The graduate program in Geography, University of Missouri-Columbia

History of Geography at MU

"LOG OF THE SCHOLAR’S SHIP GEOGRAPHY: VOYAGES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA, 1843-2000"

Address delivered by Dr. Walter A. Schroeder at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the Department of Geography, University of Missouri-Columbia, September 23, 2000.

Two years ago I noted at a meeting of the Alumni Leaders of Geography that the Department would mark its 50th anniversary in the year 2000. In response, the Leaders energetically formulated plans to celebrate the fiftieth in 2000. I, as the department’s oldest faculty member, should give this address. Jesse Wheeler had always used the year 1950 for the establishment of our department, and I got that year from him without checking. Jesse had been around then; he should know. A couple months ago, after some preliminary digging, I started to have doubts. What should we do, I asked my departmental colleagues, if I find an earlier or later year? What if the year of founding turned out to be 1951, as the official record seemed to indicate? Will we re-convene next year for another 50th celebration? Now, don’t get too far ahead of me. Stay tuned to the rest of my words; I have to build some suspense to this, lest you, comfortably seated and sated, fall asleep during this recitation of events in the life of the Department.

My geography students learn in the capstone seminar that humankind is on a grand adventure as it finds its way from chaos to cosmos. Chaos to the Greeks was the state of total disorder or ignorance and cosmos the state of universal order and knowledge. For a few thousand years we, as scholars, have sought to make sense out of the world around us, striving for an ultimate goal of total knowledge, however unattainable it actually is. Geography, as one of the ancient fields of learning, participates in this endeavor. We geographers are on a grand adventure. We are aboard the ship Geography, taking a voyage from the dark land of chaos to the bright land of cosmos.

But our ship does not take a straight course. We are often beset by strong headwinds of adversity. We tack first to the left, then to the right, as we sail against them. We need able captains to avert floundering on hidden shoals. We need purposes and ideals, theories and paradigms—we need discipline—to keep from being distracted by the many sirens of the sea. What follows is a narrative record of the good ship Geography at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

When the University published its first catalog for the fall class of 1843 Geography was present and accounted for. A course called “Classical Geography” was required for all students in their first year of study. You can decide what it consisted of; it was taught alongside “Classical Topography and Chronology,” “Classical History,” Greek, and Latin. In their second year, students (all students at the university followed the same course of study) studied trigonometry, heights, distances, mensuration, surveying, and leveling. The sons of the Missouri Little Dixie planters needed to survey and manage their extensive properties, following the leads of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. The professors for these courses in these pre-Civil War years were named Leffingwell, Litton, and Locke. Professor George C. Swallow, a state geologist after whom Swallow Hall is named, joined the faculty in the 1850s. Classes were held in old Academic Hall, of which only the famous columns still stand on Francis Quadrangle.

In the two decades following the War Between the States the university, now admitting women, allowed students to choose among several curricular programs of which one was geology and mineralogy. These programs would
evolve into academic departments. Included in the geology and mineralogy program was a course in physical geography using Appleton's Physical Geography and Geikie's textbook of the same name, both standard texts in all major universities. In 1890-91 the physical geography course enrolled 76 students, the most of any course in the geology program. Geology and mineralogy, including its physical geography partner, moved into Swallow Hall in the 1890s, and our proud word "Geography," prominently etched in stone, still graces one of the two portals.

Curtis Fletcher Marbut, born and raised in the rocky Ozark hills of Stone County, joined the faculty in 1895 as instructor of physiography and became full professor in the newly constituted Department of Geology and Mineralogy in 1899. He introduced a course called geomorphology in 1896 (in some years called physiographic geology) and described it in the 1900 catalog as "primarily a study of evolution as applied to the earth." In essence, it was the Darwinian notion of human evolution applied to the sequential development of land forms, just as William Morris Davis, Marbut's mentor in his Ph.D. program at Harvard, was popularizing by his geographic cycle of erosion. Marbut also introduced coursework in meteorology, agricultural geology, physiography of North America and Europe, and the material resources of North America. Perhaps because of his connection with geographer Davis but also because he identified himself as a geographer--the first faculty member at Missouri to use that title--Marbut of Missouri signed on as one of the charter members of the Association of American Geographers when Davis organized it in 1903.

Marbut left Columbia in 1913 for a position with the Bureau of Soils and greater recognition in national and international arenas of soils geography (he was responsible for developing the county soil surveys and for bringing Russian and European ideas of soil science to the United States) and never returned to the geography program at MU. Marbut probably achieved greater national and international fame than any other person directly associated with Geography at MU. He was inducted into the National Agricultural Hall of Fame in 1989. Marbut's ancient, wooden, roll-top desk is now used by Clarence Woodruff, professor emeritus of soils and a contemporary of Marbut during Marbut's later years. On this piece of evidence I conclude that Marbut's last office and research activity while at the University was with the soils faculty in Mumford Hall and not with the geology faculty in Swallow Hall. Marbut's legacy on campus is much stronger with the soils faculty than with the geology faculty. In passing, we should note that in February of 1912, Stewart Hall, the new physics building which Geography now occupies, was completed and opened for classes. Stewart, Mumford, the Memorial Tower, and other nearby buildings being built at the time were creating the east, or "white," campus of the university.

Marbut's self-identification as a geographer put the ship Geography at MU on a strong, straight ahead course to cosmos. He was probably responsible for the 1906 hiring of Frederick Valentine Emerson to teach geography at MU. Emerson occupies a special place in American geography as the first person in the United States to receive a doctorate in geography (1907) from the first Ph.D.-granting Department of Geography in the United States, the University of Chicago. Emerson's hiring began an eighty-year history of hiring Chicago graduates for geography faculty at MU. Emerson introduced courses in commercial geography (today called economic geography), and courses in the geography of North America and Europe. He also wrote the first state geography of Missouri, heavy in physical geography.

Emerson was joined in 1915 by Almon Ernest Parkins, another geography Ph.D. from Chicago. Parkins expanded the courses offered beyond physical geography to general college geography, advanced commercial geography, and "geographic literature," which consisted of readings in the new academic discipline of geography. Parker also authored several major textbooks. Other geography faculty during the next decade include Samuel Tilden Bratton, who received his Ph.D. in Geography from Chicago in 1925, Lewis Francis Thomas (who later earned his doctorate in geography at Washington University in St. Louis and achieved prominence there in urban geography and sociology), Mendel Branon (yet another Chicago graduate), Helen Strong (another Chicago graduate), and John Quincy Adams, who received both his masters and doctoral degrees in Geography from MU. The Professors Drs.
Adams and Bratton became the pillars of geography at MU until World War II.

The geography faculty and program were administratively lodged during these years in the Department of Geology and Mineralogy and physically lodged in Swallow Hall. Geography had enough faculty of rank and experience to offer a graduate program. The first M.A. in geography was awarded in 1915 to Martineau Knight for his (her?) thesis entitled “Geography of Boone County: Historical and Economic Geography,” and this was followed in the next decade and a half by some fifteen more master’s degrees and one doctoral degree in geography. John Quincy Adams was awarded a Ph.D. in Geography from MU in 1930 for his dissertation entitled “Geography of the North Kansas City Region.” His is the only Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Missouri—so far. The nature of geography at MU in these years between the two world wars followed the standard paradigms of “environmental influences” and “environmental adjustment.” For example, Geography 6, Elements of Economic Geography, was described in the catalog as “a study of the natural environment and its bearing on economic activities.” (Catalog number 6 for the first course in geography, which persisted into the 1950s, probably was chosen to distinguish it from the first course in geology, which was in the same department.) The title of Geography 117, Geographic Influences in American History, is self-explanatory as “a study of the bearing which physical environment has had upon the course of American history,” and was probably modeled after Harlan Barrows’ popular course at the University of Chicago. This paradigm must have fitted well with the dominant geology faculty of the combined department, who, as I personally remember from conversations, considered geography a subfield of geology in which geology was used to explain human activities. As at other universities, the MU ship Geography was veering off into a direction other than straight ahead, one narrowly defined as environmental influences, or human adjustment to the environment.

But not all in the geography program could be so simply and narrowly packaged. Let me describe two remarkable women graduates in geography of this period.

Ruth Ferris wrote her 1925 thesis on steamboating at Kansas City, and it presaged a life-long love affair with steamboats. Miss Ferris became a school teacher in St. Louis County at a time when steamboats were being discarded as so much unwanted trash. One by one, as they were abandoned by their owners on the St. Louis waterfront, Ruth went down to the levee to salvage them, collecting their logs, bills of lading, and passenger lists, then even returning home with whole parts of steamboats, like emblems, insignia, captain’s wheels, and in some cases, the entire wheelhouse itself. She stored these unwanted white elephants on her own property. In due time she became the St. Louis authority on all phases of steamboating. She gave talks. Schoolchildren toured her property to see vestiges of what made St. Louis great. When she retired from teaching Ruth Ferris realized she could no longer maintain her prized collection, by then the most extensive and valuable collection of steamboatsiana in the Middle West, if not the United States. She donated it to the St. Louis Mercantile Library, which in turn gave it to the Missouri Historical Society where it could be exhibited. Only a small portion of her vast collection can be displayed at one time. Ruth Ferris died a few years ago at the age of 93 and was publicly eulogized for her special role in interpreting regional geography and history. When next you visit the Society’s impressive museum in Forest Park, think MU Geography, where Ruth Ferris’s fascination with steamboats first took form.

Martha Friedericka Langendoerfer, granddaughter of original German settlers of Hermann, finished her graduate work in Geography at MU in 1930. Judging by the title of her thesis, “The Geography of the Hermann Region,” one would think it just another of those dreary descriptive inventories of regional geography that we have come to dismiss as not contributing to the theoretical base of academic geography. But read it. Miss Langendoerfer (like Ruth Ferris, she stayed an unmarried school teacher) did extensive field work in the German-settled hills and valleys around Hermann, interviewing fifty farm families and distinguishing minute differences in the cultural landscape with her geographic eye. Moreover, Miss Langendoerfer showed how these various neighborhoods in 1930
interacted with each other socially and economically and with the market
town (read: a Christaller central place) of Hermann. In 1930 she was
thinking in terms of cultural and urban spatial systems, although we
haughtily think that that term--spatial systems--is something we have
introduced to geography in the last couple decades. There it is, plain for
all to read, in a MU master's thesis in geography of 1930. Incidentally,
Miss Langendorfer's thesis manuscript was just sold at auction in Hermann
for $250, and the local historical society is considering publishing it as
a notable document of Hermann's past.

Something else remarkable happened during these years. In August 1930 the
Geography program inaugurated what it billed as its first annual
geographical expedition. Twenty-six students, three geography faculty, and
one chaperone for the female students toured the American West by bus for
thirty days, logging 6,250 miles. The itinerary went through Yellowstone
National Park (where their tour bus was the first bus to negotiate narrow
and unimproved mountain roads), the Tetons, Salt Lake, Reno, Yosemite, San
Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Catalina Island, old Mexico, the Grand
Canyon, Gallup, Santa Fe, Pikes Peak, and Denver. Energized by the
spectacular success of the expedition, geography faculty announced plans
for a similar month-long trip to the American East in the following year,
1931, but I surmise that the Great Depression took its toll on the
financial resources of geography students and perhaps the university as
well, since no subsequent tours materialized.

As we know, the Great Depression produced a spate of governmental
initiatives to solve social and economic problems that were engulfing the
state. This, in retrospect, should have been a grand opportunity for
geographers to expand and develop their activities, for what social or
economic problem is without its geographic aspect? For whatever reasons,
MU geographers neither conducted research into the causes and nature of
the state's woes nor did they propose solutions. With their sharp
environmental focus, geographers could have offered insight into how
degradation of soils, forest, and water was related to social and economic
well-being. Such topics as characteristics of the state's population and
basic geographic perspectives on water and land management, public policy,
and tax support of local governments were indeed investigated, but they
were investigated by faculty in sociology, agricultural economics,
political science, and economics. The expanded role of government in the
thirties generated strong tail winds to power the ship Geography, but,
 alas, our vessel did not feel them, and its progress towards cosmos slowed
relative to other academic fields at MU.

I do not want to leave the thirties without mentioning that one geography
alumnus from that period lives here in Columbia. Now in his nineties,
Harry Robinson, M.A. 1935, wrote a thesis in physiography and subsequently
led a glorious career with the National Park Service in various western
parks.

World War II brought a significant change to the course of the scholar's
ship Geography, essentially becalming it in a windless sea. One of the
pillars, Bratton, retired. The other, Adams, was aging and sometimes on
leave. Clarence Burt Odell, yet another Chicago Ph.D. (1937), had arrived
in 1940, but left within a couple of years. Except for Adams, geography
had no Ph.D. on its faculty, and the program descended into the hands of
instructors who came and went on a regular basis. The catalogs from 1943
through 1946 list twelve different instructors for geography. Full-time
university enrollment dropped significantly during the war years, but the
absence of degree-seeking students in geography was more than compensated
by a large number of military personnel sent to MU for specialized
training in geography courses. Several geography courses were offered only
to Army Air Force students or to Army Specialized Training Reserve
students. Among these courses were geopolitics, several courses in the
interpretation of maps and air photos, "geography of the war zones," and
"geographic aspects of world peace." A special course of studies was
offered for women that prepared them for various levels of governmental
service in the war effort. Thus, during the war years teaching consumed
the geography program's energy.

Nevertheless, some geographic research continued. One particularly
engaging graduate thesis examined how wartime gasoline rationing and
increased gasoline prices reduced the geographic distance that families
would travel for goods and services. The study documented how gas 
rationing restricted the travel range of poorer families significantly 
more than that of wealthier families.
The war over, geography at MU had to be re-invented. Without a core 
faculty and with a surge of veterans entering college with geographical 
experiences in the world that no other generation ever had, the University 
administration needed to make some hard decisions. Obviously, geography, 
which had shown how essential it was to education during the war effort, 
had to be reconstituted. I have not been able to figure out all the pushes 
and pulls in this period of reconstitution--too many of the players are no 
longer with us--but it appears that the geography portion of the 
Department of Geology was allowed to drift for a few years. James Eli 
Collier, who had come during the war years for cartography and air photo 
interpretation, stayed on, and he was joined by Merna Irene Fletcher in 
economic and regional geography. Neither had doctorates. They were 
assisted in meeting student demands for courses by instructors Ferdinand 
Black and Julia Shipman.
The administrative decision to create a new, independent department of 
Geography can only be interpreted as a desire to strengthen the program. 
But when did this happen? As I said earlier, Jesse told me 1950. Wayne 
Decker, Professor of Climatology, whose courses were included in the 
listing of geography courses, told me last week that Geography was already 
a separate department when he came to MU in 1949. Marjorie Wheeler, who 
came to Missouri with her husband also in 1949, recalls that she and Jesse 
arrived in the summer of 1949 in time for the fall semester and understood 
that the decision to separate Geography from Geology had already been 
made. On the question of when the Department of Geography was created, the 
Arts and Science Dean’s Office expresses total ignorance. The University 
catalog lists Geography as a separate department for the first time in the 
catalog for the academic year 1951-52, but catalogs are prepared several 
months before the year they describe. And just what do we mean when we say 
a department is “created”? For several years before its official, 
administrative separation the Geography faculty was operating 
independently within the Department of Geology, organizing its own 
courses, setting the requirements for its undergraduate and graduate 
degrees, and even holding its own meetings--a kind of department within a 
department.
We could end our celebration abruptly at this point and all go home, 
concluding that the 50th anniversary actually occurred a year or two ago, 
and we blew it. Or we could come back next year and do this all over 
again. My guess is that you will concur with me, and we will simply 
declare here and now that 1950 is the official year of the founding of an 
independent Department of Geography and defy anyone to come up with 
contradictory evidence. If we agree on that, then we can set aside time on 
our personal calendars for the year 2050 to celebrate Geography’s 
centennial.
The decision to hire Jesse Harrison Wheeler, Jr., yet another Ph.D. from 
Chicago, was part of the agreement to separate Geography from Geology. In 
1949 Dr. Wheeler joined Dr. James Collier (who was appointed first chair 
of the department), Merna Fletcher, and Wayne Decker to form the nucleus 
for a new geography program for the new department. We should note that 
the new department was authorized to offer a major for the A.B. degree and 
an M.A. degree, but not a Ph.D. degree. Thus, curiously, while doctorates 
in geography were possible before separation--and one was awarded--they 
were not possible after independence.
With grant support from the Ford Foundation, Wheeler designed and 
troduced a world regional geography course for college freshmen. It was 
geography for general education: in Wheeler’s plain words, “geography that 
one would reasonably expect a college graduate to know.” Originally 
conceived as a single one-semester, five-hour course, it was divided in 
1967 into two three-hour courses, which it still is today. When I and 
others took the course in the fifties Professor Wheeler taught it five 
days a week by himself. World regional geography immediately became the 
signature course for the department, which it continues to be fifty years 
later. The course comprises the single line of continuity in the 
department from 1950 to the present year. Thus, the ship Geography, with 
fresh and strong tail winds blowing from new-department status, tacked off
in a new direction, that of regional geography. Those on board must have been full of confidence of a new era for geography at the University of Missouri.

When Geography was separated from Geology, or possibly a few years before in the late 1940s, it vacated nineteenth-century Swallow Hall, but leaving its name on the building, and moved into T-4, one of the numerous temporary, two-story, wooden buildings that the University put up to accommodate the large number of students after the war. These were army buildings, disassembled at either Fort Leonard Wood or Fort Crowder and re-assembled on the MU campus. T-4 stood on Hitt Street in space now occupied by the east extension of Ellis Library.

Other faculty in the new department in the 1950s included Phil True from the University of Chicago, a China specialist who soon left for the CIA; Richard Thoman in 1951 but gone the next year (also from Chicago; Latin America, trade centers, and spatial analysis); J. Trenton Kostbade in 1953 but gone by 1955 (undergraduate work at Chicago; Anglo America, Europe, political geography); Howard Franklin Hirt in 1954 in tenure track (Ph.D.; Asia and urban geography); and German-born Andreas Grothe in 1955 in tenure track (Ph.D., Chicago, Europe, economic geography, resources).

We should note that all physical geography dropped from the geography curriculum, except as it could be incorporated into regional geography courses. Collier concentrated in cartography, Decker in meteorology and climatology. By the end of the 1950s the department had five Ph.D.s tenured or on tenure track, a substantial springboard for future growth. As the department entered its second decade, the future of geography continued bright. The Department moved into the east end of the first floor of McAlester Hall in the early 1960s when the Library expanded into the space occupied by T-4. Wheeler replaced cartographer Collier as chair (Collier then left the University for Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville), which set the ship’s course even more firmly than ever in regional geography. Enrollment in the University was surging, and with it came more faculty positions: Kostbade returned in 1962 (Ph.D., Michigan); Walter Albert Schroeder in 1964 and tenure track (ABD, Chicago; physical geography, quantitative procedures, and Latin America); William Allister Noble in 1966 and tenure track (Ph.D. Louisiana State University; Asia, settlement geography, physical geography); Howard Hirt left for Boston University. Professional geographer John C. Weaver became president of the four-campus University of Missouri system in 1967. It looked impressive to see his name listed in the roster of faculty of Geography with “Professor of Geography and President of the University of Missouri” after his name, but that’s all it amounted to. Invisible President Weaver may have been foot inside the Department, neither did he ever say anything to geography faculty than “hello” and “goodbye.” Nor did President Weaver impress the Board of Curators, because he left for Wisconsin in 1971.

Enrollments in the freshman world regional geography course reached well over one thousand students annually. The world regional course thus became the vehicle for financial support of the master’s program through graduate teaching assistants, or TAs. I do not know exactly what year geography first employed graduate teaching assistants as distinct from instructors, but they are first listed in the catalog for 1962-63. They included Richard Boehm, John Briles, Dale Martin, George Tempest, Inge Thomas, and Douglas Wilms, with Fiske Rawden as an instructor. The following year there was one TA by the name of—-are you listening?—Donald Duckson, Jr. We have no record that he finished a graduate degree.

During these halcyon years the department attracted graduate students from all over: in 1967 alone we had TA’s from Peru, South Africa, India, New Jersey, Maryland, Michigan, Kansas, among other less exotic places. The department had fifteen funded T.A. positions that year, two of whom were assigned to grading correspondence courses and sixteen T.A. positions in 1968. The department had an enviable record in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s for placing its graduates in some of the best doctoral programs in the nation and for obtaining positions of responsibility in business and with state and federal governments. It is these graduates, including many of you present this evening, who compose the strong alumni cadre who help immeasurably in securing funding for departmental research and in placing graduates and who also support the department with generous contributions to the Wheeler Endowment and the Horizons Fund.
In its first years the department instituted an option of a non-thesis M.A. program. In retrospect, this practice did not do the department any good in the eyes of deans and fellow faculty in other departments, most of which had doctoral programs. But also in retrospect the practice did not detract at all from the quality of the program for the many students who went into non-academic careers. These were halcyon years primarily in terms of teaching numbers of undergraduates and graduating large numbers of master's students.

Published research—as defined by deans and their promotion and tenure committees—was close to non-existent in the department. During the fifteen-year period from 1962 to 1977 the combined geography faculty produced no more than six articles in refereed journals in mainstream geography and no books. Disregarding the fact that Wheeler and Kostbade meticulously researched and produced the world's largest selling textbook in world regional geography—the publishers calculated that at least one million college students had studied geography from its pages in its first two decades, leaving an indelible impact on American geography—the Department of Geography was stigmatized on campus as one deficient in research. The college did not consider writing best-selling textbooks as basic research. What built the department in the 1960s by providing support for a large master's program—the department ranked among the top three departments of geography in the nation in number of M.A.'s awarded—now was turned against the department: “You spend too much time teaching,” complained one dean to me during a college committee meeting. During these years the University had created other new departments, like Anthropology and Atmospheric Science, even offering doctorates, while Geography stood relatively still. Obviously, if the direction of the ship of geography were to veer into a different direction in its journey to cosmos, it would take leadership other than that which had been around for fifteen years. Former graduate student Richard Glen Boehm (Ph.D., Texas; economic geography), a true believer in regional geography but also able to speak the language of systematic research, joined the department in 1971, taking over the position vacated by Grotewold, and became chairman in 1975. Boehm brought to the department just what it needed: a new face and a new vision for geography and, just as important for a chair, the energy and desire to do the social networking needed to twist administrators’ arms, if not also brains, to invest in the department. Boehm secured new funding to create a new position of Extension Geographer and in 1977 brought Gail Stephanie Ludwig (D.A., Northern Colorado, environmental education) to campus as extension geographer. Within a few years she was part-time, then full-time in the A&S Department of Geography. Boehm also supervised the move in 1976 from McAlester Hall to Stewart Hall, although the move had been planned and set in motion by Kostbade. New quarters under a new chair brought fresh winds to propel the ship of Geography, and, it was hoped, redirect its course.

Those fresh winds abruptly subsided when Boehm left MU in 1977 for Southwest Texas State University where, as the story would unfold, his aborted efforts at department-building at MU found full fruition in the creation of one of the strongest and largest departments of geography in the nation. But that’s a success story for Southwest Texas to tell.

Robert Frederick Austin (Ph.D., Michigan; economic geography, Asia) came in 1977 with great promise as a basic researcher, so much that the following year he was awarded the chairmanship of the department, despite being an untenured assistant: professor with only one year of experience at MU. This truly shows how deep the “geography problem” was at MU: a department with a splendid record in the liberal education of undergraduates and the education and training of master’s students and their placement in doctoral programs and in excellent positions in government and business, but one without a record in published research appropriate to a fundamental research discipline at a major research university. You will note that I intentionally used “research” three times in that last subordinate clause.

The Department did not forward Professor Noble’s request to be promoted to full professor, which reflected negatively on the department, and Chairman Austin was turned down for tenure (actually he resigned before the decision was handed down) and left in 1984. The department had fewer ranked faculty than at any time since the 1960s. Not only had the
department not progressed, but, to any objective observer, it had
stagnated. It did not help the situation that geography was questioned
nationally as a fundamental research discipline and that geography
departments had closed in some eminent universities. In these troubling
years Mary Wilson came into the department as its secretary. She must have
thought she stepped through the looking glass into a land of make believe.
With no other alternative, in 1980 the Dean turned to Walter Schroeder,
who, lacking a doctorate, still held the title of instructor, to serve as
chair. Financial exigency struck the university at this time, the early
eighties, and the Board of Curators instructed the Columbia chancellor to
eliminate programs. Her committee listed Geography as one of several small
departments to be examined for elimination or
reconfiguration--bureaucratise for merger. The ship Geography was
floundering on exposed shoals in a storm-tossed sea. How would it survive?
We worked with on Arts & Science dean from Michigan, Milton Glick, who
couldn’t find St. Louis or Kansas City, or even the Mississippi River, on
a wall map of Missouri on the terrace level of Stewart Hall. But very much
more important he had a truly open mind and listened fairly to arguments
for and against reconfiguration. He and I considered a re-merger with
Geology and mergers with Anthropology and Atmospheric Sciences. We
considered dispersing ranked faculty individually to various departments.
We even considered Geography leaving Arts & Science. The dean called to
campus both the executive director, Robert Aangeenbrug, and the president,
Risa Palm, of the Association of American Geographers for consultation
and advice. Jesse Wheeler worked endless hours accumulating data on the
department’s academic record, especially placement of its M.A. alumni and
their significant achievements in both academic and non-academic careers.
He wrote statements on the unique contribution of geography to general
education. He contacted several of you for advice and letters of support.
It was my strategy as chair to identify Geography with maps, not because I
considered cartography the central focus of geography, but because I knew
that maps were what my non-geography colleagues on the dean’s and
chancellor’s committees considered distinctively geographic, and it was
those colleagues who would decide our fate. We had to establish an
identity irrefutably our own, one that overlapped with no other department
for possible merging. You see, quietly and rather unheralded, the new
mapping sciences had taken root in the department, just as advances in
computer cartography and satellite imagery were capturing the fancy of the
educated public through the media. Chris Johannsen in Agronomy was
assembling an interdisciplinary group of faculty and graduate students to
work in remote sensing. This effort, lodged first in Agronomy and then in
Electrical Engineering, was quickly dominated by geographers, both
instructors and students. The first GIS courses on campus had been taught
in Geography in the early 1980s by Gail Ludwig, John Beets, and Dr.
Gregory Koeln. Remote sensing was being offered in Geography for several
years in the mid 1980s by Dr. Gary Johnson Other courses in digital image
processing for resource management, statistical mapping, and map design
were introduced, some by temporary faculty, some by Gail Ludwig, who was
transmogrifying from geography education to geographic information
science. Joseph Astroth (Ph.D., Chicago; India, economic geography) also
participated in the thrust into mapping sciences. In the
technologically-based mapping sciences Geography had a powerful new
weapon, one that clearly distinguished it from all other departments and
programs. The strategy worked, with crucial support from some powerful
allies in History and Natural Resources. If I could recreate one special
moment in the life of the department, it would be the moment when we heard
Dean Glick, the same one who was geographically illiterate, announce that
he was recommending that Geography should continue as one of the
constituent and essential departments of the College of Arts & Science,
independent and unmerged with any other department. The ship of Geography
at MU escaped the rocks of destruction and, instead of floundering to the
bottom of the sea, set anew its course for cosmos, adding a strong mapping
science component to its traditional core of regional geography.
Dean Glick’s next move was to bring to the department senior-level,
experienced leadership in a new chairman at full professor rank and to
further strengthen the department with new, research-oriented faculty. In
1988 we happily greeted Joseph John Hobbs (Ph.D. Texas; Middle East,
cultural and environmental geography) as a new tenure-track member. Then, in the fall of the same year, 1988, with Gail Ludwig playing a central role in recruiting him—against all odds—we greeted Christopher Lord (Kit) Salter (Ph.D. California-Berkeley; China, cultural geography, landscape) from the National Geographic Society as the new chair. At about the same time, the two senior members of the department officially retired, Kostbade in 1987, Wheeler in 1988. More new faculty, hired primarily on the basis of their promise for research, filled in the enormous holes left by their departures and that of Professor Noble, who retired in 1996: Robert Joseph Kaiser in 1991 (Ph.D., Columbia; Russia, political and population geography), but who left in 1996 for Wisconsin; Edward Lowe Kinman in 1996 (Ph.D. Minnesota; medical geography, South America); James Dennis Hipple in 1997 (Ph.D. Utah State; remote sensing, urban geography); Michael Andrew Urban in 1998 (Ph.D. Illinois; fluvial geomorphology, environmental systems); and finally Charles Mark Cowell in 2000 (Ph.D. Georgia; biogeography). Meanwhile, the department has benefited from Larry Brown’s contributions as a part-time faculty member (Geography alumnus; ABD, Missouri; Latin America, social and cultural geography); his courses, especially Regions and Nations, have attracted numerous students into the field.

Regional geography, though still alive, is now clearly subordinate to systematic and process study; the last three faculty hires claim no regional proficiencies and teach no regional courses. And above all, published research abounds (though it is never, ever enough), and the department is a leader on campus, for its size, in external grants. You see, Kit Salter pulled off a stunning act when he secured the Geographic Resources Center from Electrical Engineering for Geography and added “Director of the GRC” to his chairmanship title. When this happened, we had no way of knowing its full impact on the department, in terms of faculty and staff, students and instruction, and certainly not in grant-funded research. But the addition of the GRC and its bedmate, the state-funded Missouri Spatial Data Information Service, to the Department in terms of how “Geography” is perceived on campus and throughout the state is absolutely phenomenal. I will get into trouble typing names in respect to the GRC, but I certainly must mention Tim Haithcoat and more recently James D. Harlan (an alumnus of the department), Greg Breuer, and Martin Wills.

As it ends its first half century and enters a new century and millennium, the Department is stronger than ever. Gone are the feelings of inferiority and defensiveness of the 1980s. Today the Department speaks with great pride in its discipline and with confidence in its future. It finds itself sought out by colleagues in other departments and divisions. Such progress could not have happened without an able and productive helmsman who publicly speaks up for Geography at every opportunity, but Kit Salter’s extraordinary success as chairman required a competent faculty. Her transmogrification complete, Gail Ludwig now explores the cutting edges of geographic information science, subfield of virtual reality. Walter Schroeder completed his doctorate, and that completion brings the total faculty with doctorates to eight, with proposals for more. But the future will be built on the younger faculty. Joe Hobbs has brought credit to Geography by his Kemper Teaching Award and early promotion to full professor, thanks to an outstanding publications record. Ed Kinman, Jim Hipple, Mike Urban, and Mark Cowell are forging solid linkages with other departments and divisions and thereby are enhancing the good name of Geography (and Environmental Studies/Science) throughout the university. Grant funds from NASA and from university enhancement sources, coupled with substantial moneys that come annually to the Geographic Resources Center for their projects, not only position Geography as one of the major research programs in the university, relative to size, but also support a large number of graduate students and give the department flexibility to do many things that it could not do in the past. Witness to all this programmatic expansion is the department’s physical expansion onto the middle floor of Stewart Hall, the first substantial spatial (i.e., geographic) expansion for Geography in a quarter century. The department’s next major initiative is obvious: Geography is poised to add a Ph.D. program. Thus, while the elusive land of cosmos is still over the horizon, as it will always be, the MU ship Geography is sailing more directly...
towards it than ever, with full sails blowing.
I want to close this narrative with a paean to our discipline in general. We
must, all of us, regardless of the different paths we have taken,
acknowledge how much the study of geography has enriched our lives every
year, every day. Geography adds immensely to the human experience. Is
there any one of us who does not agree? If indeed we are aboard a ship
sailing from chaos, land of disorder, to cosmos, land of universal truth,
and discovering fascinating new lands en route, then please tell me, what
other ship than Geography would we rather be on?
Note: The Department of Geography assembled three lists of graduates for
the 50th Anniversary Celebration. One is a chronological list of all
recipients of graduate degrees, with thesis titles, 1915-2000. The second
is an alphabetical list of all recipients of graduate degrees, with thesis
titles, 1915-2000. The third is a chronological list of all known
recipients of undergraduate degrees with majors in geography, 1929-2000.
These lists can be obtained by requesting them from the Department of
Geography. The Department also maintains a list of addresses and phone
numbers of many of its graduates.
The Department counts 299 alumni with M.A. degrees (including 1 Ph.D.) in
Geography of which 277 graduated since the Department was established in
1950. We think that this is a reasonably accurate list. They have come
from Greece, France, Germany, Denmark, Great Britain; Saudi Arabia, Yemen,
Palestine, Egypt, Libya; South Africa, Zambia; China, Taiwanese China,
Malaysia, India, Thailand; Peru, Bolivia, Mexico, Canada, and Arkansas. At
least forty have gone on to attain doctorates. Many more have
distinguished themselves in other lines of endeavor, which are harder to
classify, but the following serve as examples: Missouri state
representative; assistant to Governor Carnahan; associate commissioner of
the Missouri Coordinating Board of Higher Education; Assistant Director of
the Missouri Department of Natural Resources; Assistant Director of the
Division of Water Quality. Dozens of graduates are leaders in various
positions in "high tech" business and the mapping sciences, such as ESRI
(Environmental Systems Research Institute), Army Corps of Engineers,
National Imagery and Mapping Agency, and CARES (Center for Agricultural,
Resource, and Environmental Systems). Others are in governmental
intelligence and information agencies. Some have established their own
businesses.
The Department counts 505 alumni with B.A. degrees in Geography since
1929, of which 495 graduated since the Department was established in 1950,
although we believe there are more that we have not yet discovered. Many
of these graduates have gone on into careers of prominence, but frankly
the undergraduate alumni are much harder to keep track of.