The Archivist's Corner

Over Hill, Over Dale, Down the Dusty Field Trip Trail

by Robert H. Dott, Jr.

"Doctor Dott, my stove won't work," came the plaintive cry just as I was sitting down to dinner famished and exhausted after an arduous day in the field. Then, likely as not, I could anticipate at about dusk another cry, "Doctor Dott, my lantern doesn't work." Thus was my extracurricular life while teaching our summer field course during the 1960s. In those years, the UW field course was taught in a spartan manner by touring and camping out west where the geology is more obvious and varied than in the Midwest. In those bygone days, neither students nor universities were affluent, so roughing it was an economic necessity. The students provided their own cars while the UW provided only one vehicle for the faculty. The Department provided tents and a Coleman stove, lantern, and a cook kit for each car. Coleman appliances were simple and generally reliable, but ours got hard use by young greenhorns, therefore, I had become an expert at minor repairs and always carried spare parts.

Student cars in those days were not Detroit's finest models and most were at least second hand with high mileage, uncertain running condition, and dubious tires. The results were lots of flat tires and mechanical problems. I shall never forget the afternoon when I was following at the rear of our caravan and saw a rock hammer fall to the pavement from the jalopy ahead of me. It had fallen through a hole in rusted floorboards.

Four people rode in each car and shopped and cooked together as a unit. Not surprisingly, it was rare that any of the students were gourmet chefs, so their menus were simple and not very well balanced. It was amusing to overhear a foursome arguing over the cost of a can of beans or box of cereal in the markets, but when they got to the beer counter, economy suddenly ceased to be an issue.

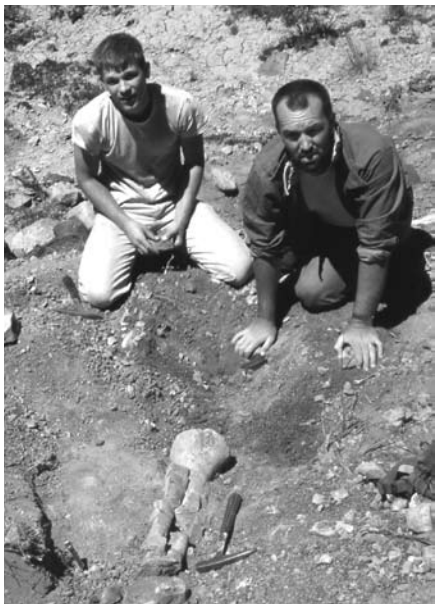
During the seven summers that I taught the course, I took my wife and children along. They were accustomed to traveling and camping and Nancy judged it better to rough it with me than stay at home alone for two months with a bunch of kids. Besides, we both thought it a grand way for youngsters to grow up. Quaint as it may seem today, in the sixties universities still assumed some responsibility for the propriety of co-educational activities. Consequently, when we had young women students in the course, which was usual, a chaperone was considered necessary. My wife easily fulfilled this function, which paid her a token sum of about $100 and allowed us to cover her modest expenses. The presence of my family also, I think, had subtle civilizing effect upon our groups. For diversion, there were evening campfires enlivened with singing and yarn spinning and occasionally we were able to take in a local rodeo.

The two-month course was divided into a month of touring and a month of mapping in one place. In 1959, I conducted the mapping at beautiful Fairy Lake in the Bridger Range just north of Bozeman, Montana . We arrived on the first of July and settled in a Forest Service campground by the lake. Suddenly on the Fourth of July we were blessed with four inches of very wet snow. To my shock, several of our Wisconsin lads were panicked by the legends of Montana blizzards and pleaded to let them go back to Bozeman until the storm passed. Because it was too wet for us to work, I agreed reluctantly and told them to meet me at 8 AM sharp two days later at the north edge of Bozeman, where we would begin a geological orientation. The group was able to stay again in dormitories at Montana State University, where they had stayed when we first arrived thanks to hospitality arranged by UW geology alumnus, Dean Charles Bradley. At the appointed time, we all congregated—all except one fellow, however, who emerged sheepishly from a taxicab fifteen minutes late. I later overheard another student telling about the tardy one having had a nightmare in which he got out of bed and stomped around in a circle muttering, "Limestone, limestone, limestone."

During that 1959 time at Fairy Lake, a foursome of Korean War veterans, who were only a few years younger than I, asked me to go with them to help solve a knotty field problem. Of course I could not refuse, but the spot was in the farthest corner of the map area, which lay over the nearly 10,000 feet-elevation-pass. After the very stiff climb to the pass, I began to suspect that these wise guys might be taking the prof on a snipe hunt just for the helluvit, but I maintained a poker face all day.

In 1960 we mapped at Sheep Creek Canyon on the northern side of the Uinta Mountains in Utah and Wyoming near Flaming Gorge. The only notable memory I have of our time there was a student coming down off the high canyon wall on a particularly hot afternoon and exclaiming to me that, "The good Lord shore must've liked quartz." He had just finished

Lou Maher and Robert Palmquist taught a cross-country UW field trip in the summer of 1965. Members of the party drove personal cars (ranging from a 1950's vehicle to a 1930 model-A Ford), and slept four to a tent. They had just gotten to a Forest Service campground a little north of Dubois, WY when a problem arose: The campground had a couple of toilets but no other facilities. The Forest Service said the group could build some picnic tables and make other improvements as long as everything was removed when they left. The two instructors headed for a Dubois lumber yard and picked up a saw, some nails, and planks. *(Lou Maher)*



Students Schroeder and Kane with their discovery, a *Stegosaurus* bone. *(Bob Dott)*

measuring a pure quartz sandstone formation that is about 1000 feet thick. A couple of years later, when we came past there with the roving part of our course, we discovered that a flash flood the year before had completely wiped out the campground and the road through the canyon; it was an awesome sight and a good learning experience in environmental geology.

In 1962 we mapped the southern edge of the Absaroka Plateau near Dubois, Wyoming located in the upper Wind River Valley. In Wyoming English, it is pronounced "Dewboys;" if you tried it in the original French, no local would have a clue what you meant. Generally we preferred to camp in cheap Forest Service campgrounds, but there were none near Dubois, so we ended up in a bargain-priced commercial facility at the edge of town. This was not ideal from a faculty point of view, for the bars were too handy. In addition, Dubois had an excessive number of roving dogs—apparently more dogs than people. In 1963, Lou Maher took the course back to Dubois, but arranged to make their own camp by building tables and privy in the National Forest north of town and farther from the bars. (Photo page 8.)

Dubois, or properly DuBois, translates as "of or by a woods." Perhaps significant is the fact that a few miles up the canyon from town was a historical site where trees were cut to make ties for the Transcontinental Railroad and/or for mine timbers in the late 1800s. There is also much timber north of town on the Absaroka Plateau where we did most of the student mapping.

One day I drove with students in the UW Ford station wagon through the nearby Maverick Springs oil field over a dirt road deeply rutted by a recent rainy spell. Although I successfully straddled most of those ruts, eventually one got us. The wheels slipped into a rut with a severe jolt and a loud wham. Soon we smelled raw gasoline and my heart sank. Sure enough a big rock had punched a hole almost big enough to shove a brick through endwise. Luckily, it was in the upper half at the front of the tank, so we still had some fuel left. But how could we hope to negotiate the steep, rough descent without going bone dry? A resourceful student managed to carve a plug from a piece of 2x4 lumber lying by the road. When we wrapped it with sample bags and pounded it into the hole, very little gasoline could leak. So we headed downhill to a cluster of oil field buildings, where I was able to buy enough gas to refill the tank. Off we went toward Dubois about 25 miles away holding our breath and dribbling gas all the way. We made it and after a few days the Ford had a new fuel tank. My wife observed later that we were lucky not to have a fire. Quite so!

On another day, two of the students came back to camp all excited, for they had discovered a large fossil bone. The next day, I went with them to see their prize and recognized it as a leg bone of a modest-sized dinosaur, probably a *Stegosaurus*. The bone was about three feet long and well preserved, so I called the Department of Geology at the University of Wyoming in Laramie to report it. I was unable to generate any interest, only a disappointing "ho hum" reaction. Well, dinosaur fossils are a lot more common in Wyoming than in Wisconsin.

In 1964 I took the course back to the beautiful Bridger Range again for mapping. Carl Bowser was my confederate. By this time, family camping was becoming very popular, so the Forest Service asked us not to use the Fairy Lake campground, rather designated a nearby unimproved area. An old outhouse was brought in for us as well as a few old picnic tables, but we had to dig the privy pit, which, needless to say, enjoyed heavy use by some 30 people including both genders and some faculty children. Our "Camp Wisconsin" lay at the bottom of one of the most beautiful alpine meadows I have ever seen anywhere in the Rocky Mountains. Our family dog was driven to distraction by a pair of marmots up in that meadow, who teased him fiercely by whistling and promptly disappearing into their holes.

In 1967 Gordon Medaris and I led the field course. After three weeks of the usual grand tour of western geology, we arrived on the southern Oregon coast for mapping. I had been conducting research there for 10 years and had finally gotten up the courage to take students all that way to a geologically complex area with thick, monotonous rock units, few fossils, and poor exposures except in sea cliffs. Besides interesting Cretaceous strata, there were peridotites and serpentines to delight Gordon and an abundance of faults to challenge everyone. Several years before, I had made friends with locals Ben and Lola Gardner, who were delighted to host our group. We camped at the Gardner Ranch about ten miles inland among old corrals and out buildings. Ben gave the students free range to use any old implements and lumber to make their camps comfortable. We constructed a tented privy to supplement the one toilet in the old Ranch House (the Gardners now lived by the coast). It was fascinating to behold student ingenuity. One fellow made use of an old, discarded bathtub and two women put the old smoke house to good use for storage. They were more than a little surprised one afternoon when they returned from mapping to open the door and be greeted by the leering carcass of a desiccated wild cat, which Ben had retrieved from the roadside earlier in the day. The view to the east from the ranch of the high Klamath Mountains was spectacular. Gordon recalls the delight of waking many mornings and looking eastward toward Snow Camp Mountain across valleys filled with fog.

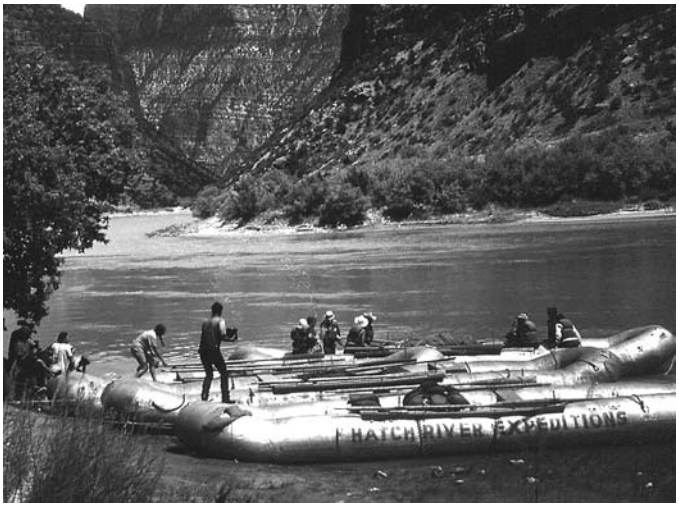
The group relaxes at the Bridger Range. *(Bob Dott)*

The most memorable incident of that 1967 field camp was when Gordon told me one evening that our smart aleck student had driven his brand new International Scout (the student's graduation present from his father) onto the beach to play chicken with the surf. He lost the game when a large wave

doused the engine. Now the tide was rising (the tidal range here is about six feet) and the vehicle was thoroughly stuck in beach sand. When we arrived after dark, a local man was trying to pull the Scout out, but his truck was not up to the task. The water was by now up to the cab floor and the wheels were deeply embedded in sand. The next day, after a complete tidal cycle, a tow truck was finally able to extract the Scout and tow it into nearby Gold Beach to be dried out. Needless to say, twelve hours in salt water and fine sand are not good for autos. I was furious with that irresponsible young smarty, but the car was his and his dad's problem. Gordon and I still had another problem to deal with, namely an irate landowner across whose property our student had trespassed to drive onto the beach.

Gordon Medaris (center, standing) lectures in Oregon, 1967. *(Bob Dott)*

My last roving summer field course was in 1969. I accompanied Bowser and David Stephenson for the first half only. Having often experienced cold, rainy weather in early June in the central and northern Rockies, I suggested that we outwit the weather by swinging into Colorado first. A clever idea, but nature outwitted us again. We had deluges around Boulder and more deluges in southern Colorado near Canon City. Besides the insult of downpours in the latter area, there was a hatch of thousands of cicadas in our campground and the racket was almost insufferable. Finally the weather improved, and we culminated the three-week tour with a wonderful raft trip organized by Stephenson through Ladore Canyon and Split Mountain in the Uinta Range.

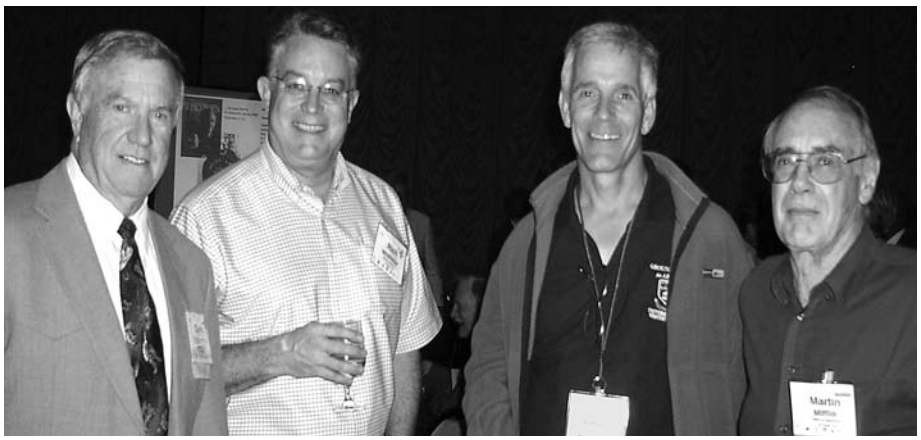


The Wisconsin group rafting on the Colorado River in 1969. *(Bob Dott)*

This adventure celebrated the centennial of John Wesley Powell's heroic exploration of the Green and Colorado Rivers during which he was the first to boat through the Grand Canyon. Our rafts emerged from Split Mountain canyon on July fourth, and that evening a spectacular thunderstorm passed just south of our camp, a fitting fireworks show to celebrate the holiday. Next day my family and I bade farewell and headed for Oregon.

The roving, two-month field course introduced by Lowell Laudon in 1948 was modified into the two-part format by Lewis Cline in the mid-fifties. By the late 1960s, however, camping with a large group for more than a few nights at any one site was growing more and more difficult. We were not welcome in government campgrounds for long stays and commercial campgrounds were prohibitively expensive. Also several faculty members had come to believe that our camping field course involved too much student time camping and cooking, which time could be better spent learning geology. Consequently, after considerable controversy, in 1971 we joined the Wasatch-Uinta consortium field camp with Iowa, Minnesota-Duluth, Illinois, and Michigan State based in a ski lodge at Park City, Utah. I was the first UW representative in 1971. This arrangement has proven very satisfactory and is continuing today. There are plenty of good memories from this camp experience as well, but that is a story for another day and another author.

The most satisfying teaching that I ever did was in the summer field course. Day by day, I could see so clearly the learning process occurring as light bulbs of insight flashed in young brains. I used to enjoy standing on a critical outcrop and plying a student with questions until, at last, the light dawned that the answer lay right there at our feet. The value of that course for students was, I think, nicely summed up by Jack Howard (BS 1959; MS 1961), recently, "That 1959 field course was the highlight of my geological education." ●



At GSA 2008 in Houston: Dave Stephenson, Rich Whittecar, Ken Bradbury, and Martin Mifflin. *(Mary Diman)*