Prunty also assigned me additional readings, and once a week he put me through a tough two-hour tutorial to drill into me the undergraduate geography major I had not had. I owe him an enormous debt of gratitude for the time and energy he invested, both then and later, in teaching me to be a geographer, and his spirit still hovers over my shoulder whenever I sit at my typewriter.

One fine May day in 1947 he informed me that I was driving with him to Birmingham the next day. I was delighted, because I am always ready and willing to go anywhere at the drop of a hat, and that is how I became one of the five charter members of SEDAAG. The American Society for Professional Geographers (ASPG), which had been formed in Washington during World War II, had authorized the formation of regional divisions, and Prunty and Allen Tower of Birmingham-Southern had decided to organize one in the Southeast.

We met in Tower’s living room. The other two were Merle W. “Duke” Myers of Mississippi State and William V. Miller of Tennessee Planning. Miller was the only one who was a member of the AAG, because back in those days you had to be elected to membership. We agreed to hold the first real organizational meeting at a breakfast during the annual meeting of the AAG in Charlottesville at Christmas 1947, and I was not invited, because by then I was a graduate student at Northwestern, and extraterritorial to the Division.

In the fall of 1949 I came back and joined the faculty with the munificent salary of $3,200 for nine months. Shortly after we arrived in Athens my wife went to a local store and bought a pair of shoes. She asked the clerk to charge them, but the clerk said icily, “We only accept cash.” My wife was a bit taken aback, but proudly told the clerk that her husband was on the university faculty. “Humph,” snorted the clerk, “they’re the worst of the lot.”

In the fall of 1949 the Department of Geography and Geology at the University of Georgia had six faculty members (Fig. 1), and we were a bumptious and feisty lot. Merle Prunty, the oldest, was only 32, although he looked older because he was almost completely bald. I was the baby at 25. Prunty and Parizek had their Ph.D.s, but Lane, Zeilinsky, Mather and I were still trying to finish our dissertations.

Eldon Parizek was our tame geologist. His Ph.D. was in petroleum geology, and he did a truly awesome job of retooling himself in the hard-rock geology of the Piedmont. He taught the entire advanced geology sequence, but some of the rest of us taught introductory geology and geomorphology courses.

Parizek used to attend SEDAAG meetings with us. Back in those days SEDAAG met in the latter part of the week, with a Friday evening banquet. We used to vie to sit next to him at the banquet, because he was a devout Catholic who could not eat meat on Friday, and he glumly swapped you his steak for your potato.

Charles F. “Chuck” Lane was our physical geographer. He was writing his dissertation on the geomorphology of Grassy Cove, a large solution valley in the Cumberland Plateau of Tennessee. I spent my first year drawing maps for my dissertation on hill sheep farming in the Southern Uplands of Scotland, and was not
Even willing to take the time to attend the annual meeting of the AAG in April 1950. I have missed only one AAG annual meeting since then.

Wilbur Zelinsky was the wild man of the bunch. He was always in a hurry, always tilted forward at an angle of 20° or so. He had decided that shaving wasted too much time, so he had started reading a book while he was shaving. When he arrived in the department in the morning his face was flecked with bits of blood-stained toilet paper he had stuck on to stanch the spots where he had nicked himself.

Zelinsky developed an outstanding course on the South, and he was racing around Georgia collecting information for his dissertation on the state’s settlement patterns. Unlike the rest of us, who saw the dissertation merely as another degree requirement, he wanted his to be a major scholarly contribution. I have always felt sad that he never published it, because it is an extremely fine piece of work, and I may be one of the few people outside his dissertation committee who has ever read it.

Lester Eugene “Cotton” Mather was working on his dissertation on the Sand Hills of Nebraska. Even back in those days he was a professional character. He had grown up on a farm in Iowa, and he retained the instincts of an Iowa farm boy for the rest of his days. Any time I wanted to find out how an Iowa farmer would react to something I would test it out on Cotton, and he was pitch-perfect, 99 and 44/100ths percent accurate.

Cotton knew the cattle business, because his father was one of the leading cattle buyers in Iowa, and he regularly ranged the West buying cattle on commission for other Iowa farmers. Cotton quickly realized that farmers in Georgia were grasping for a replacement for cotton, and many of them hoped the answer would be in beef cattle.

He bought a rundown cotton farm near Athens, fences it and planted it to grass, stocked it with cattle, and then began ranging the state talking to farm groups and extolling the opportunities that cattle would create. After his talks eager listeners would crowd around to ask him where they could find cattle to buy, and of course he just happened to have exactly what they were looking for on his farm near Athens. I have no idea how many he sold, but I do know that few cattle remained on his farm for long.

Later, when he had decided to leave Georgia, he put his farm on the market, with a very prominent proviso that the owner would retain all mineral rights. “For further information, contact Prof. Mather at the Department of Geology at the University of Georgia.” That proviso probably tripled the sales price of the farm, and the purchaser paid a lot of money for some hard old Georgia granite.

Merle Prunty was a dominating, hard-driving person who did a superb job of building a department from scratch. In today’s jargon I think he might be called a “control freak.” He had an unhappy childhood. He did not get along with his stepmother, and was married when he was an undergraduate, which was virtually unheard of in those days. He essentially adopted his wife’s family, and rejected his own. He had an extremely close relationship with her, and relied on her to an extraordinary degree.

He received his Ph.D. from Clark in the early 1940s, and was commissioned in the Navy. The Navy assigned him duty as an instructor in its preflight school in Athens, and he decided that this would be a good place to make his home. He sold the university administration on the desirability of developing a department of geography and geology after the war had ended, and he launched it in the fall of 1946.

People who knew him later probably will not believe it, but in the early years Merle Prunty was no more than the first among equals. The faculty was aggressively democratic, and any one of us could and did tell him where to head in. James Woodruff, who joined the faculty several years later from a highly autocratic department, vividly remembered his first faculty meeting at Georgia. After Merle had pontificated at some length, one member of the faculty (and I fear it was I) blurted out, “Ah Merle, you’re full of it,” and he promptly shut up.
His personnel problems began, in my opinion, when he appointed to the faculty a sycophant who agreed with him no matter what he said, and thus supported he felt free to run roughshod over the rest of us. Perhaps we were spoiled, but we did not take kindly to such treatment, and in time we moved to other institutions where we felt our contributions would be more highly regarded.

Merle certainly knew how to build a program. He was highly sensitive to the critical importance of enrollment. He pressured all of us as well as himself to recruit major students for the department, and he did not allow any of us to teach an advanced course of our own choosing until we had recruited at least five new major students. He assiduously cultivated other programs, such as business and forestry, and he sold them on the idea of requiring their students to take courses in geography. He never let us forget that our jobs depended on teaching these service courses effectively and attractively.

I learned the necessity of motivating students and getting them interested in the subject matter, because most of them were in my classes under duress; the class was required, but their interests lay elsewhere. Back in those days the university served as a sort of unofficial matrimonial service for the state; one sad freshman girl, when asked why she had come to the university, said, "I came to be went with, but I ain’t yet." The spring quarter, when the sap began to rise in plants and students alike, was especially challenging.

Our normal teaching load was fifteen hours; three courses five times a week. Cartography and air photo interpretation courses met for two hours a day five days a week, and one horrendous quarter when I taught both I had twenty-five contact hours a week. We taught what and when the chair told us to teach. I taught one, sometimes two, sections of introductory physical geography the entire time I was at Georgia. We had to teach multiple sections of introductory and service courses, because our classrooms were small; the largest seated only thirty students.

We got to know our students well in small daily classes. For example, I learned not to call on one student who had a terrible stutter, because he insisted on prefacing his answer to any question by informing us that he was Alexander Bartholomew Higginbotham from Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College, thereby taking up a goodly portion of the class hour. At the end of my first year I dutifully went to the college graduation exercises, where I introduced myself to the mother of one of my students. She cocked her eye at me and snorted disdainfully, "You don’t look old enough to teach my son anything." I have not attended a graduation ceremony since then.

Despite our heavy teaching loads, Merle pushed us and himself hard to do research, and to travel to and to participate in regional and national meetings. We were strongly supported and encouraged by a wonderful gentleman named George H. Boyd, dean of the graduate school, who always seemed able to find research and travel funds for us. We enjoyed going to meetings, both because of what we saw en route and because of those with whom we interacted at the meetings themselves.

The bunch from Georgia were an arrogant lot, but I hope that our arrogance might have challenged others to do better and to compete with us. There were six of us in the early 1950s, when most geography programs in the Southeast had no more than two or three members, and often they were dominated by geologists in combined departments.

A few states might have had only one single academic geographer. The SEDAAG Steering Committee originally was a permanent nonelected group consisting of the chairs of the leading departments in each state. Perhaps the founders of SEDAAG created it to ensure that each state was represented in the affairs of the Division, but it was also an effective mechanism that enabled the wise old heads of the Division to ensure that the arrogant young pups did not get out of hand and run away with things.

In the early 1950s many geographers in the Southeast were insecure and fearful of trying to compete on the national stage. SEDAAG became our meeting, a place where we could present our papers to our schools without feeling intimidated. It was strongly supported by all of the departments in the region, and this support has made SEDAAG the strongest regional division in the AAG (with all due respect to the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers). I do think that this regional sense of insecurity lingered on longer than was necessary or appropriate.

In the early days we were expected to bring 50 copies of our abstracts to the meetings. Next it was 50 copies of our complete papers, and then someone got the bright idea of assembling and stapling together the entire set of papers and calling it a Memorandum Folia, which could be cited as a publication.

Such a makeshift patently was unsatisfactory, and SEDAAG obviously needed its own formal scholarly journal, but the inauguration of the Southeastern Geographer was long delayed because two departments wanted the editorship. Neither was strong enough to grab it, but each was strong enough to block the other. An intense personal animosity exacerbated this rivalry, and deferred the parturition of the journal for more than half a decade.

One of the personal highlights of my years at Georgia was the IGU tour of the Southwest. The XVIIth International Geographical Congress in Washington in 1952 was the first opportunity to visit the United States for a generation of geographers in Europe who had come of age in an era of war, postwar reconstruction, and stringent restrictions on travel and currency exchange.

The congress organizers laid on a toothsome array of post congress tours, and invited Merle Prunty to lead a tour of the Southwest. He was so busy that he deferred this opportunity to Cotton Mather, who invited me to tag along as his assistant, and assigned me responsibility for writing the guidebook for the tour.2

The southeastern excursion was a memorable experience for all of us, and it generated some wonderful friendships that I still cherish. We loaded 50 foreign geographers onto two Greyhound buses, anglophones on the first, francophones on the second. Of course Cotton assigned me to the second bus, where mercifully a few
Francophones were bilingual and kind enough to translate my comments for the rest of the group.

When we walked out of our very first morning rest stop the manager politely said, "Now ya'll come back and see us, ya hear," which subjected him to a long and bewildering explanation of currency exchange regulations and travel restrictions that made a return visit virtually impossible for Europeans.

One of our most unforgettable experiences came during a lunch stop at a small town in Georgia. We arrived a bit before the hotel was ready to feed us, and we gave the members of our group a few minutes to wander around the town, even though we realized it was unwise, because we never knew what some of them were going to do. One enterprising soul had actually opened a privy door and taken a picture of the startled occupant.

I had just sat down to eat with a sigh of relief when one of the excitable Latins came rushing in shouting, "The police have arrested Faucher!" Apparently the local chief of police had been sitting quietly in his office, boning up on the latest Dick Tracy comic book, when his phone began to ring off the wall. Frantic citizens were calling to report that communists were invading the town, and demanding to know how he was going to protect them.

By the time I reached the street he had two fingers hooked inside the collar of Faucher's shirt, and was shaking him as hard as he could. Poor Faucher, the dean of French agricultural geographers, knew not a word of English. He had a magnificent handlebar mustache, and its tips were going up and down like a yo-yo as the chief shook him.

When I politely inquired what was wrong the chief turned to me angrily and shouted, "I caught this bleeping communist taking pictures of an important United States Government installation. He must be a bleeping communist, because he can't even speak a word of English."

I tried to calm the chief by telling him that Faucher was one of a group of foreign geographers that I was leading on a tour of the Southeast, and then I made the mistake of pouring kerosene on the fire by telling him that I was a member of the faculty at the University of Georgia. "You are all a bunch of bleeping communists over there, too," he roared.

When I finally managed to get him calmed down enough to release Faucher, I expressed surprise that the town had a major government installation, because I was not aware of it, and the chief told me that he had caught Faucher red-handed taking a picture of the United States Government post office.

The early 1950s were the height of the McCarthy era, and ferreting out communists was high fashion. Georgia politicians were not about to be outdone, but the state was so poorly supplied with communists that they turned their attention to that other arch-enemy, proponents of racial integration. The Georgia campus endured a singularly nasty witch-hunt.

Not long after that my father-in-law from Milwaukee was visiting us, and the chairman and his wife came to my home to say hello to him and to drink my Scotch. Athens in those days was beer-wine-only, and the closest liquor store was in Atlanta, unless you were willing to pay the outrageous prices of the local bootlegger.

The chairman was genuinely concerned about me. He knew that I was young and naive, and knew that my father-in-law was a man of the world who would help me to realize how foolish I had been. He hitched his chair up close to my father-in-law's chair and confided, "Fraser's wife has been seeing attending meetings of interracial groups, and she will wreck his career if she doesn't stop."

I exploded, and told him that what my wife did was none of his or anybody else's damned business, but it was obvious that we could no longer stay in Georgia.

NOTES

1A map of the Mather farm in Clarke County, Georgia, is on page 202 of Eugene Cotton Mather and John Fraser Hart, "Fences and Farms," Geographical Review, Vol. 44, No. 2, April 1954, pp. 201-223.

2Eugene Mather and J. Fraser Hart, Southeastern Excursion Guidebook, Washington, DC: International Geographical Union, Seventeenth International Geographical Congress, 1952. Cotton subsequently turned leading field trips into an avocation. One of the first was a trans-Appalachian trip on which he and I led the students in his geomorphology classes. We stayed overnight at a resort that was renowned for its square dances, and he announced that we would have an evening campfire cookout to save money.

"We will stop in Chattanooga to buy the food we need," he said. The students were baffled when he drove past half a dozen nice new supermarkets, but they quickly got the word when he parked at one of the grungiest grocery stores in town and first walked into the liquor store next door. We had so much bourbon that we used it as starter fluid for the campfire.

In the evening we attended the square dance, and at intermission the proprietor, one Col. Taylor, proudly announced, "We are fortunate to have with us this evening a group of fine young Christian gentlemen from the University of Georgia, and I invite them all to stand up and be recognized." All of the fine young Christian gentlemen promptly stood up, except for Leon Adams, who had his bottle of bourbon in his jacket pocket, and its neck was trapped under the arm of his seat.

Leon gave a mighty yank, his bottle fell to the floor, and it rolled slowly and majestically across the empty dance floor to the microphone where the colonel was standing. Without batting an eye he added, "and I have here a prize for the fine young Christian gentleman who wants to come forward and claim it," which Leon did, to the applause of the assembled multitude.