

Coming to Academia

By R.H. Dott, Jr.

Editor's Note: A dinner reunion of Bob's friends, family, and former students at the Geological Society of America meeting in Denver (see the following article) prompted Bob's reminiscences of earlier days in Science Hall.

It was the autumn of 1958 when I walked into a room packed with about 100 animated souls loudly greeting each other and swapping lies. It was a full house of enthusiastic and well oiled Badger geology alums. As I plunged into the happy melee not knowing what to expect, my hand was pumped repeatedly and I was greeted with such exclamations as "Bob Dott, welcome to Wisconsin" and "What do you plan to teach?" Never had I been greeted with such gusto and well wishing. As I departed three hours later, I noticed that ours had been the largest and noisiest of all alumni parties at that year's Geological Society of America meeting. Glad I was to have joined Wisconsin's family.

That was only a few months after Nancy and our then-three young children had migrated across the country from Los Angeles, where I had been working for the Humble Oil and Refining Co. What a send-off for beginning a 36 year teaching career at the University of Wisconsin! But Nancy likes to remind me that I announced soon after we arrived "This would be okay for five or six years, but eventually we must move back to the mountains and ocean." After finishing my PhD at Columbia University in New York, I had begun working for Humble in 1954 on the Pacific Coast and we fell in love especially with Oregon. After two years, the Air Force foreclosed on my ROTC commitment for two years of active duty. We were sent to the Boston area, where we enjoyed the Atlantic coast and the mountains of New England and Maritime Canada. So in 1958, the cratonic flatlands of Wisconsin did not seem a satisfactory long-term substitute, but here we still are 46 years later! The joke was on me as I learned that the quality of colleagues and the institution are much more important in the long run than geography. A great bonus has been the world's most enthusiastic alumni.

In 1954 and 1955 I had worked two years as a company assistant to Prof. Lowell Laudon of Wisconsin, who was engaged as a summer consultant to conduct a regional reconnaissance of the Pacific Northwest. That was quite an experience, which I described in our alumni *Newsletter* for



May, 1960: at the podium Bob Black (right) presents Bob Dott with the coveted "Crackpot" Award. Seated at the front table are Maggie Hanson and Carl Dutton. In the lower right corner, backs to camera, are Eleanore and George Woollard.

1991. L.R. kept badgering me to switch to academia. A few years later when Prof. Lewis Cline persuaded the department to add another person in sedimentary geology to relieve his burgeoning load of graduate students, Lowell must have mentioned me. In any case, of several positions for which I interviewed, Wisconsin fit best—in spite of the distance from mountains and ocean.

Having been born in the Oklahoma oil patch, I had felt I had to try the petroleum industry first. Moreover, I was not sure that I would be a good teacher. The search for petroleum was very exciting, requiring a combination of Sherlock Holmes sleuthing and poker-style gambling. But clearly a petroleum career would be indoors, precluding the outdoor field work and camping with family that I loved. By the end of my Air Force tour, I decided to pursue an academic career with the opportunity to do research and enjoy the diversity of a university. When opportunity knocked in the spring of 1958, I answered.

I was excited to join a major university, but when I arrived in Science Hall, it soon became clear that most of the faculty saw me as the solution to a collective guilt about the neglected state of the laboratory for the large introductory geology course. I quickly realized that my principal mandate was to overhaul all of the laboratory exercises, somehow create a laboratory manual, implement a field trip, and shape up the decorum of the TA's. It was decreed that all must wear ties while teaching—hard as it is to imagine today. Ever resourceful, the students bought a couple of clip-on bow ties, which were thumb-tacked to a community bulletin board. On his way to class, a TA snatched the tie, clipped it to his collar, and

bounded into class. Afterward, the procedure was reversed. (Yes, all of our TA's were male then).

Luckily I found high *esprit* among the TA's as we undertook feverish communal manual writing. We brainstormed over bag lunches, individuals took topics that suited them, wrote drafts, which were subjected to a group critique. Then we tested each exercise in class, and after a couple of trial semesters, distilled our collective best effort and went to press. The Geology Club financed the printing and then sold the manual at a small profit, which was used to underwrite various social functions. Although I wondered briefly whether the Club could legally sell such a thing to a captive clientele, I shrugged and forged ahead. This approach was repeated by two faculty successors, producing in turn blue-, red- and green-covered editions. After about 10 years, for reasons that I cannot recall, commercial manuals were adopted and the Geology Club retired from the publishing business; its budget simultaneously declined precipitously.

The spirit of the Geology Department could not have been higher. A daily coffee break held in the basement of Science Hall brought everyone out around 10 AM. Picture 40 or 50 people jammed into a narrow hallway and a much elevated decibel level. Neither faculty nor students would miss this daily ritual. Sadly, however, it faded away during the 1970s. The Geology Club promoted several social functions during the year in which both faculty and students participated as an extended family. There were spring and fall picnics, Christmas parties, and a dressy spring banquet. A mid-year stag party was particularly noteworthy during my first few years until our student body became more feminized. There was a lot of beer consumption, cigar smoking, and generally raucous behavior highlighted by a student skit poking fun at both faculty and students. Once or twice we turned the tables and presented a faculty skit. I have always been amazed at the creativity that emerges on such occasions even from individuals who otherwise seemed rather lackluster.

In my early days, an Elucidation was presented whenever we had a guest speaker rather than only once a year. Though surprised, the speakers enjoyed the fun. Thus we heard regularly of the misdeeds of both faculty and students. The most quick-witted show-offs among the students were chosen as Elucidators, and most were truly outstanding. Fred Schwab (early 1960s), Steve Born (late 1960s), and David Fastovsky (mid-1980s) were three of my students aptly cast in that all-important role and all shone brightly. Late on snowy winter nights, study-weary graduate students often emerged to slide on Union trays down Bascom Hill. A ready supply of aluminum trays was kept in student offices. Regardless of weather, it was also diverting in any season to slide down the old fire escape tube inside the southwest corner of the building. Eventually it was sealed by a humorless Buildings and Grounds department. Another important event was an annual pool to choose the

date that ice would go out of Lake Mendota.

Early students will recall the Crack Pott Award given between 1951 and 1962 to the faculty member who had committed the most outrageous *faux pas*. The honoree had his name added to the quaintly crude, three-tiered trophy topped with an old fashioned chamber pot neatly bisected by a rock saw. A plate said "The Phillip Pott Trophy Dedicated in Perpetuity to Professorial Blunders." When this trophy became filled with names in 1962, it disappeared, later to be found in the Cline basement; apparently Lewis thought it too vulgar to be on display. Next came the Olympic Order of the Purple Pick Society, whose Ooops Award trophy was a large board with a broken rock hammer and a list of names of awardees. Three Ooops boards have been filled so far.

Campus Unrest

Those who were in the Department between 1966 and 1970 will have memories of the campus unrest induced by the Vietnam War. That difficult period is so burned into my memory that I can almost smell the tear gas, which seeped into Science Hall. FBI agents once used Emmons' office to observe a demonstration across the street at the Union. I also remember stones being thrown through windows and a small fire in the lobby late one night. There was a more serious burning down of an old World War II "temporary" frame building over on the Engineering Campus. I secretly considered this conflagration therapeutic and wished that two ugly companion buildings had also been torched (they lasted two more decades). Rampaging students had sit-ins, tried to take over classes, trashed stores on State Street, and declared that "You can't trust anyone over 30." The University was likened to a "Filling station at which students simply got filled up with establishment propaganda." They wanted to be "taught only what they wanted to know," which amounted to shared ignorance in my opinion. Teaching under such conditions was difficult and uncomfortable, especially when rowdies tried to take over classes; I recall that Herb Wang once received such an uninvited visitation.

There were many emergency faculty meetings filled with eloquent rhetoric from Marxist faculty and hawkish conservatives alike. The campus was no environment then for dispassionate inquiry, especially when the National Guard was called and staked out places around the campus with guns. The Memorial Union offered rooms for rap sessions with students to discuss the issues, and I took advantage of that several times. At our reunion dinner at the Denver GSA meeting in November last, Glen Tanck reminded us of a time when I invited a class to write messages to the White House expressing whatever they wished about the situation, and I then mailed them. On top of all the Vietnam-related tension, the Teaching Assistants Association decided to go on strike. At Denver, Ken Aalto reminisced about that event, which had touched him

deeply. All of this disruption was very difficult for faculty, especially us younger ones, for we were torn between our sympathies for our students' concerns about the war and our felt duty to continue teaching. It all came to a dramatic end in 1970 with the traumatic bombing of Sterling Hall, which took the life of a young Physics post-doctoral fellow. Two decades later, his daughter majored in geology.

In spite of the Vietnam War blight, the 1960s decade had several positive aspects. The civil rights movement came to fruition, social mores became more honest, environmental awareness surged, women's issues began to receive public attention, and plate tectonics revolutionized our field. I recall that students in my undergraduate classes then were the most exciting ever because they were so intellectually alive, engaged, and questioning. But soon the rise of creationism began to shake



At the dinner, left to right, front row, Lonnie Leithold and Marjorie Chan; back row, Heather Macdonald, Steve Driese, Bob Dott, Jody Bourgeois, David Fastovsky and Gary Kocurek.

my naïve faith in ever-increasing social and intellectual progress. Unfortunately social and political events of the following decades have not reversed my disillusionment, however my joy of being a part of the Wisconsin geological-geophysical family has never weakened.

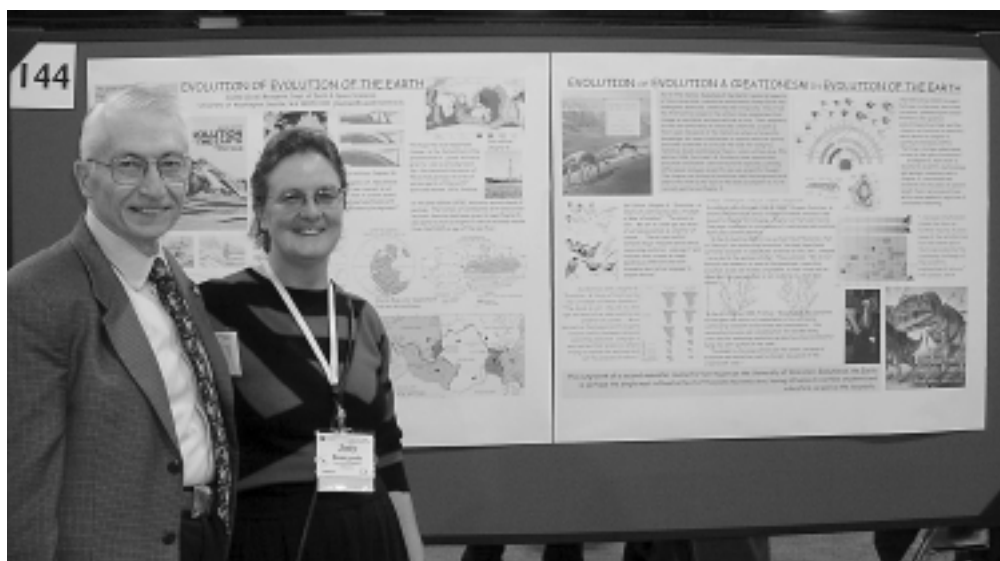
“IN HONOR OF ROBERT H. DOTT, JR.”

Bob Dott's friends and former students organized an all-day “Dottfest,” at the Geological Society of America's November 2004 meeting in Denver—*Sedimentary Geology and Earth History: Retrospective and Prospective: In Honor of the Career and Contributions of Robert H. Dott, Jr., (Nos. 157 and 172, Nov. 9)*—which included posters, a technical session, and dinner reunion at the University Club of Denver. Joanne Bourgeois was the overall organizer of events along with

Margie Chan, Gary Kocurek, John Andrew and Ray Thomasson.

The afternoon session was very well attended, both by Bob's friends and colleagues (and family!), but also because the range of topics, based on Bob's career, were of broad interest. Speakers received many positive comments about this session, as well as about the morning poster session, an opportunity again for Bob's colleagues, friends and admirers to get together and appreciate his contributions.

See much more about this event on the web at http://www.geology.wisc.edu/news_events/GSA_04/dottfest/



Bob Dott and Jody Bourgeois with her poster, “Evolution of Evolution of the Earth”, at GSA, Denver.