GEOGRAPHY AT CLARK: THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS, 1921–1971

William A. Koelsch
Graduate School of Geography
Clark University
Worcester, Massachusetts

The Clark Graduate School of Geography, established in 1921, is the now oldest Ph.D.-granting independent department of geography in America. By the sixtieth anniversary of its establishment, in 1981, it had turned out nearly 300 Ph.D.'s, far more than any other geography department in this country. As such, the School has been a major institutional contributor of trained manpower to geography both in this country and abroad.

The initial decision to found the Graduate School of Geography was a response to a severe institutional crisis facing Clark University in 1919 with the imminent retirement of its principal intellectual resource, psychologist-President G. Stanley Hall. The Clark trustees had been unsuccessful in their attempts to find another psychologist to succeed Hall and renovate the aging psychology program, on which the University's scholarly visibility had been largely based. The trustees were then persuaded by their President, Charles H. Thurber, editor-in-chief of the Boston textbook publisher Ginn and Company, that they should rebuild Clark's visibility in research and graduate training around a discipline as undeveloped at the graduate level in 1919 as psychology had been in the 1890s.

Dr. Thurber had a discipline in mind and a candidate for President, a Harvard geographer named Wallace Atwood who had been unable to get his own university to develop geography on a substantial scale and was the author of a school text about to be published by Ginn and Company. Atwood was invited to assume the Clark Presidency and reorganize the University around geography and related social sciences to produce a "great geographical institute" on a European model. hopes ran high; indeed, at the inaugural banquet one enthusiast even predicted that Atwood and his Clark geographers would "be able to tell the Lord about this wonderful earth of His and perhaps tell him how to 'arise and amend it'...."

The experiment was crippled from the start for a number of reasons, however. Atwood was never able to attract the faculty who might have put Clark at the cutting edge of the discipline and kept it there. Indeed, he was never able to attract anyone who currently held a full-time position in any other university. He was refused by Charles Colby, V.C. Finch, Wellington Jones, and a young historian named Derwent Whittlesey, among others. Until 1923 Harvard-trained meteorologist Charles F. Brooks, with three years of university teaching experience at Yale, was the only full-time member of the staff.

There were, however, some interesting part-timers. Government scientists H.L. Shantz, O.E. Baker and Curtis F. Marbut; the Pole Stanislaus Novakovsky, who later became a leading Marxist geographer in his own country; and a bright young Ph.D. candidate who coordinated the introduction geography course and lectured on Latin America, Preston James. By far the most celebrated part-timer, however, was

Miss Ellen Churchill Semple, who lectured one semester each year until 1928 and completed at Clark her last, least known, and best book, The Geography of the Mediterraneans. Acquiring Miss Semple, then President of the Association of American Geographers, was a coup comparable to acquiring a used Rolls Royce in good running condition. Miss Semple was a woman of strong convictions about geographers and geography, and her presence and teaching helped give Clark its early reputation as a "Citadel of Determinism."

The appointment of newly-minted Chicago Ph.D. Clarence Jones in 1923, however, marked the last time Atwood secured an American geographer for his permanent staff who did not have his highest earned degree from Clark. Even Samuel Van Valkenburg, the Zurich Ph.D. who was to succeed Brooks in 1932 in climatology, had earlier Clark connection as a visiting professor in the 1920s. Other early Atwood appointees included Guy Burnham (A.M. 1922), who remained on the staff as cartographer for forty-four years, and Douglas Ridgley (Ph.D. 1925 in geographic education), who also ran such auxiliary enterprises as the Summer School, correspondence courses in geography, world cruises, and summer bus tours led by professional geographers. Full-time Atwood era faculty eventually included W. Elmer Ekbllaw (Ph.D. 1926), who was both Managing Editor of the new Economic Geography magazine and editor of the short-lived Home Geographic Monthly, conceived as a rival of the National Geographic.

Wallace Atwood, Jr. (Ph.D. 1930) was brought back in early 1932 to assist his father in physiography. During World War II Henry Warman (Ph.D. 1945) succeeded Jones in Latin America and also picked up Ridgley's work in geography in education.

During the early years of the School, substantial efforts were made toward strengthening the teaching of geography in the region. The most long-lived result of these efforts was the formation of the New England Geographical Conference, which combined in the late 1940s with the recently established Northeastern Division of the Association of American Geographers, and is now the New England/St. Lawrence Valley Geographical Society. The New England Geographical Conference held its first meeting at Clark on January 20, 1922, on the theme of "The Training of Teachers of Geography." Addresses were given on the state of geography in the region's normal schools by Robert Brown of the Rhode Island College of Education; on the aspects of geography which should be emphasized in normal school training, by Mabel Stark of Salem State Normal; and on the training of geography teachers, by President Atwood. In the evening, Miss Semple gave an illustrated lecture on Japan.

The idea of such a gathering proved a popular one, perhaps in part because luncheon, tea at the Atwoods, and dinner were provided gratis. Geographic educators from all the New England states attended, as well as visitors from New York, Missouri, Dakota and Bulgaria. Atwood refused to load up the conference with papers; rather, he said, "I want the geography people to get together, talk things over which are interesting to them -- things that are vital -- and stay together long enough so that they talk some subjects out and reach perhaps some definite conclusions." One thing discussed and concluded was the matter of a permanent organization. At that historic meeting a permanent professional organization was set up, whose purpose would be (and I quote the local newspaper account verbatim) "pushing the science of teaching geography." From 1922 until the 1950s most of the annual meetings of the organization were held at Clark, though in the last 25 years or so only one of them, that of 1977 has been held there.
In 1934 an American Council on Education study identified the Clark department as one of four institutions having “distinguished” facilities for Ph.D. training in geography. By that year Atwood had fleshed out the geography program, the geography faculty numbered eight (five of them full-time), and the school was attracting a steady stream of M.A. and Ph.D. candidates. But he had lost his two leading researchers, Semple and Brooks, one through death and the other by resignation. Both Atwood and his staff were heavily involved in the production of textbooks, lecturing before the community and educational groups, and teacher preparation, rather than in advancing the frontier of geographic research as it was being shaped in the 1920s and 1930s at the Midwest Spring field conferences and elsewhere.

The inbreeding of the Clark faculty also limited its intellectual influence within the discipline. Faculty inbreeding was not unusual in geography at that time; indeed, Chicago, Wisconsin and Berkeley were to practice such incestuous relationships with the reckless abandon of Egyptian pharaohs. At Clark, however, inbreeding appears to have reinforced the commitment to a style of geography already passing by the date of the School’s founding, a model emphasizing environmental causation and human response. As Van Valkenburg recalled much later, Clark was perceived in that period of professional reversion from deterministic hypotheses as “the last bulwark to be stormed.”

This mode of analysis was transmitted through a curriculum which was essentially frozen from about 1927, when at Clarence Jones' suggestion, a Midwest-type Fall Field Camp was instituted, until the early 1960s. As one examines the various Clark University catalogues from the 1920s onward, one is struck not so much by the changes, although there were many in detail, as by the remarkable persistence in the consensual view of the structure of the discipline packaged for novice graduate geographers by the professionals in residence. Most of the graduate courses offered at Clark in the 1950s would have been quite familiar to a graduate student of the 1920s and 1930s. Merle Prunty's criticisms of the graduate curriculum of the late 1930s and early 1940s, most importantly the limited emphasis on research training and the transmission of routine facts, would have been equally germane twenty years later, with few exceptions.

Research by Allan Bushong and Dean Rugg suggests some of the consequences of Clark's clinging to this rapidly obsolescing mode of graduate education. The two faculty members of the 1930s and 1940s who held to the older environmentalism most tenaciously, Atwood and Ekblaw, supervised most of the dissertations. Ekblaw had produced 25 Ph.D.'s by 1946, a total equalled in the profession only by Charles Cobly of Chicago, and one more than Harlan Barrows had produced. Atwood had been mentor for 19 Ph.D.'s, the same number as Carl Sauer in the same period. Comparisons are usually odious, and there are always exceptional cases, but Bushong's list of mentors and students suggests that, in the light of their later work, the model of graduate training at Clark was far less effective in producing innovative, publicly recognized scholars, persons who shaped new directions in the discipline, than either Chicago or Berkeley in this period. Rugg's research indicates that Clark was able in this period to place a smaller percentage of its Ph.D.'s at major institutions than any other Ph.D. granting department except George Peabody, another primarily teacher training institution.

What might be called "the tenacity of the taught [environmental] tradition" appears to be a central factor in isolating Clark geography from the stimulation of the new ideas flowing out of the Midwestern departments and Berkeley during the 1920s and 1930s. Clarence Jones, who was Charles Cobly's first Ph.D., was himself mentor of eighteen Ph.D.'s while at Clark. As a group these proved to be more productive than either Atwood's or Ekblaw's Ph.D.'s. Jones appears to have been the channel through which the new Midwestern geographic ideas were bootlegged into the Geography Workróom; Merle Prunty tells us that Jones called his attention to The Nature of Geography, as extra reading, which it remained at Clark through the late 1950s. According to Prunty, Carl Sauer's name was not mentioned at Clark, though Berkeley-generated ideas were accessible in principle to Clark graduate students through the Library's subscription to the University of California Publications in Geography. Although Jones and Warman were both Latin Americanists, the Clark Library did not regularly receive Ibero-Americana, the other principal early outlet for research of the "Berkeley School," until 1963.

Van Valkenburg submitted his resignation in November, 1945, citing among his reasons low salaries, insufficient financial support for the School, and the department's stagnation in the face of the postwar rejuvenation of other graduate departments of geography. "What we need," he wrote Atwood, "is a new Director [Atwood was still Director], new energy, and a new program." Van Valkenburg himself was brought back in 1946 as the new Director and, because of the resignation of Jones in 1944 and both Atwoods in 1946, followed in a few years by Ekblaw's death, the department he headed was very different from that of the 1930s. Financially the situation remained bleak, however, throughout "Dr. Van's" sixteen years as Director, and the graduate program also was not radically changed.

Just as midwesterner Clarence Jones had been an intellectual conduit for the newer developments in mainstream geography in the 1920s and 1930s, so another midwesterner, Raymond Murphy, a Wisconsin Ph.D., played that role in the department in the late 1940s and 1950s. Under Murphy's editorship Economic Geography took on a problem focus and opened its pages to a broader range of contributors. His "Problems of Economic Geography" course was a true professional seminar, focused on research methodology and critical appraisals of the most recent literature. The Clark appointment also gave Murphy a chance to give form to the then young field of urban geography. Murphy was the only Clark geographer of this period with significant intellectual ties to the professional mainstream. In William Bunge's 1961 matrix of most cited geographers, Murphy was ranked seventh among 86 publicly recognized researchers in the field. Though Columbia-trained geomorphologist Richard Lougee was also an intensely committed researcher, his interests in glacial theory were remote both from the old-fashioned regional physiography courses he taught and from the emerging disciplinary concerns of geographers during the 1950s.

Although in the 1930s Clark had one of the larger departments of geography, the enlarged and better financed graduate geography departments in other universities in the postwar period had placed Clark's Graduate School of Geography at a severe competitive disadvantage the late 1950s. Like several other departments of that period, notably Michigan, Ohio State, and Indiana, a large proportion of the staff was nearing retirement. As a result of several vacancies, in the period of 1960–62 there was
another "changing of the guard," bringing with it the opportunity to appoint new faculty and reorganize the program to take account of new tendencies in the discipline in the postwar era. In 1960 came J. W. Birch (Ph.D. Reading), an economic geographer and somewhat quantitatively oriented rural and land use specialist. Rodman Sneed, a Louisiana State-trained physical geographer, and Robert Gates, a Chicago-trained water resources specialist with environmental management and behavioral interests, were appointed to the other vacancies. Murphy succeeded Van Valkenburg as Director in July, 1962.

Murphy and Birch realized both the need for renovation and the slendorness of Clark's existing resources. They worked out a strategy for survival which would minimize physical geography and teacher training and pull the department toward what had become the geographic mainstream of the post World War II era by reorganizing around the department's two remaining major assets, Murphy's professional standing in economic and urban geography, and the journal, Economic Geography. A series of research seminars was instituted, Murphy and Birch taught a joint seminar on models in geography, and Birch taught the first quantitative methods course. In the Spring of 1963, as Visiting Professor, I taught a research seminar in methods in historical geography, uncultivated at Clark since Miss Semple's day. Thus the end of Murphy's first year as Director, a period of limited modernization had begun and significant steps taken to provide graduate students with contemporary mainstream perspectives and research training opportunities.

The Murphy-Birch strategy was essentially a holding action, emphasizing a limited range of special strengths in order to buy time for younger faculty to build up professional visibility by the time of Murphy's anticipated retirement. Unfortunately, the reasoning behind it was either not clear or not acceptable to some of the principals in what became a protracted period of internal dissension over the pace and direction of change after Birch and I left in the summer of 1963. The result was Murphy's resignation as Director in December, 1964. An external committee was formed to seek a Director from outside the department. The result of that search was the appointment of Saul Cohen as fourth Director of the School.24

Figure 1 Raymond Murphy
Clark

Geography in New England

The period 1965 to 1971, known locally as the “Cohenske Renaissance” was first and foremost a period of rapid expansion. The faculty more than doubled from the six slots (one of them part-time) of the 1950s to fifteen full-time tenure track positions by 1971, four of them joint appointments with related departments (History, Government, Psychology, and Biology). The number of graduate students in residence increased from about forty in 1964–65 to a peak of about sixty in 1971–72, almost all of them enrolled as candidates for the Ph.D. rather than the so-called “terminal M.A.’s.” Drastic reorganization of the undergraduate program, the increased appeal of the department’s environmental and cognitive orientations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and special dedication of Berkeley-trained historical/cultural geographer Martyn Bowden to Freshman instruction brought hundreds of Clark undergraduate students into the department, yielding six-to-nine-fold increases in numbers of majors and unprecedented numbers of graduate assistantships. The renewal of the graduate curriculum, begun in the early 1960s, was carried to a point where almost no course would have been recognizable to a Clark graduate of the first four decades.

The recently vacated Library building was remodelled to provide improved teaching and research spaces for geography and related disciplines, including a modern cartography facility. The staff moved outward into the university to stimulate other academic programs, as well as to take on major administrative roles. Much of this physical expansion and program development was funded by a steady stream of grants from the U.S. Office of Education and the National Science Foundation, agencies well known to Cohen from his year of service in Washington as Executive Officer of the Association of American Geographers.25 After 1969 Economic Geography was once again made over under Gerry Karaska’s editorship, emphasizing current spatial theory, models, and quantitative methods. A new, provocative and initially widely read “radical journal of geography,” Antipode was begun by a group of Clark students and faculty and edited by Richard Peet.26

It was, in retrospect, a yeasty time, a time of new if sometimes shaky foundations, a time of numerous programmatic experiments, a time of the effective reinstitutionalization of geography at Clark after a long period of isolation from the internal life of the university. It was also a time of great openness, intellectually as well as structurally, and Cohen encouraged the free exploration of new ideas and interchange for both students and faculty.

Much of the faculty’s energies in those years, however, went into internal and institutional concerns, saving the university in period of successive administrative crises, and the like. Institutional stability, personal development, and some increased personal visibility for a few members of the department were gained. Little of this, however, had significant long-term scholarly impact on the discipline nationally, in part because little in the way of finished research surfaced in the mainstream geological journals which, including Economic Geography, Clark geographers tended to ignore.27

The School celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary in April, 1971, with an all-day event taking place just in advance of the Boston meetings of the Association of American Geographers.28 The program included a reunion of alumni and friends of the department, the dedication of the new physical facilities, and a special academic convocation. Brief addresses were made by Cohen, by “Wally” Atwood, Jr., by

NOTES
7. I am indebted to Arthur J. Krim for the phrase.
13. Material relating to the origin and earliest years of NESTVAL may be found in the
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Wallace W. Atwood Papers, in The Monadnock, and in scrapbooks of local newspaper clippings, all in the Clark University Archives; the records of NESTVAL itself, extending back to 1937, are also on deposit there. See William A. Koelsch and Stuart W. Cam“ell, “Resources for the History of Geography: Clark University Archive,” History of Geography Newsletter No. 2 (1982), pp. 32–34.


25. Much of the material in these pages is drawn from my personal files, which will eventually be deposited in the Clark University Archives, and from memories of my own participation in the events described, corroborated by materials in the Archives.

