A GEOGRAPHER WEST OF THE SIERRA NEVADA

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As a wee tot I was brought out of the Missouri Ozarks to a farm in the Sacramento Valley of northern California in 1909, then a land of alfalfa fields, dairy cows, fruit orchards, and rural farmsteads having subsistence patterns of vegetable gardens, pigs, chickens, and turkeys. Small-boyhood years of farm life provided memories that remain pungent. My father had been an itinerant engineer between spells on farms in the Middle West, and another return to that itinerancy took a growing boy into the cannery camps up and down the Pacific Coast, where I was fascinated by the divergent ethnic flavor of life that ranged from Chinese and Portuguese to Mexican and "American" in variety. There followed another period on a farm in southern California, during which I was somewhat isolated from companions of my own age. My father compensated for this by buying me second-hand books on travel, natural history, geology, geography, history, and anthropology, but no fiction. Those years of farm life and wide reading predisposed many of my later interests and were factors in my selection of courses as a college student a few years later.

UNDERGRADUATE EXPOSURE TO GEOGRAPHY

During my first freshman semester I enrolled in a course in physical geography taught by Clifford M. Zierer in his first semester on the faculty at the University of California, Southern Branch (Los Angeles). Zierer (Ph.D., University of Chicago, 1925), against much advice, had ventured west from his native Indiana to a fledgling campus that was in the process of rebuilding from a state normal school toward a university. The Southern Branch was still a satellite of the University of California (meaning Berkeley), and many of the professional programs consisted only of preliminary courses, with all advanced work at Berkeley. Full programs were offered by several liberal arts disciplines, some of which held departmental status, and a few (geography in 1895) had long held such status.

The university library was small, and most of the texts and reference books used in geography have long since been cleared from most personal professional libraries. The texts in my first two courses were Salisbury, Barrows, and Tower, Elements of Geography, and Huntington and Cushing, Principles of Human Geography. The first seemed fairly easy after my earlier reading, but the second I disliked owing to its physical environmental basis and simplistic treatment of human societies when compared to reading I had done. Other authors available in the main library were such as George C. Chisholm, James Fairgrieve, Hugh Robert Mill, Elisee Reclus, Israel C. Russell, J. Russell Smith, J. F. Unstead, and Robert deC. Ward. The department chairman was George M. McBride (Ph.D., Yale, 1921), a former missionary school principal with years in South America, who had achieved his degree under Ellsworth Huntington.1 After sampling majors in history and geography I settled on geography, and worked my way into being McBride’s student assistant, filing correspondence, taking care of the wall map room, mounting top sheets, and reading exams and term papers in selected courses.

In those years departmental philosophy, by consensus, emanated largely from Ellen C. Semple, Ellsworth Huntington, and others of similar bent. I recall an early map catalogue whose caption was: “Teaching the New Geog-

1 Isaiah Bowman, of the American Geographical Society, while engaged in field work in the Bolivian Andes in 1915, became acquainted with McBride, who then was in La Paz. Bowman invited McBride to join the staff of the American Geographical Society in New York and to secure a Ph.D. in geography. McBride enrolled at Yale University but never became a resident student, and Huntington was not a teaching faculty member, so that the contact was minimal. Much of McBride's formal education in geography came through his work at the A.G.S. in New York.
raphy: Man’s Response to his Environment,” a variant on an old theme. These simplistic and one-sided views caused me considerable difficulty, and I was summarily ejected from class on several occasions for arguing with instructors.

Two new faculty members appeared in the fall of 1927, in line with the enlargement of the department, Burton M. Varney (Ph.D., Clark University, 1925) and Jonathan Garst (Ph.D., Edinburgh, 1930). Varney, a climatologist, had been with the U.S. Weather Bureau in Washington, D.C., but for personal reasons came with no love for the Berkeley geography department. Garst (a member of the Iowa corn-growing family) had studied at Grenoble, Paris, and Edinburgh, and his views were very different from those of the American-trained faculty. I was assigned to Garst to read all his exams and term papers, and Garst required me to stand his office hours after each exam to defend my grading to the students, an early lesson in academic diplomacy.

Garst promptly took me in hand, set me to reading in European geographical literatures, tutored me, and proceeded to reorient my outlook on geography. It was he who taught me to question all simple conclusions, to review all the evidence, and to seek the historical trend in human affairs prior to concluding a judgment. “Doctor Mac” remained tolerant of my changing viewpoints and, nearing graduation, attempted to get me an appointment in a high school in Chile. A church record less than satisfactory to the mission board blocked that, so I decided to try graduate work in the United States. Faculty recommendations of both Clark University and the University of Chicago I declined owing to their reputations on geographic viewpoints. Garst encouraged me to apply at Berkeley. Neither scholarship nor assistantship was offered with my acceptance at Berkeley in the fall of 1929, and the first semester was rather a grim struggle on a very short financial shoestring.

The Berkeley geography department shared the general university attitude toward the Southern Branch—patronizing and superior, but willing to accept some of its products. On the faculty level, however, the small Berkeley group ignored the already larger group at Los Angeles. McBride and Sauer had met early at some west coast conference, but had been unable to mount what Sauer later termed an intellectual conversation. McBride’s interests lay in political geography, land systems and agrarian problems, human adaptation to the Andean Highlands, and in effective teaching of undergraduates. Sauer’s concerns still centered in geomorphology, historical geography, graduate student training, and geographical philosophy. Their personalities were very different, they never came to a meeting of minds, and there never developed any cross-contact between the two departments.

Even in those years I detected a growing “western” attitude as related to American geography. After one semester Zierer shifted his choice of topographic sheets for student study from the Middle West and East to the West, with the comment that it was best “to study our home country and abandon the teaching patterns of the East.” Zierer also related that it was considered a loss to the profession for a new degree holder to move so far away as the West Coast, thereby becoming isolated from the important geographic centers. Faculty members regularly expressed annoyance at the eastern control over the location and timing of the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers—always east of the Mississippi River and always at Christmas. For the West Coast, then, this meant a long and expensive train ride and an absence of two weeks.

INITIATION AS A GRADUATE STUDENT

It quickly appeared that there were many differences separating the thinking of geographers at Los Angeles and Berkeley in that era. Beyond the contrasts between McBride and Sauer, there were others. Zierer, for example, reflecting his Chicago training, was concerned with the interpretation of the contemporary land-use scene, and in a course on Anglo-America I had been reproved for dealing with features more than twenty years old. At Berkeley, in the fall of 1929, I audited Mr. Sauer’s course on North America, the very last sentence of which dealt with Daniel Boone finding a route across the Appalachian Divide. “Doctor Mac’s” favorite course had been problems in political boundaries, but Mr. Sauer did not

2 Although McBride’s book, *Chile, Land and Society* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1936), has long been considered a sound monograph in historical geography, its Spanish translation became the “bible” of the land reform movement mounted by liberal forces in Chile in the 1950s and later.
permit the offering of a course in political geography. One of Zierer's primary interests was urban geography, but I once heard Mr. Sauer remark that: "We do not believe in cities around here," and no undergraduate course in urban geography was taught.\(^8\)

Mr. Sauer ran the Berkeley department in his own inimitable manner. There were no colloquia or department gatherings, graduate students were never "advised," a student had to make his own way, and he had to come forward in argument before anyone noticed him—a few who never achieved notice simply disappeared. Mr. Sauer early became aware of my presence, so that I received a teaching assistantship the second semester. After one hot argument in 1930, Dr. Sauer became Mr. Sauer to me, as he remained thereafter, and his reference shifted from "Spencer" to "Joe." On occasion Mr. Sauer tossed some cryptic comment at graduate students; those perceptive enough to comprehend the meaning profited by future endeavors. In those years Mr. Sauer, in some manner of his own, classified the students he noticed. Of one he might ask: "Have you a topic in mind for your M.A.?” That meant finish your M.A. and be gone, in most cases. Or, he would ask: "Have you thought about your doctoral topic?" And that meant one could skip the M.A. and "go for broke" at the Ph.D.

As a second generation graduate student at Berkeley (Dicken, Kniffen, Leighly, Meigs, and Thornthwaite were the first generation doctoral candidates), I enrolled in all the geomorphology seminars offered in my period of residence. Two were with Mr. Sauer, and in one we worked through Walther Penck's *Morphologische Analyse* in its original German. Mr. Sauer's mind was shifting focus about 1931, however, his concerns with Latin America were growing stronger, the seminars in geomorphology were handed over to others (not deleted), and he offered only seminars in cultural geography in my final period.\(^4\) This shift of interest was my final reorientation, for I realized that what really interested me was the way peoples operated cultural technologies in varied environments rather than the physical-biotic environments themselves. In due time my doctoral dissertation carried the subtitle: "A Study in Culture Growth and Change," and I have essentially spent my professional life endeavoring to comprehend the roles of cultural development and cultural processes in the varied and changing ways of mankind on the earth.

There were certain unwritten rules in the Berkeley department in my era. Everyone took the field course every time it was offered, no matter who might offer it, unless there was a very good reason not to. There was a short list of recommended readings in geography, chiefly in the German and French literatures, but no check was ever made as to what students read. I recall browsing J. H. von Thünen's *Die Isolierte Staat*, and Mr. Sauer once referred to it during a late evening session, but there was no call to create a "new geography" around it. After each evening seminar had completed its formal routine, the coffee pot was heated up and an informal session went on until midnight, at which point the faculty member went home and the students went back to work. During one such session, Mr. Sauer reacted to the current land-use mapping being done for dissertations in the Middle West: "There is nothing significant to be found out in such a thing. You map this year's crops until your area is mapped, and you are through. There will be none of that done here."

Sauer's concerns with Latin America were matched areally in several departments in the Middle West and East, and it appeared to me in 1930 that too many students in geography were oriented that way. I was not that certain of my own competitive ability in an environment in which there were but few openings each year—the Great Depression had already made itself felt. I spoke only an indifferent Spanish and had not yet really mastered the readings of either French or German, which eliminated Europe. There was but one course on Africa, and none on Australia, but I was dar gave a six week break at Christmas, and field work in Mexico rather than meetings appealed to Sauer in those years. I accompanied him as his field assistant during the winter break of 1930-31.

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\(^8\) John Leighly did offer one seminar in historical urban morphology in my period of residence. We reviewed the plans, layouts, and situations of the earliest cities and those later ones to about A.D. 1700.

\(^4\) The West was new to Sauer in 1923. He was first interested in its geomorphology, but became increasingly attracted to its Latin American background, which led him into Mexico. His "refusal" to attend national meetings in the East arose out of the same attitudes as were held by other Westerners. There was the added factor that the then Berkeley academic calen-
determined to get out of North America. I learned that there were about thirty courses dealing with some part of Asia, but that only five instructors had ever been there. Asia became my future region, and I began auditing almost every nonlanguage course in the university dealing with Asia.

There was no requirement of a Latin American topic for a Ph.D., but Mr. Sauer made it clear that he could not get funds to help field work outside that area. By the end of the summer of 1932 I had completed the field and library work on a topic in southern Utah, had passed my qualifying exam, and had encountered a young lady willing to gamble on a trip to China, so the newly married Spencers departed. The sheer luck of being in the right place on the right day provided a position with the Chinese National Government. A period of home leave in 1936 enabled taking the compulsory final oral exam. The Ph.D. completed, we returned to China to stay until 1940. Those China years afforded the opportunity to mature many ideas about geography while resident in a society replete with cultural process operations which had also vigorously created its own systems of culturally ordered landscapes.

REACTIONS TO TEACHING IN GEOGRAPHY

The simplistic conclusions about physical environmental controls I had rejected. Judgments short of that view often seemed unclearly stated and amorphous. The Berkeley attitudes were anti-environmental, but how culture operated never came across. I was taken aback by the Berkeley dictums that cities were unimportant and that political geography had little to offer. There had been no anthropology department at UCLA, and at Berkeley the stimulus to use anthropological materials presented no guide lines as to what aspects could be most useful to a geographer. The contradictions between the importance of contemporary land use studies and the disdain thereof left an uncertainty as to how a geographer should best be concerned with the agricultural economies that occupied most of the world's peoples. There was also the contrast between the primary production-commercial geography of Chisholm and J. Russell Smith (UCLA) and the society economy-wirtschaftsliehkeit of Edward Hahn (Berkeley). The concerns for the rural scene contained few guidelines on how to distinguish the critical elements that motivated different rural living systems and modified the surfaces of those home regions. If the real objectives were unclear, even more so were the means of getting at the factors that caused different peoples to act as they did.

My five field courses had taught me to observe critically and to record what I saw, but in China there seemed to be almost too much human activity and too many diverse kinds of impact on the earth. The Berkeley insistence that the young scholar should follow thematic approaches I understood and liked, but in China too many themes appeared interconnected in a complex manner. The Berkeley dictum that a problem is structured only after enough has been learned to clarify the nature of the problem stood in conflict with the growing insistence in the Middle West that every study must be fully structured before it can be undertaken.

During the China years I possessed only a very small library of works in geography, and the Geographical Review was almost the only contact with current developments. My official duties kept me away from the libraries of university centers and the coastal cities, but they did require that I travel widely in the countryside. Bearing in mind Mr. Sauer's injunction that I get something into print to earn my mark required that I be somewhat opportunistic in what I did while also trying to learn both the Chinese language and everything about China. My published papers did certify that I could meet standards, but most of those early ones were compromises between opportunity and philosophy. Slowly concepts crystallized, working hypotheses matured, and a viewpoint toward geography solidified. As that pattern of synthesizing continued, the importance of cultural processes became clearer and more focussed, so that by the time I returned to the United States in 1940, I felt almost ready to practice my own kind of geography.

THE WAR YEARS

The opportunity to fill a last-minute vacancy at the University of California, Los Angeles, was offered and gratefully accepted. Taking a position as a junior colleague to most of my undergraduate instructors had its problem moments. One new staff member, Robert M. Glendinning (Ph.D., Michigan, 1933), was also having philosophical and personality difficulties in adjusting to the department. We shared
a small office and mutual problems. The university was then engaged in elevating its status, expanding its programs, and was aiming high. The department had initiated an M.A. program in 1934 with a small group of students, and plans were afoot for a new building and a doctoral program. As McBride put it: "Why should we have to send our students to the Middle West and East when they look down their noses at us?" The onset of World War II delayed both the building and the Ph.D. program.

In the spring of 1942 there began the "drafting" of geographers across the country for service in Washington, D.C. It was that gathering together of a corps of young geographers, largely unrecognized by their professional elders, that led to the restructuring of the exclusive senior club, the Association of American Geographers. My participation in wartime activities involved eighteen months in Washington and another twenty-eight months in India, Burma, and China with the Far East Division, Office of Strategic Services.

GEOGRAPHY IN THE WEST

In the latter years of the nineteenth century and during the early twentieth century, the discipline of geography was well represented along the Pacific Coast in the colleges and normal schools, and there were several local geographical associations. George Davidson's activities with the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey were capped by appointment, in 1898, as professor of geography at the University of California. The Berkeley department dates from 1905 when Rufus Holway (M.A., geology, Stanford) was appointed chairman. Eleven M.A. degrees, chiefly in physical geography, were awarded between 1908 and 1923, when Holway retired. The University of Oregon early possessed a department of geology and geography, and several other universities taught physical geography in their geology departments, then a common pattern across the country. Such authors as James F. Chamberlain, Harold Fairbanks, and Nellie B. Clark each published a series of books that provided a wide coverage of materials. Most of the early faculty members of western schools had been trained in normal colleges and universities in the Middle West and East but, once located in the West, they became westerners in every sense of the term. For example, Otis W. Freeman (M.S., Michigan, 1913; Ph.D., Clark, 1929) moved west to a position at Eastern Washington Normal School and was a leading spirit in organizing independent groups interested in furthering geography. Many Pacific Coast geographers regularly attended meetings of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, Pacific Division, but did not go East for the meetings of the Association of American Geographers.

By the mid-1930s geographers along the Pacific Coast were both sufficiently numerous and exasperated by the attitudes of those in the Middle West and East that, at the stimulus of Otis Freeman, they came together in the organizing of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers as an independent association. The effort took place at the University of California, Los Angeles, in conjunction with the 1935 meeting of the A.A.A.S., Pacific Division, a move the UCLA department of geography was happy to implement. Freeman was the first president, and was for some years the editor of the Yearbook, which began as a slim pamphlet of abstracts, owing to the scarcity of funds. The records indicate as founding members about forty people from about twenty-five institutions in the four states of Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona. John Leigthy, of the Berkeley department, was an important founding member, but Mr. Sauer never participated. By 1938 the annual meeting had become a three-day affair with over one hundred members in attendance.

Contrary to the exclusiveness of the A.A.G. in those years, the A.P.C.G. has followed a policy of inclusiveness, encouraging graduate students and outside teachers to attend and present papers. British Columbian geographers were also invited, and they regularly attend meetings held at central or northern points of the Pacific Coast. Centrally located meetings in recent years have drawn 300 registrants, and there are a good many geographers in the West for whom the A.P.C.G. meeting is "the" annual meeting. The Yearbook has grown into an annual publication that in some years exceeds two hundred pages. The success of the Pacific Coast efforts, and the insistence on maintaining both our annual meeting and the Yearbook, eventually led to the development of the A.A.G. regional division system now implemented nationally. A good many of us would have preferred that the A.P.C.G. remain
permanently independent of the A.A.G. Geography, along the Pacific Coast, at the time the divisional system was initiated, had crossed a critical threshold, and the membership felt quite able to maintain both the organization and professional activities in geography.

THE POSTWAR ERA

The war years had decimated the UCLA geography enrollments as such, though a curriculum for the Army Specialized Training Program had been carried on by a skeleton staff implemented by faculty from equally decimated local junior colleges. McBride had been detached from the department in 1942 to serve on a U.S. Department of State Boundary Commission in northern South America, and had reached the final compulsory retirement age while there. McClellan had retired in 1941, and Varney had died in 1943. Postwar plans for the university envisaged vigorous growth and expansion, and an upgraded and enlarged faculty was required for the hoped-for doctoral program. This implementation began in late 1945, and for about a decade one or two new members joined the department faculty each year. Shifts of quarters occurred repeatedly until, in 1964, the department finally occupied quarters designed for a geography program.

Clifford Zierer had inherited the chairmanship of the department in 1943, and it was he who led the expansion and the planning of the department program. Curricular revolutions within the university structure altered elements of the program over time, as the undergraduate major changed. The doctoral program was initiated in 1947, and the first degree awarded in 1950. Zierer pointed the future growth of the department toward an “across the board” program that was broad in range. As the years passed, Zierer’s outlook both grew and changed and, interestingly enough, his offerings in the last few teaching years were almost entirely in historical geography of the West, a strong contrast to his earliest insistence upon the contemporary scene.

The expansion of geography departments, and their programs, of course, has occurred along the whole Pacific Coast. An independent geography department at the University of Oregon has been staffed in such a way as to carry on a share of the tradition of the “Berkeley school.” The Berkeley department is larger than it was in the early Sauer years, and much more broadly based, with few members having any tie to the old “Berkeley school.” The former normal schools along the Pacific Coast have mostly been upgraded into universities, just as elsewhere, and in a good many the geography program includes the M.A. Several branches of the University of California now have departments of geography offering a full range of geography. Most Pacific Coast junior colleges have either geography or earth science departments. The corps of geographers forming the membership of the Pacific Coast Division of the A.A.G., which includes those as far east as Montana, Utah, and New Mexico, compares with that of any other division, although separation by distance is greater in the West than elsewhere. Rather than just one institution offering the Ph.D., as in the 1920s, there are eleven departments providing work to the Ph.D. and over thirty additional departments offering the M.A., plus the three Canadian institutions just across the border which also provide a full range of education in geography.\(^5\)


From about 1940 through the 1950s geography seemed to be suffering from inertia and an over-concentration on an economic geography chiefly concerned with world primary production and trade.\(^6\) Many of the static viewpoints seemed strongly entrenched in the Middle West and East. During the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s, however, expansion in the membership of the Association of American Geographers brought in many new and varied viewpoints ranging from inclinations toward mathematics through psychology to law. Whereas the total manpower in geography scarcely exceeded 1500 in the late 1940s, it probably exceeded 8500 by 1970. Many of

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6 This arose largely because colleges and schools of business administration required their undergraduate students to take one or two courses in economic geography, through which they should learn some essential geographic and economic facts about the world at large. In some geography departments business administration students formed the largest single contingent in the enrollment in geography. A few of these regularly switched their majors to geography.
these new members had done only a little prior work in geography, but the sheer variety of their concerns made for change in the discipline that had early recruited largely among the earth sciences (the chief source of physical and regional geographers) and later from business administration (the chief source of economic geographers). As faculty members were recruited from these new groups of graduate students, there occurred changes in the content of many courses, and there came the introduction of many courses quite new to a curriculum in geography.

It was in this period, late 1963, that I was asked to become editor of the *Annals*, as of June, 1964. I had served an apprenticeship as editor of the *Yearbook*, Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, from 1949 through 1956, during a period in which publication was limited to papers presented at the annual meeting. The *Annals* editorship was willingly accepted, since the responsibility of putting out the journal presented the possibility of doing a little to enliven professional viewpoints in geography. I had shared the unhappiness of many over the conservatism induced by earlier *Annals* editorial boards and, as a condition of acceptance, asked for the abolition of the editorial board in order to have complete freedom of choice and decision. My editorial policy henceforth was based on the principle that there should be no restriction on subject content, methodology, procedure, or professional viewpoint, so long as a paper achieved quality and dealt with geography.  

Many of the newer members of the profession were not really well trained in the older traditions of geography, but they were grounded in separate disciplinary approaches and in the use of new elements of procedure, mechanics, and hardware. Their “perceptions” of geography were often quite different from those of older members. The first studies, later described as introducing a “conceptual revolution” into geography, had already appeared as I became *Annals* editor. It seemed to me during my period as editor, that many aspects of “new geography” were really variants of old traditions in geography, interpreted through different procedures, improved mechanics, and the use of electronic hardware, none of which had been available in earlier periods.

Authors were asked to use significant problems in the illustration of a new point of view, which they did not always do. I struggled to persuade some of the quantifiers to express in plain English what they had accomplished through mathematical manipulation, but not very successfully. I tried to persuade some of the spatial behaviorists to consider individualized perception of situations when they assumed stereotyped behavior, to little avail. Authors of papers in traditional themes were encouraged to work in newer concepts. For me, the editorial task was not that of choosing among papers presenting particular kinds of geography, nor of requiring highly polished writing. Instead, it was the facilitating in publication of papers presenting all kinds of geography—the “new geography” as well as the “old geography.”

Since one of my chief concerns was to free editorial policy from any control over viewpoints expressed, this amounted to letting contributors become advocates of viewpoints. As the flow of papers increased, and the range of viewpoints widened, no urge was felt to solicit papers presenting particular themes or views, for the *Annals* was performing its role in broadening the outlook of geography. Time for my own research almost disappeared, as what had been fifteen hours of editorial work per week grew into thirty hours per week. As the final 1969 issue under my editorship went to press, there came the feeling of satisfaction that the West Coast had assisted American geography in its recovery from the earlier inertia.

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1 In my six years as editor of the *Annals* I rejected just one paper for its content per se, a paper dealing with the “geography of the solar system,” since by definition geography dealt with the earth.