecuador, continental United States, Hawaii and the Philippines. In 1946 I was detached from active duty with the Navy and resumed employment with The Panama Canal on engineering studies for a sea-level canal in Colombia and Central America, including several routes in Panama. In 1951 I was assigned to the Panama Canal Company as Supervising Construction Inspector for Government construction contracts in the Canal Zone.

August 1, 1960 I retired from the Panama Canal Company after 32.8 years of Federal service and returned to the United States.

September 1, 1962 I was transferred to the Naval Reserve Retired List with the grade of Commander, after 26.5 years in the Naval Reserve.” [William M. Sergeant in letter to Myers, December 14, 1978, AMNH Herpetology Archives]

Much of Sergeant’s employment history is corroborated in issues of *The Panama Canal Review* (October 5, 1951; January 3, 1958). We are unaware of publications by him, except for an editorial titled “Our Opportunities” in his 1922 high school yearbook (*The Zonian*, Balboa, Canal Zone); he expanded on the importance of learning Spanish in order for Americans “to get their full share of Latin American trade, which has been practically monopolized by European countries.” William Manuel Sergeant was born in Havana, Cuba on August 17, 1902; he died on February 25, 1983.

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FIG. 1. William M. Sergeant, a Cuban American engineer responsible for the discovery of *Rhadinaea sargenti* during trail-cutting operations in the Panama Canal watershed. This photograph, dated July 15, 1960, was taken a few weeks before Sergeant's retirement.

*Rhadinaea sargenti* is a rare snake (Myers 1974:162–163, 245; Ibáñez et al. “1994” [1995]). It has been reported in print mostly from specimens obtained by Sergeant, whose “B” party “took five of the six specimens” (Dunn and Bailey 1939:4, 11). The sixth specimen, a paratype from the Piedras-Pacora ridge, may have been obtained by the “E party.” The holotype and three paratypes are in the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ 42764, 42787–42789); two other paratypes collected by Sergeant's party might have been discarded (see below). An additional specimen from the Panama snake census—not a type—was retained by Clark for his GML collection (Myers 1974:245). Five new specimens, however, have been collected in recent decades (unpublished, including Fig. 2).

The 12 known specimens come from localities widely scattered in low mountains east of the Panama Canal “in humid tropical forest that lies on the wet side of evergreen seasonal forest” (Myers 1974:162). These mountains, unnamed on most maps, are the “Chagres Highlands,” which provide a lower montane forest refuge for some rare snakes and frogs. The specimen in Fig. 2 is from the northeastern periphery of the Chagres Highlands (at 9°19'45"N, 79°9'12"W); this geologically complex uplift contains the important Chagres drainage as well as more eastern streams that drain directly north to the Caribbean Sea or south to the Bay of Panama (Myers et al. 2012).

Dunn and Bailey (1939:11) included in the original description two uncatalogued heads; these are paratypes but their disposition is unknown to us. Most of Clark's Panama Snake Survey was based on heads. As summarized by Myers (2003:4), “Unfortunately, over 90% of the [13,745] GML specimens were apparently discarded after Dunn's study, except for whole specimens and selected heads especially of rare species that were placed in major museums. Fewer than 1000 specimens with data were saved from the Panama snake census, which spanned a quarter of a century.”



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FIG. 2. *Rhadinaea sargenti* Dunn and Bailey, a distinctive species roughly 300 mm in total length. This little snake is known only from central Panama, where it occurs east of the Panama Canal in low, forested mountains designated as the “Chagres Highlands” (Myers et al. 2012). The uniformly blackish sides are diagnostic; *R. sargenti* is most closely related to *R. vermiculiceps* (Cope)—the generic type species, which occurs in highlands west of the Panama Canal.

Dunn was an influential herpetologist who left an important body of research. He, however, was not the most careful worker and left two misspelled names for the Panamanian fauna: *Rhadinaea* “*sargenti*” and *Colostethus* “*panamansis*.” These cannot be corrected. The last name was an incorrect latinization that Dunn himself later emended to “*panamensis*” (Grant et al. 2006), but by a vote of 13 to 11 the International Commission of Zoological Nomenclature ruled that Dunn's original spelling must be maintained (ICZN 2008: Opinion 2195).

Myers had explained to Sergeant that “rules of nomenclature consider the stability of a name to be more important than the correctness of its formation.” Myers promised to point out the misspelled name in a future supplement to his *Rhadinaea* monograph. That planned “supplement” was superseded by other publications on the genus, but we are pleased finally to note the misspelling and to honor Commander Sergeant's service to his profession and to his country.

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