

# FIFTY YEARS OF GEOGRAPHY IN THE SOUTHWEST: A HISTORY OF THE SOUTHWESTERN DIVISION OF THE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN GEOGRAPHERS

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The publication of this inaugural issue of the *Southwestern Geographer* coincides with the fiftieth anniversary of establishment of the Southwest Division of the Association of American Geographers (SWAAG). Thus, a review of the history of geography in the states comprising the Southwestern Division is appropriate. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to present a brief history of geography in the Southwestern Division since SWAAG was founded shortly after World War II.

The five states that comprise the Southwestern Division of the Association of American Geographers have experienced unprecedented population growth and economic development during the past half century. The national reputation of universities located within the SWAAG region has increased dramatically. These developments have contributed substantially to the growth of geography within the states of the Southwestern Division. Growth in higher education, government, and the private sector has created numerous job opportunities for geographers. More and more professional geographers are active in academic and non-academic positions throughout the SWAAG region, and the SWAAG institutions have successfully attracted numerous scholars with international reputations in various areas of geography to join their geography faculties.

All of these developments have helped SWAAG to emerge in recent years as one of the stronger regional divisions within the Association of American Geographers. In this article, we examine the growth of professional geography

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in the states comprising the Southwestern Division since World War II, with special attention paid to the growth of SWAAG itself. A presentation of the history of the division itself is followed by discussion of the growth of geography in individual departments and discussion of linkages between SWAAG and the Association of American Geographers at the national level.

### **History of the Southwestern Division**

The history of SWAAG as a formal organization, like that of other regional divisions of the Association of American Geographers (AAG), dates back to the period immediately following World War II. Prior to the war, only those persons formally nominated and elected to membership by active members of the association could join the AAG. Meanwhile, a younger generation of geographers was taking an active part in the U.S. war effort by serving on active duty in the armed forces or lending their expertise to the Department of State and other government agencies. The younger geographers objected to the AAG's refusal to expand its membership and formed their own organization, which was known as the Society of Professional Geographers.

After the war ended, the AAG and the Society of Professional Geographers merged. The merger agreement eliminated the requirement that AAG members be elected formally, and membership in the AAG became open to all persons interested in geography as a profession. With the expansion of the AAG's membership rolls came the establishment of regional divisions. Originally the United States was divided into six regions, with that number eventually increasing to nine. The Southwestern Division consisted of the states of Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas. The geographic composition of the division has remained unchanged since SWAAG's inception.

### *The Founding of the Southwestern Division*

In some parts of the country, professional geographers had already established formal regional associations before the merger of the AAG and the Society of Professional Geographers. For example, the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers was well established before the beginning of World War II. Other divisions, such as the Southeastern Division, began to hold annual regional meetings immediately after the war.

The Southwestern Division, in contrast, was the AAG's smallest division

in terms of population, number of academic institutions, and number of AAG meetings. At that time, Ph.D.-level work in geography was offered at only one SWAAG institution, Louisiana State University. By 1970, Ph.D. programs at the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University, and the University of Oklahoma had been established. The ranks of Ph.D. programs in geography within SWAAG has since increased to five with the establishment of a new Ph.D. program in geography at Southwest Texas State University in 1996.

Meanwhile, the Southwestern Social Science Association (SSSA), an organization dedicated to integration and advancement of all of the social sciences, had already been active for several decades. Several prominent geographers within the SWAAG region had already established close ties with SSSA. Notable among these geographers was John W. Morris of the University of Oklahoma, who served three two-year terms as SWAAG president between 1946 and 1962 and also served as SSSA president in 1965. Other SWAAG members who have served as president of SSSA include Edwin J. Foscue of Southern Methodist University in 1950, Lorrin G. Kennamer of the University of Texas at Austin in 1973, Donald E. Vermeer of Louisiana State University in 1980, William B. Conroy of Texas Tech University in 1985 and Leon C. Hallman of Stephen F. Austin State University in 1991 (Tolbert 1995).

Given the already close ties between prominent SWAAG members and SSSA, it is not surprising that SWAAG as a regional division of the AAG began to organize its professional activities in conjunction with SSSA. In part because of the region's small population of professional geographers, the annual meeting of SSSA was the main focus of professional activity for the Southwestern Division's geographers during those early years. Geographers were also active in state-level social science and scientific societies but did not meet at the regional level on their own. During the 1951-52 academic year, for example, SWAAG President Harry Hoy reported that

The activities of the Southwest Region have been limited to participation in the several meetings of geographers in science and social science associations. The one meeting that draws geographers from the states of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arkansas [and] Louisiana is the Southwest[ern] Social Science Association. (Hoy 1952: 24)

Five years later, President Fred Kniffen stated that the Southwestern Division "had not yet gained enough strength to hold an Annual Meeting apart from that of the geography section of the Southwestern Social Science Association"

(Kniffen 1957: 43).

SWAAG did not meet independently of SSSA until the early 1970s. In 1971, SWAAG began to sponsor an annual "field" meeting each fall. In contrast to the SSSA meetings, which featured formal presentations of research papers, the fall meetings were organized around field trips. Although the fall meeting has now supplanted the SSSA conference as SWAAG's official meeting, field trips remain an important component of SWAAG's meetings. Each of SWAAG's fall meetings has featured at least one field trip.

In contrast to SSSA meetings, which were held in hotels in large cities such as Houston, Dallas, and San Antonio, the fall field meetings were held on college campuses in smaller communities in order to promote less formal interaction among professional geographers and geography students in the region. Not only did the fall field meetings afford SWAAG members an opportunity to take field trips to some of the many interesting places located throughout the states comprising the division, but they gave some of SWAAG's smaller geography departments an opportunity to show off their campuses, facilities, students, and faculty to the division. Among the smaller departments that hosted SWAAG fall meetings during the 1970s and 1980s were the University of Southwestern Louisiana in Lafayette in 1978, Texas Tech University in Lubbock in 1984, and the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville in 1993. Some fall meetings of SWAAG have been held in larger communities or in resort areas such as Hot Springs, Arkansas (1982 and 1994), and Galveston, Texas (1987).

The spring meeting of SWAAG, which was held in conjunction with the annual SSSA meeting each March, remained the official annual meeting of SWAAG until the mid-1980s. By that time, active participation in SSSA by SWAAG members and other professional geographers had begun to decline. The declining interest of geographers in SSSA stemmed from several factors. Geographers had long been outnumbered by sociologists, political scientists, and historians within SSSA. Moreover, SSSA's orientation to social science was of little interest to SWAAG's increasing number of specialists in physical geography, natural resources, geographic techniques, and geographic information systems.

Even more important, however, were temporal conflicts between the AAG's annual meeting and that of SSSA. In the mid-1950s, the AAG began to hold some of its annual meetings in the spring. As early as 1956, SWAAG President

John W. Morris stated that "The SWSSA [*sic*] has been using the Easter date for 30 years. When the AAG shifted its time it caused a definite hardship" (Morris 1956: 36). After alternating between spring and summer meetings for some years, by 1970 the AAG had begun its current practice of holding its annual meeting in the spring of each year. Many AAG meetings were scheduled within a week or two of SSSA's traditional meeting time in mid- to late March. A few AAG meetings, in fact, coincided precisely with those of SSSA. As the AAG meetings grew in size and prominence, many geographers were reluctant to spend time and money to attend both SSSA and AAG, and when forced to choose between SSSA and AAG, they chose the latter.

Recognizing the increased conflicts between SSSA and AAG meetings as well as the rising importance of the fall field meeting, SWAAG members voted to recognize the fall meeting as the division's official annual meeting in 1983. Despite the efforts of some prominent SWAAG members to revive interest in SSSA, the attendance of geographers at SWAAG continued to wane. Formal ties between SWAAG and SSSA were severed in the early 1990s.

In recent years, however, SSSA has taken steps to resurrect its lost ties with professional geographers. The author of this essay, for example, was appointed as book review editor of the SSSA's journal, *Social Science Quarterly*, in 1994. Recognizing that declining attendance of geographers at SSSA meetings has often been the result of temporal conflicts with the national meetings of the AAG, the SSSA executive committee has decided to move the SSSA meeting from its traditional March time slot to late January or February. Future SSSA meetings will also be held at more attractive venues such as Galveston and Corpus Christi as well as New Orleans and San Antonio, which have served as memorable AAG meeting sites in recent years.

Although some geographers regretted the decision to sever formal ties between SSSA and SWAAG, the fact that SWAAG was now sponsoring only one formal meeting annually undoubtedly has contributed to the increased size and prestige of SWAAG's annual meetings each fall. Attendance at annual meetings of SWAAG has doubled since the mid-1980s. Recognizing the vitality and quality of SWAAG meetings, more and more geographers living and working outside the region have also become active participants.

Increased attendance at SWAAG's fall meetings is due not only to the elimination of formal ties with SSSA, but also to several other factors. In recent years

the AAG has taken a more active interest in the activities of SWAAG and its other regional divisions. In 1969, for example, a visit to the SSSA meeting by AAG President John Borchert elicited a comment in the *AAG Newsletter* that this was the first time that an AAG president had ever attended a SWAAG meeting. Over the past decade, in contrast, several AAG officers, including presidents Larry Brown, Stephen Birdsall, Risa Palm and Ron Abler, have attended SWAAG meetings, as did Abler and his predecessor, Robert Aangeenbrug, in their capacity as executive director of the AAG.

In addition, SWAAG has taken steps to promote attendance among students. The division instituted a formal student paper competition, greatly increasing interest and participation in SWAAG among the region's graduate and undergraduate students. In 1995, SWAAG's first formal poster session was held in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The following year, SWAAG inaugurated a prize for the outstanding student poster presentation.

### *Officers of SWAAG*

Between 1946 and 1997, 33 individuals have served as president of SWAAG (Table 1). SWAAG presidents generally served two-year terms until 1980, when the current practice of having the president serve for one year and be succeeded by the secretary-treasurer was adopted. In 1995, a change in the SWAAG by-laws re-instituted two-year terms for presidents of SWAAG.

Until the late 1960s, SWAAG presidents served as *ex officio* members of the AAG Council. Following a change in the AAG's bylaws, AAG members in each division were empowered to elect a regional division councillor. Regional division councillors serve three-year terms. Since that time nine persons have served as regional division councillors (Table 2). Lorrin Kennamer, Leon Hallman, F. Andrew Schoolmaster, and Sent Visser have served SWAAG in both capacities. Hallman, who served as regional division councillor in the early 1980s, was honored by his fellow councillors by being elected treasurer of the AAG.

### **SWAAG and the Association of American Geographers**

SWAAG and its members have had a continued impact on the affairs of the AAG at a national level. SWAAG member Terry Jordan, who holds the presti-

**Table 1. SWAAG Presidents, 1946-1997\***


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1946-48	John Morris, University of Oklahoma
1948-50	George Corfield, Oklahoma A&M University
1950-52	Harry Hoy, University of Oklahoma
1952-54	John S. Kyser, Northwestern State University
1954-56	John Morris, University of Oklahoma
1956-58	Fred Kniffen, Louisiana State University
1958-60	Charles C. Bajja, Texas A&I University
1960-62	John Morris, University of Oklahoma
1962-64	Lorrin Kenamer, University of Texas at Austin
1964-66	Stephen Sutherland, University of Oklahoma
1966-68	C. Miller Strack, Henderson State College
1968-70	Stanley Arbingast, University of Texas at Austin
1970-72	Robert Crisler, University of Southwestern Louisiana
1973	Robert Holz, University of Texas at Austin
1974	William Conroy, Texas Tech University
1975	Robert Byrnes, Angelo State University
1976-77	Robert Sawvell, West Texas State University
1978-79	Robert Norris, Oklahoma State University
1980	Leon C. Hallman, Stephen F. Austin State University
1981	Dennis K. Ehrhardt, University of Southwestern Louisiana
1982	Ronald Briggs, University of Texas at Dallas
1983	John M. Harlin, University of Oklahoma
1984	Phillip E. Kithcart, Prairie View A&M University
1985	Henry W. Bullamore, University of Southwestern Louisiana
1986	Fred M. Shelley, University of Oklahoma
1987	F. Andrew Schoolmaster, North Texas State University
1988	Sent Visser, Southwest Texas State University
1989	Robert S. Bednarz, Texas A&M University
1990	Stephen J. Stadler, Oklahoma State University
1991	Peter C. Johnson, Southwest Texas State University
1992	Bradley T. Cullen, University of New Mexico
1993	Clarissa T. Kimber, Texas A&M University
1994	Olen Paul Matthews, Oklahoma State University
1995	Frederick A. Day, Southwest Texas State University
1996-97	William Doolittle, University of Texas at Austin

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\*Institutional affiliations are those at the time of service as SWAAG president.

**Table 2.** SWAAG Regional Division Councillors\*

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1968-71	Lorin Kennemar, University of Texas at Austin
1971-73	Allen D. Hellman, Southwest Texas State University
1973-76	H. Jesse Walker, Louisiana State University
1976-80	Phillip Bacon, University of Houston
1981-85	Leon C. Hallman, Stephen F. Austin State University
1985-88	Otis W. Templer, Texas Tech University
1988-91	F. Andrew Schoolmaster, University of North Texas
1991-94	John R. Giardino, Texas A&M University

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\*Institutional affiliations are those at the time of service as AAG Councillor.

gious Walter Prescott Webb Chair at the University of Texas at Austin, served as president of the AAG in 1987. Two of Louisiana State University's distinguished faculty members, Richard J. Russell and Fred B. Kniffen, preceded Jordan as AAG president in 1948 and 1966, respectively. Three other persons who served as AAG president had ties to SWAAG before or after their service. Brian J. L. Berry, who was president of the AAG in 1978, accepted a chair at the University of Texas at Dallas in the mid-1980s. Tom Wilbanks of Oak Ridge National Laboratory, who was AAG president in 1992, had been an active member of SWAAG while serving as chair of the Department of Geography at the University of Oklahoma in the 1970s. Another former Oklahoma faculty member, the distinguished climatologist C. Warren Thornthwaite, was the AAG's honorary president in 1961.

The contributions of SWAAG geographers to the AAG have been recognized by the association's national membership on several occasions. All three of SWAAG's AAG presidents were recognized by their peers with AAG honors. Russell earned AAG honors in 1960, with Kniffen honored in 1978 and Jordan in 1982. In addition, AAG honors were conferred upon George F. Carter of Texas A&M University in 1958, H. Jesse Walker of Louisiana State University in 1960, and George Hoffman of the University of Texas at Austin in 1985.

More recently, two SWAAG members have been awarded the James R. Anderson Medal in Applied Geography. Berry, the former AAG president, won this award in 1987, and David L. Huff of the University of Texas at Austin won



it the following year. These honors commemorated the important role played by SWAAG members in applied geography. In fact, the 1985 meeting of SWAAG in Denton, Texas, was held in conjunction with the annual Applied Geography Conference. The joint meeting allowed SWAAG members to interact with applied geographers in academic and non-academic positions from throughout the United States. Following the precedent established in Denton, the Applied Geography Conference has been held in conjunction with SWAAG and other regional division meetings on several occasions since 1985. In 1997, the Applied Geography Conference and SWAAG will meet jointly in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

On several occasions, the Southwestern Division states have welcomed the national community of American geographers at some of the most memorable annual meetings in the history of the AAG. In 1940, Louisiana's geographers hosted the AAG at the 36th Annual Meeting, in Baton Rouge. It was at this meeting that Carl Sauer, whose dislike of professional conferences was well known in the profession and who rarely appeared at annual meetings of the AAG (Parsons 1976), gave his well-known and still frequently cited presidential address on the nature of historical geography (Sauer 1941).

In the mid-1970s, the AAG Council voted to allow open access to AAG meeting programs. This decision initiated AAG's modern history of large, open meetings. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, in fact, annual meeting attendance increased threefold. The two annual AAG meetings that perhaps best symbolized this transition occurred within the Southwestern Division. Geographers of baby-boom age and older recall fondly the 74th Annual Meeting in New Orleans in 1978 and the 78th Annual Meeting in San Antonio in 1982. Perhaps these two meetings more than any others have set a standard of participation for the modern era of AAG meetings—a standard continued with the 1997 AAG meeting in Fort Worth.

## Conclusion

Over the past half century, the Southwestern Division of the Association of American Geographers has grown rapidly, in association with growth in the Southwest region itself. SWAAG has emerged as one of the AAG's most vibrant and dynamic regional divisions. Geographers have a vital role to play in

the development of one of America's fastest-growing regions, and SWAAG as an organization is playing a critical role in promoting the activities of professional geographers throughout the region.

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