

The West Coast's Little Slit Shell, *Anatoma kelseyi*

By Bill Merilees

Every shell collection is a 'grab bag' of material - a collection of specimens - as unique at its curator. Peter Henson's collection was not an exception. From his earliest years as a young boy in England he developed an interest in molluscs but it was not until his appointment as Indian Agent to Masset on Haida Gwaii that the expression of this interest blossomed! (Merilees, 2008)

Between March 15th, 1957 until June 15th, 1962 Peter meticulously recorded 2,297 entries in his shell catalogue. His penultimate dredge sample recorded as, "*In 100 fathoms, west and slightly north of Rose Spit, [Graham Island] June 15, 1962. Bottom of silty mud, with thousands of brittle stars*", contained a number of Little Slit Shells *Scissurella kelseyi*. This species is now recognised as *Anatoma kelseyi*. At 5mm, *Anatoma kelseyi* is miniscule compared to its gigantic highly prized relatives.



Rick Harbo photo

We are not certain if Peter was 'on board' Bill Wylie's fishing boat "Dungeness" when the sample was taken. Peter is believed to have often lent his dredge (given him by Dr. Ian McTaggart-Cowan of the University of British Columbia) to friends in the commercial fishing community. His expectation was a bottom sample or two from their fishing grounds when they returned to port.

Slit Shells, (as opposed to the Little Slit Shells) are the very large warm water species that attract considerable attention from shell collectors. They have been prized by Emperors – and have also developed an intriguing, almost mythological, 'cult' following. Specimens of these large species occasionally appear at our Club's auctions, much to the delight of the members. A perfect specimen of spectacular size (230 mm or 9 inches!) of *Pleurotomaria rumphii* recently sold for \$3,500 at the online dealer, indopacificseashells.com !

Along with the abalones, slit shells are among the most ancient lineages of gastropods. The 'slit' in their shells is an evolutionary feature important for respiration and possibly excretion of waste.

For the interest of members (and to enhance our Club's scholarship fund) two lots of *Anatoma kelseyi* will be available at the club's next shell auction in August!

Reference:

Merilees, B., 2008: A Love of Molluscs: Peter Henson's Story. *Discovery, Journal of Nature Vancouver*, Vol. 37(2): 18-21.