LETTER FROM LEEPER

Hello, Benvenuto. Willkommen, Aloha
HSU geographers!!

A brief note from the last of the pre-1990 HSU Geography faculty, to apologize for the tardiness of this latest newsletter and explain its various purposes. First, the department wants to reconnect with you all. Second, we want to tell you what’s up with “old” faculty, as well as introduce the “newbie” faculty. Third, we want to brag a bit about achievements of the new department. Fourth, we want to share news of what HSU geographers are doing and invite you to share your news updates. Fifth, we want to see if there’s any interest out there for putting on a department reunion in the future featuring a picnic and more formal meal centered around some important HSU function.

Hope you enjoy this effort. Needless to say, if any info is wrong, please let me know. Should you be in the area, the department offers an open invitation for you to visit us. If you call, email or write me beforehand, I’ll be happy to have a parking pass ready for you.

Always, Joe Leeper

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GEOGRAPHY DEPARTMENT

Geography has a nearly 40-year history at HSU. At its inception in 1964, Geography was a program within a general education/service division of Humboldt State College called the Division of Social Sciences. Some of the first geography courses were taught by historians and economists. The first true geographer hired, Dr. John Coleman, helped establish a stand-alone department of Geography in the late 1960s when the new College of Behavioral and Social Sciences was formed. At this time, HSU had about 5,500 students and the dominant major was Forestry.

The “Dirty Half-Dozen”

The first HSU Geography Department consisted of just three geographers: Dr. Alvar Carlsson, Dr. Jonathan Lu, and Dr. John Coleman. After Dr. Carlsson moved to Bowling Green and Dr. Lu to the University of Northern Iowa, Dr. Coleman began the hiring of what was to be the core of the department for almost 25 years and what some students jokingly called the “Dirty Half-Dozen.”

Dr. Coleman hired Dr. Lowell “Gentle Ben” Bemmion and “Commander” Robert Plank from Indiana University in 1970. Dr. John Harper joined the department in the fall of 1971. Dr. Joe Leeper also came aboard then as a visitor for one quarter, but was subsequently offered a tenure-track position for the next year. Dr. Hal “Halito” Jackson joined the department a year later after several years at Millersville State University in Pennsylvania.

These six individuals put together a traditional department anchored by regional classes, and students were given great leeway in designing their major. In the late 70s, following an extensive survey of other geography majors, the program was changed to a more structured format, later modified to three core areas. This model proved to be very effective, as the number of majors reached over 100 during the early 1980s, a far cry from the 30-odd majors of the early 1970s. As today, few freshmen came to the campus as geography majors. Many were lured to the major after taking physical geography as a required course for another major or human geography as a general education course. Every geographer except Commander Plank and his cartography empire taught human geography, and each used their own approach and books, so students were exposed to five different approaches to geography.

Geography faculty were also readily available outside of class, sponsoring two yearly picnics with athletic events (until the faculty got too darned old) and an annual career day in geography. Classes were small and user-friendly, and the department had the best teaching faculty in the college according to several members within HSU higher administration.

Riding the Roller Coaster - the Decade of the '90s

As the 1990s arrived at HSU, faculty began planning more for the future given two important considerations: 1) impending faculty retirements and 2) the severe downturn in California's economy. Dr. Paul Blank came on board in 1990 as a lecturer, and helped the department hang tough through the recession years until we could begin replacing retiring faculty. When the College of Behavioral Sciences was disbanded mid-decade, the department
became part of the new College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. In 1996 Blank garnered a tenure-track position with the department and in 1997 Dr. Stephen Cunha filled yet another tenure-track position. Cunha's wife Mary Beth joined the department as a lecturer the next year. In 1998 and 1999 the department hired two more tenure-track faculty -- Dr. Margaret Pearce and Dr. Judy Walton, respectively. Walton replaced retiring Ben Bennion.

Recognizing a need to stay on the technological frontier of the discipline, and given a boost with the technological skills of Mary Cunha, former cart lab manager at UC Davis, the department decided to bring computer cartography to campus to complement existing GIS programs in Forestry and NRPI. This was accomplished in 1999 when Dr. Pearce snagged a $180,000 NSF Grant that funded a 15-station NT cartography and visualization lab, or "Kosmos" as we call it. The lab has been a boon for the department, turning out award-winning maps by students at national competitions such as NACIS (North American Cartographic Information Society) and giving us recognition throughout the geography profession as well as across campus. Both Geology and Sociology are now also using the lab. We are in the process of starting a Cartographic Institute that will help fund the lab in the future and provide beautiful maps for clients. Sadly, Dr. Pearce left us in 2000 to move to Michigan, but her legacy lives on.

New faculty have provided new energy and lots of new ideas. Dr. Cunha helped revamp the major, and along with Dr. Walton also revamped our physical facilities, including the department office, the map storage room, and the new Harper Room. Both Cunha and Walton have been active in bringing grant money to the department -- Cunha through his efforts at establishing the national headquarters of the California Geographical Alliance at HSU, and Walton through an Information Competence Grant aimed at improving geography students' research and writing skills. (Not to be outdone, Leeper snagged his own big grant last year to help coordinate and run the Redwood Area History/Social Science Project.)

Geography into the 21st Century

HSU has changed a great deal since the 1970s. Student numbers have risen to over 8,000 on occasion and now hover around the 7,100 mark. Forestry no longer has the largest number of majors; rather, Biology, Art, Business, and Elementary Ed dominate. Geography usually has about the 15th largest number of majors on campus out of over 48 offered. There is more diversity on campus in terms of age, gender and ethnicity. As on many campuses across the country, the gender ratio on campus has been reversed, with female students now slightly outnumbering males.

Geography continues to have the highest student-faculty ratio on campus, in large part the result of dynamic lecturing to classes of over 150 students by Drs. Blank and Cunha. Currently, Geography has 116 majors and the department consistently graduates over 45 students per year. These figures often place HSU in the top ten colleges and universities in the U.S. in terms of undergraduate major production in geography. If one compares number of geography majors in the whole state, including both UC and CSU campuses, HSU usually ranks in the top five.

As we make our way into the 21st century, the department is evolving rapidly and requires a good deal of administrative work to keep up the momentum. To assist in these efforts, we invited Dr. William Herbrechtsmeier from Religious Studies to take the reins as chair. We knew of William's excellent reputation across campus as one who could get things done, and his administrative proficiency is proving itself daily in our department. We look forward to continuing to move full-steam ahead under his expert helm.

FACULTY & STAFF REPORTS

Where Have You Gone? The "Dirty Half Dozen"

JOHN COLEMAN

The original HSU geographer and founder of the department, John Colman retired several years ago. He sold all of his Humboldt County property and he and his wife Amber are now happily retired on a large farm above Lake Keuka in Upstate New York. While Amber produces folk art and organic fruit juices, John takes care of his fast horses and continues work on his "Silent Thunder" novel set in Tropical Africa.

ROBERT PLANK

Commander Bob also retired several years ago, and still lives in his unique complex high atop Pickle Hill. He is on active duty with the U.S. Army and is curator/director of an Army museum in Marin County. According to his wife Sharon, Bob may retire from the military if an impending promotion comes through.

LOWELL "BEN" BENNION

Ben retired in September 1999; exactly one year later he and his wife Sherry moved into a new home that faces Utah's Mt. Olympus in Salt Lake City. While teaching at HSU, Ben won the J.B. Jackson award as co-author of Sanpete Scenes: A Guide to Utah's Heart. A year ago he and historian Jerry Rohde finally completed Traveling the Trinity Highway, an illustrated guide to Highway 299. Scores of Ben & Jerry's students contributed to the book, now in its second printing, Ben's next book will feature "Plural Wives and Tangled Lives: A Tour of Twenty Mormon Towns in 1880."

HALITO JACKSON

Hall was the first of the 'dirty half-dozen' to retire. After thoroughly exploring New Mexico, he and his wife Beverly found an ideal property north of Albuquerque and built their dream adobe-style house. Hall taught part-time for the University of New Mexico, where he helped organize an international Latin American studies meeting. He has recently come out with a revised and expanded edition of "Following the Santa Fe Trail," cos-authored with Marc Simmons. It's a handsome guide!

JOHN L. HARPER

The fourth of the "dirty half-dozen" to retire was John Harper. John originally took partial retirement and began to complete several projects he had initiated while a graduate student in Colorado. Eventually John and his wife Joan sold their Arcata home and moved to the warmer climate of San Luis Obispo. John passed away on May 13, 2000 after fighting Parkinson's Disease. In his honor, the department dedicated a student practicum -- the John Harper Room -- in FH 126, and in conjunction with Joan Harper has started a special scholarship in his name. (See box on next page.)