

## A SLIGHTLY VARNISHED HISTORY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

*Bret Wallach*

Like all official histories, a history of an academic department written by a member of that department must be read with skepticism—a double dose of it if the author is the department chair. The history related below, however, is unusually truthful. A few rough edges have been buffed away—varnish applied lightly to soothe a few egos—but the presentation is candid to a fault.

### Early Years

Geography came to the University of Oklahoma early this century in the hands of two men, neither of whom were trained geographers. Charles Taylor was the director of the university's School of Mining Technology; Arthur B. Adams was a professor of economics and director of what would become the university's College of Business. Both men taught the geography of the United States, Taylor first, starting in 1912, Adams following in 1916, after Taylor left the university. Of the two, Adams had the greater influence on geography's development at OU, for while at Columbia University he encountered J. Russell Smith. Adams was evidently so impressed with geography that, when he became dean of

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*Bret Wallach is professor and chair of geography at the University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019-1007. Marvin Baker, Arthur H. Doerr, James M. Goodman, Don R. Hoy, Richard L. Nostrand, and Blake Gumprecht were kind enough to comment on an early draft of this paper. For any remaining errors or omissions, the author is solely responsible.*

the College of Business at OU 20 years later, he instituted a two-course geography requirement for all majors in his college. The courses Adams required were physical geography and economic geography. Perhaps in a bow to environmental determinism, the physical course was called Principles of Human Geography; misleading as that name was, these two courses would be the sustaining core of OU geography enrollments for more than 20 years.

OU hired its first geographer a decade after offering its first geography course. He was Clyde John Bollinger, appointed in 1920 as an assistant professor of geology. His office was in Carpenter Hall, now the university's visitors' center but then the geology building. The next year, the department changed its name to the Department of Geology and Geography, and in 1922, when Bollinger completed his master's degree at the University of Chicago, his title was changed to assistant professor of geography.

Bollinger quickly began teaching a wide spectrum of courses, including regional geographies of Oklahoma, the United States, Latin America, Europe, and Asia, as well as a systematic course in agricultural geography. (This was the field in which he hoped to complete a doctoral dissertation under the direction of O.E. Baker at Clark University.) Almost single-handedly, Bollinger taught all the courses needed for the geography major, which was authorized in 1923. The first two students to complete the requirements for that degree graduated in 1926, and both did well in later years. John L. Page went on to become a professor of geography at the University of Illinois, while Ruel B. Frost eventually headed the Geology and Geography Department at Oberlin College. In 1927, Bollinger offered the first graduate course in geography, and three years later, in 1930, the university granted its first two M.A. degrees in geography.

In 1927, a soon-to-be-famous colleague joined Bollinger. This was the young Charles Warren Thornthwaite, who taught a full load at OU

while finishing a doctoral dissertation under the direction of Carl Sauer at the University of California at Berkeley. Its subject, perhaps surprisingly to readers familiar with Thornthwaite's later career, was Louisville, Kentucky.

Thornthwaite soon turned to climatology. So did Bollinger, who abandoned his dissertation and, with it, his hopes for a doctoral degree. Perhaps the shift to climatology was inevitable for any quantitatively inclined geographer living on the Southern Plains in those years. Bollinger concentrated on the field he called "planetary climatology" and, with a calculating machine, began laboriously correlating drought with sun-spot cycles. Thornthwaite turned in a different direction. According to the Köppen system, all of Oklahoma except the western Panhandle possesses a C climate. Thornthwaite looked around and knew that there was something wrong with a system under which the dust bowl had a humid, mesothermal climate; he decided that temperature was less significant in the determination of climate than the relationship between precipitation and evaporation. Hence began his famous work on a new classification, the first version of which appeared in a lengthy 1931 article in *The Geographical Review* (Thornthwaite 1931). In Thornthwaite's new system, Oklahoma fell in a region of subhumid climate, subdivided into wet and dry zones separated by a dividing line that passed through Norman.

For reasons that remain unclear, Bollinger and Thornthwaite did not get along. Part of the reason may be that Thornthwaite, the younger man, soon had his doctorate, while Bollinger did not. (The lack of the doctorate hobbled Bollinger throughout his career, in fact, and though he continued as a faculty member at OU until his retirement in 1959, he never rose above the rank of associate professor.) There were other causes of friction, including the uncomfortable quarters the two men shared in a temporary building called the Zoology Lab. Geography had moved there in 1928, and the building "reeked" of formaldehyde. That

word comes from the recollections of Leslie Hewes, who graduated from OU as a geography major in 1928 and who shared office space in the lab with Bollinger and Thornthwaite after joining the Norman faculty in 1932. Hewes had grown up near Guthrie, north of Oklahoma City. While an OU undergraduate, he had been advised by Thornthwaite to pursue an advanced degree at Berkeley. Like Thornthwaite, Hewes completed his doctorate there, under Carl Sauer, in Hewes' case with a dissertation on the Cherokee in Oklahoma. At the end of his own career, many years later, Hewes recalled "almost fainting one evening" from the Zoology Lab's odor. He also recalled the bad feeling between Bollinger and Thornthwaite. The three men shared a phone that sat on Bollinger's desk, with Thornthwaite and Hewes sitting at nearby desks. If the phone rang for Thornthwaite, Bollinger would pick it up and say, "Mr. Hewes, will you please tell Mr. Thornthwaite that there is a telephone call for him?"

Thornthwaite took a leave of absence in 1934 and moved east to work at the University of Pennsylvania on a study of internal migration in the United States. Soon he resigned from OU altogether, and in 1935 he joined the new Soil Conservation Service. Bollinger and Hewes, meanwhile, moved to Adams Hall, newly built in 1936 to house, then as now, the College of Business. The move made sense, since most of the geography enrollment came from business students enrolled in Geography 41, the mislabeled physical geography course, and Geography 42, Economic Geography. By 1947, 90 percent of all geography enrollments were coming from those two courses, each of which enrolled about 500 students a term. It is interesting to note that, of the other programs on campus at that time, journalism in particular recommended that its students take geography.

### The Department Takes Shape

During World War II, Norman became a military center, with naval air stations both immediately north and south of campus. Bollinger and Hewes continued to teach civilians, but they also taught—for a time were flooded with—soldiers and sailors enrolled in Army “specialized training” and Navy “college training” programs. These two programs were discontinued in March 1944, but Norman continued to grow, partly because of the nationwide boom in higher education but also because the military bases stayed active until the 1960s, by which time Norman had merged into the greater Oklahoma City metropolitan area.

In 1946 Hewes left Norman for the University of Nebraska, where he would spend the rest of a long career—finally, in his last published work, returning to Oklahoma to study the Guthrie neighborhood of his childhood. So it was that Clyde Bollinger, in the summer of 1946 and 26 years after his arrival in Norman, was once again on his own, the only geographer at OU. In the fall of that year, however, he got help with the appointment as associate professor of Harry Hoy, who had earned a Ph.D. at Nebraska in 1940. Hoy had spent the war years working as an OSS cartographer and as an explorer and field technician for the Rubber Development Corporation, at whose direction he traveled by canoe down the Amazon. At OU, Hoy taught Latin America, soils, and cartography. Copies, in fact, are still available in the department of the large land-forms map of South Asia that he drew in the early 1950s for the Quartermaster Corps, U.S. Army. Like his colleagues, he also taught the required course in economic geography.

Bollinger and Hoy were joined the next year by Ralph E. Olson, who had attended the University of Nebraska, had become friends there with Hoy, and had gone on to take his doctorate at Clark University. Olson specialized in Europe, particularly Luxembourg. (Many years later, he would leave behind a large collection of Luxembourg materials, as well as a full-length but unpublished manuscript dealing with that coun-

try.) At OU he taught not only the required courses in physical and economic geography but also regional courses on Europe and the Soviet Union and systematic courses in political and urban geography. His grade books survive, and they reveal that Olson taught eleven courses in the 1947-48 academic year: four in the fall, four in the spring, three in the summer. Political Geography and the Geography of the U.S.S.R. had only 10 to 12 students, and Olson worked closely with them, his grade book lined with meticulous rows of scores. Typically he gave no more than one A. Meanwhile, he taught the courses required of business students. He was equally tough there: in a class of 60, he typically gave two A's and 10 to 12 B's.

In the fall of 1948, another faculty member was hired. John W. Morris, an Oklahoma native and OU graduate from 1930, had been teaching at Southeastern State College, in Durant. In 1941 he had completed a dissertation at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville; the subject was Oklahoma's oil towns. Coming to OU seven years later, Morris taught the historical geography of the United States, as well as Geography for Teachers, a course reflecting his special pedagogical interest. Morris remained a forceful and lifelong advocate of geography, and he not only kept an eye on how geography was taught in the state's schools but also wrote prolifically for a popular Oklahoma audience. His books, including *Ghost Towns of Oklahoma* (Morris 1977) and *Historical Atlas of Oklahoma* (Morris 1965), are still to be found on the local-interest shelves of bookstores throughout the state.

On January 1, 1948, a few months before Morris' arrival, geography became an independent department. Hoy, who would be promoted to full professor in 1950, was named the first chair, and he continued to serve in that position until 1956. Olson, promoted to full professor in 1953, served as chair from 1956 to 1964. Morris, promoted to full professor in 1955, served as chair almost without interruption from 1964 until his retirement in 1973. Together, these four men consti-

tuted the heart of the department for a generation. They gave it a remarkable degree of stability. The four got along well, were dedicated to their careers as teachers, and maintained those good relations across campus that sometimes prove crucial to a department's health. Hoy's son Don recalls that these early years were probably the happiest ones in his father's life.

In 1949, Arthur Adams stepped down as dean of the College of Business. Two years later the Business College dropped its human geography requirement; economic geography was dropped as a Business requirement in 1958. The impact of these cuts was drastic: the number of sections of economic geography, for example, plummeted from 13 in 1948 to 1 in 1961. Faced with such declines, the Department of Geography might have collapsed, but two other faculty members had come on board by now, and, with the help of the older group, they turned this crisis into an opportunity.

The first of the two new appointees was Arthur H. Doerr, a graduate of Northwestern University who had joined the department in 1951 and taught Latin America, cartography, and Asia. The second was Stephen M. Sutherland, a climatologist from the University of Illinois, who was hired in 1958. (Sutherland's doctoral advisor, coincidentally, was John Page, one of OU's first two geography majors.)

In 1953, with Olson as chair, the department spent many hours persuading a seven-member committee in the College of Arts and Science—and subsequently a 10-member college executive committee and the whole college faculty—that a new, lab-based course in physical geography should be accepted as satisfying the college's lab-science requirement. Resistance to this proposal was especially strong from the geologists, who feared that geography would benefit at their expense, but Olson and Doerr did a great deal of homework, and the final vote in the first committee was in favor of geography—the two “no” votes both coming from the geologists. The college executive committee voted 9 to

1 in favor of geography, the negative vote coming from a physicist who argued that meteorology actually belonged to physics. At the college meeting, resistance was so strong that the motion was tabled in the spring of 1953 and not finally voted on until that fall. The result then was 90 in favor of geography, 41 opposed. The 41 were overwhelmingly from physics, geology, and mathematics.

The new course, Geography 1, did not hurt geology enrollments, but in the early years it caused considerable pain to the geography faculty. Enrollment in the course boomed, because Doerr, and subsequently Sutherland, proved to be prize-winning, charismatic teachers. So, too, after they had both moved to administrative positions, did Joseph Schiel, who took over the course during his time at Norman, from 1970 to 1975. By 1962, 11 sections of Geography 1 were being offered annually; during the early 1970s, when Schiel taught it, five hundred students took the course each term. The burdensome consequence of this success, at least in the early years of the course, was that the geography faculty not only gave 12 hours of lectures weekly but taught 6 hours of physical geography lab.

There was no immediate alternative, if the department was to keep its enrollments up. Relief was needed, however, if the faculty were to have any time for research. Relief came in the form of a doctoral program, in which graduate students were supported as teaching assistants responsible for the physical geography labs. For this, Doerr deserves much of the credit, for he became dean of the Graduate College in 1961 and served in that capacity until 1965, when he won approval of a doctoral program for geography (Figure 1). The first student to graduate with the degree was Behru Lal Sukhwal, who completed a dissertation in 1969 on the political geography of India. Appropriately, his supervisor was Doerr. Sukhwal is presently professor emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, Platteville.

With the enrollment crisis solved and a doctoral program established,



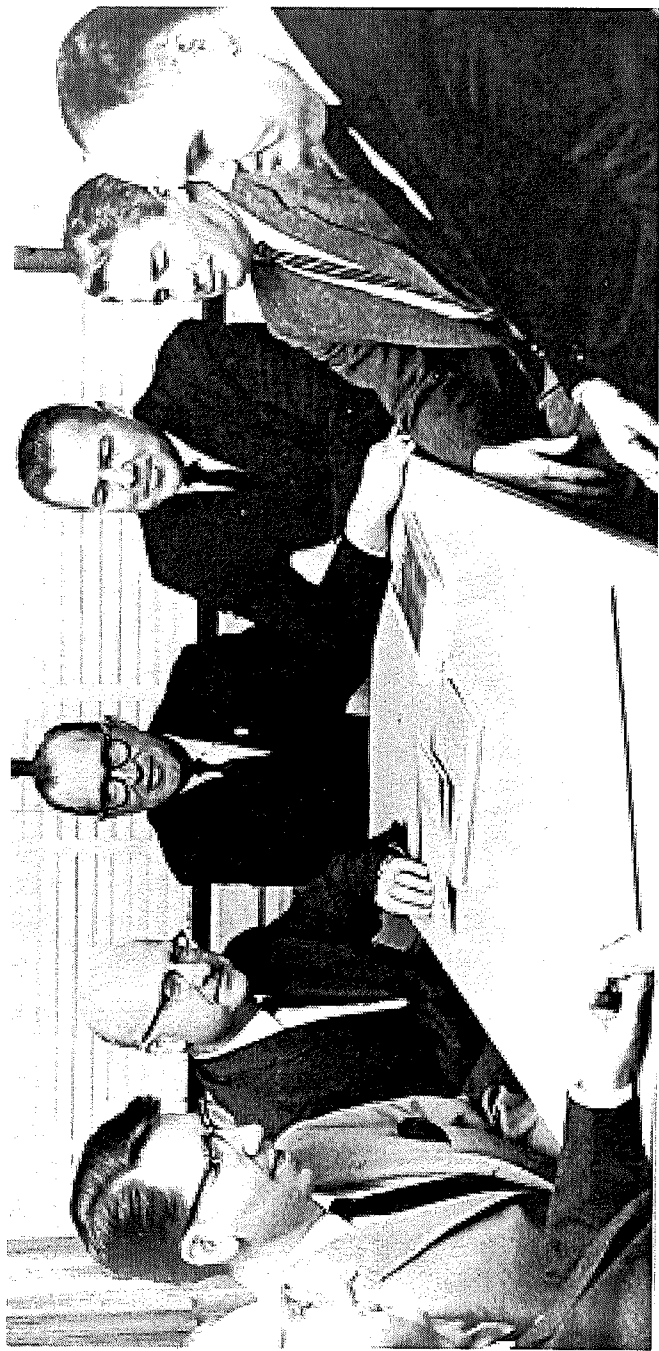


Figure 1: The OU geography faculty in 1966 included (left to right) John W. Morris (Chair), Edward L. Myles, Ralph E. Olson, Harry E. Hoy, Arthur H. Doerr, William C. Wonders (visiting professor from the the University of Alberta, Edmonton), and Stephen M. Sutherland (Source: Olson 1966).

the department could think once again of growing. Two new faculty lines were authorized and filled in 1967. One of the new hires was James M. Goodman, an Oklahoma native who had taken classes with Hoy, Bollinger, Olson, and Doerr. Earning a bachelor's degree at Norman in 1952, Goodman took heed from Doerr and went to Northwestern for graduate work. He then served in the U.S. Air Force and taught in Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Oregon, before returning to OU in 1967. The other new hire was Gary L. Thompson. Like Goodman, an Oklahoma native, Thompson earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Norman in 1960 and 1962, then undertook doctoral work at Michigan State University, joined the department in 1967, and finished his dissertation a year later. Like the original departmental cadre—Bollinger, Hoy, Olson, Morris—both Goodman and Thompson stayed in the department until their retirements, respectively in 1993 and 1998.

### **The Booming 70s**

The doctoral program grew so quickly that during the 1970s the department awarded 50 doctoral degrees, as well as 55 master's degrees. In order to do this, while maintaining undergraduate enrollments, the size of the faculty had to grow, and grow it did, from six faculty in 1965 to an all-time high of 17 faculty ten years later. New quarters were needed. With the dropping of the geography requirements in business, the department had moved in 1952 from Adams Hall to Gittinger Hall, today the home of the English Department but then the social-sciences building. Gittinger became very cramped during the 1960s. Fortunately, a new social-sciences building opened in 1969, and geography moved in. For the next 20 years, until the department moved in 1990 to its present location in the Sarkeys Energy Center, geography was housed high in Dale Hall Tower. Dale remains the home of several social-science departments and is a well-located structure on the OU campus, close to

other classroom buildings as well as to dormitories.

These years of expansion came at a time when most of the original faculty members were approaching retirement age. Clyde Bollinger had already retired, in 1959, and Doerr had been enticed to leave OU in 1970 to become the first academic vice-president at the University of West Florida. Sutherland had moved to posts in the university administration. Both Hoy and Morris retired in 1973, and Olson retired a few years later, in 1977. Who would take the reins and guide the department after Morris' departure? A search committee was appointed, including Gary Thompson and a new faculty member, Marvin Baker, who was a Latin Americanist, urban geographer, and a Syracuse University graduate. The committee soon settled its attention on Thomas L. Wilbanks, a dynamic young man who had completed his doctorate four years earlier at Syracuse University and who was now an assistant professor, age 34. Both Thompson and Baker knew him personally—Baker from Syracuse, Thompson from the Army—and both thought that Wilbanks could provide the kind of dynamic leadership that would propel the department dramatically upwards within the national rankings of geography departments.

Appointed associate professor and chair at the start of the 1973-4 academic year, Wilbanks represented a new geography. He was disinterested in physical and regional geography—interested, instead, in what he called “pattern analysis” and “spatial decision making.” In later years, he would enjoy a highly successful career at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory; while there, he would serve a term as president of the AAG and chair the National Research Council's Rediscovering Geography Committee. During his four years at OU, however, Wilbanks had a more checkered career. His greatest successes lay in overseeing the expansion of the faculty from 12 to 17 people and in infusing that group, especially the younger members, with a high degree of excitement. In retrospect it was an extraordinary success, made possible partly by

Wilbanks' energy and intelligence and partly on the strong support he received from a new Arts and Sciences dean. His success there rested on the argument that it would cost OU less to lift the geography department into the big leagues than it would cost in other disciplines. Dean Paige Mulhollan agreed and supported Wilbanks without reservation.

Wilbanks' troubles and ultimate failure came from the senior geography faculty, who resisted the disciplinary shift that Wilbanks was intent on making. The issue came to a head with a faculty appointment that Wilbanks made without consulting the faculty and gaining their approval. At a faculty meeting on March 2, 1977, at which Wilbanks reported that he had made the offer, Sutherland threatened legal action, on the ground that such a procedure was in violation of the faculty handbook. The minutes of that meeting, as was standard practice, were prepared by Wilbanks but were so abbreviated that they made no mention of Sutherland's objection. At the next faculty meeting, Sutherland moved that henceforth minutes should be kept by someone other than the chair. The motion passed eight to six. Wilbanks left the room—and although few would have anticipated it, he was never to return to the department during working hours.

Wilbanks requested rescission of the vote, and at a faculty meeting on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March a motion was introduced; a secret ballot was conducted, and the measure failed, nine to six. Matters were very tense when another faculty meeting was held the next day. The faculty passed, by a vote of ten to one, a motion rescinding the Sutherland motion and asking Wilbanks to carry on as chair, with the critical proviso he be more open and consultative. Rather than acquiesce, Wilbanks chose to stay away from the department, and department business came to a standstill. Because they knew Wilbanks had the support of the dean, the senior faculty went to the provost to say that something must be done. That was March 30. One day later, Wilbanks tendered his resignation. "The principal problem," he wrote, "is that the tenured faculty in resi-

dence this spring find decisive leadership and independent judgments by the Chair, whoever he or she may be, to be so threatening that the only way to stop continued bickering and divisiveness is for the Chair to act merely as a convenor of the faculty... I am confident that enough other departments and programs in the university are willing to pay the price of achieving ambitious goals so that the college and the university can continue their exciting rate of progress." Wilbanks recommended that James Bohland, an urban geographer who had joined the faculty in 1969, "be appointed Acting Chair in September, because he is the only tenured faculty member who stands any chance to avoid a wholesale exodus of the remarkably able untenured faculty of the department." On May 20, Dean Mulhollan appointed Bohland to a two-year term, charging him with "moving the department along the road of accomplishment already established under Professor Wilbanks."

### Decades of Instability

These events were traumatic ones for many members of the department. A few months earlier, an embittered Ralph Olson announced that he would take early retirement at the end of the year. (A decade later, he and his wife Margaret made peace with the department and generously presented the university with a check for \$25,000, regularly supplemented thereafter, to endow a department scholarship.) A few months later, at the height of the tensions, one untenured assistant professor circulated a memo to the faculty in which he called the senior faculty's visit to the provost "the single most irresponsible act I have ever had the misfortune to suffer the consequences of." The faculty as a whole, sensing the dean's reaction to events, and fearful that the wrong impression might be conveyed to higher administrative levels, wrote to the provost to rebut "speculation that the geography faculty no longer seeks national prominence."

It was an extraordinary and perhaps even a tragic turn of events. At the very moment that geography was coming into its own as a central discipline at the University of Oklahoma, the department stumbled and entered a period of turmoil. It is probably fair to say that the composure and stability that had been the department's hallmark for a generation was lost for years to come. Of all the people who were hired during the 1970s, only two were to stay at OU throughout their careers, and both were Morris appointees. One was Marvin W. Baker, the Syracuse graduate who had arrived in 1971. The other was Richard L. Nostrand, a historical geographer specializing in the American Southwest.

What happened to the others? At the end of his two-year term as chair, Jim Bohland resigned to take a position at Virginia Tech. A national search was launched to find a chair. It led to the appointment of Neil M. Salisbury in 1979, with a term running until 1985. Salisbury had had a distinguished career as a pioneering quantitative geomorphologist at the University of Iowa; there, he had produced dozens of doctoral students. Like Wilbanks, his research was strongly positivistic, but unlike Wilbanks Salisbury was hypercritical of his new colleagues, whether they were what he jokingly called "humanoids" or whether they employed the most rigorous kind of quantitative methodology. The result was what Wilbanks had predicted: a flood of faculty resignations, including many people hired during Salisbury's own term. The astonishing list of faculty departures in that six-year period includes J. Clark Archer, Daniel Fesenmaier, Robert Q. Hanham, John Harlin, John A. Harrington, Jr., Carolyn Hock, Michael Libbee, Edward J. Malecki, Jr., Rebecca S. Roberts, David R. Seamon, Christopher J. Smith, and Billie Lee Turner, II. Only two hires made during the Salisbury period managed or chose to stay at OU. One was the senior appointment of Hans-Joachim Spaeth, an agroecologist who at the time was living and working in Colorado under the terms of a German fellowship. The other was Bret Wallach, a cultural geographer and graduate of Berkeley who

was then teaching at the University of Maine at Fort Kent. Spaeth was appointed as a full professor, with tenure; Wallach came in as an associate professor without tenure.

Meanwhile, Salisbury's relationship with the dean of the new College of Geosciences deteriorated. During negotiations over geography's move into that college, the department had been assured of new faculty positions and enhanced operating funds. They did not come. At the end of his term as chair, Salisbury was replaced by Jim Goodman, who would serve as chair from 1985 to 1992. Primarily a geomorphologist, Goodman was instrumental in bringing remote sensing to the department in the person of T.H. Lee Williams, a Bristol graduate who, during the traumatic 1976-77 academic year at Norman, had been a research associate in the department. Appointed to a tenured position in 1986, Williams proved to be exceptionally adept at securing major grants with which to build a remote-sensing program.

Meanwhile, the department moved from Dale Hall Tower to the new Sarkeys Energy Center, where, for the first time, it had its own computer laboratory. Goodman planned that complex move, which went well, and he worked hard to establish OKAGE, the Oklahoma Alliance for Geographic Education, which is still housed in space provided by the department. (Eventually, after Goodman's retirement, Williams would take it over and run it with his characteristic efficiency.) Goodman fared less well with another major initiative, the American Indian Resource Management Program. Goodman and his wife Mary had written and drawn the maps for *The Navajo Atlas* (Goodman 1982). Goodman now hoped that the department could become a national center to provide Indians with the tools needed to manage tribal resources. It was a logical choice, given Oklahoma's Indian population, but Goodman attempted to impose the program on the faculty, rather than securing their support, and it withered. With the end of his term in 1992, Goodman retired and took a position in Washington as geographer-in-residence at

the National Geographic Society.

He was succeeded as chair by Gary Thompson. Thompson knew the state and university intimately, and he decided to build strength in areas that would make geography indispensable to the college's other academic units. Contrary to his own interest in economic development, particularly in Oklahoma, he worked hard to strengthen the department in climatology, hydrology, and GIS. In the case of GIS, he was particularly successful. A new dean supported this initiative by funding a major computer investment, and Thompson astutely supervised the recruiting of May Yuan, a SUNY Buffalo graduate and student of David Mark. She, in turn, would prove in succeeding years to be the anchor of the department's program in geotechniques.

Like every chair, Thompson had his failures. They included a proposed merger with regional and city planning. Remembering Goodman's failure with the Indian resources program, Thompson tried to involve the faculty in this development, and the planning faculty seemed keen to proceed, but despite a joint faculty meeting to discuss the issue, the proposal made the geography faculty uncomfortable, and the merger never happened.

In 1994, Thompson became critically ill, so much so that he was put on a list for—and finally received—a heart transplant. Less than halfway through his term, therefore, he took a medical leave. Bret Wallach, who happened to be serving that year on the department's administrative committee, filled out the year on an interim basis. The next fall Thompson resigned as chair and Wallach was appointed to a four-year term as his replacement. When that term expired in 1999, he was re-appointed through 2004.

Wallach had joined the department in 1981 and had never shown any interest, capacity, or talent for human company, let alone academic administration. Believing that new resources were unlikely to be given to the department, he believed that the department should build on its



strengths, rather than try to develop new ones. He anticipated several lines opening with the approaching retirements of Salisbury, Thompson, and Baker, and he wanted to replace them with people in those areas, which he defined as cultural geography and climatology.

Of the two, cultural was perhaps the clearer focus, because the department not only had Wallach and Nostrand but had Robert A. Rundstrom, a Kansas graduate, student of Pete Shortridge, and specialist in the study of the indigenous peoples of North America. During Wallach's first term, this trio was strengthened by the additions of Philippe Forêt, a polymathic sinologist, and Gavin Bridge, a Clark graduate who specialized in the environmental side-effects of minerals development. With his British background (he had come to Clark via Oxford), Bridge wasn't comfortable with the label "cultural geography," but the group was stable, amicable, and productive.

Meanwhile, however, problems were brewing. The central difficulty arose from Wallach's own insistence that in the hiring of physical geographers competency should be the issue, not pedigree. Despite warnings from others in the department, he strongly supported the appointment of several faculty who had no background in geography and, as it turned out, no interest in it. They were bright, ambitious, and successful, but several of them grew convinced that Wallach, by his own admission no scientist, was not competent to supervise—and in fact did not support—the development of a strong program in physical geography.

The revolving door of an earlier decade began turning once again. The resignations this time included not only the non-geographers but some geographers as well. Each case was different, and each person had a unique set of reasons for leaving, but four young and gifted faculty members finally chose to leave; none were obliged to do so. Gradually, the physical-geography program was rebuilt, as indeed it had to be in a department housed in a College of Geosciences. Biogeography was assumed by Bruce Hoagland, an OU graduate and plant-community ecolo-

gist appointed jointly in 1996 with the Oklahoma Biological Survey. Climatology was assumed in 1998 by Scott Greene, a Delaware graduate and an applied climatologist. Hydrology was assumed in 1999 by Aondover Tarhule, a recent graduate of McMaster University. The unspoken question was whether this group would cohere, work together, and choose to stay at OU. One very positive sign of stability was the decision of May Yuan in 1998 to reject a handsome and very tempting offer from Syracuse University.

### Related Issues

The hard times that geography at OU has had since its heyday a generation ago are not solely a matter of mistakes by the various chairs. Oklahoma, after all, is a poor state. This is more than a matter of image, though Oklahoma has had a poor image since the 1930s. Just as it cannot pay for a first-class university, it cannot support the attractions found in wealthier places. Offers have been made in recent years to potential faculty members who finally decided to take poorer offers from other schools, simply because they could not bring themselves to move to Oklahoma. In other cases, faculty have come to Norman, only to leave as soon as a job came along elsewhere. It takes an odd person, it seems, to willingly choose Norman over Boulder or Austin or even Lawrence.

There have also been problems with the College of Geosciences. Every chair of the department since the creation of the college in 1980 has supported geography's presence in that college, chiefly because the move gave geography outstanding facilities and easy access to a dean. Salaries, too, have benefited, for incoming faculty are appointed at approximately the same level across the college. In recent years this has led to a differential of between five and ten thousand dollars annually between faculty appointed in geography and those appointed in many departments

in the College of Arts and Sciences.

Those have been the benefits of the move to Geosciences. The costs, apart from the refusal of the first dean to give geography the new faculty and increased funds that were promised to it, include a separation, physical and psychological, from the humanities and social sciences with which geography would normally have close ties. Geography enrollments have probably suffered because faculty and counselors in Arts and Sciences have tended to forget about geography, now housed in splendid isolation on the northeast corner of the campus. Conversely, some faculty—and not only in Geography—have felt that the move to Geosciences wrenched them from their broader academic home and put them in a unit where administrative expectations have precious little to do with the production of ideas but a great deal to do with grant-funded research whose products are aimed increasingly at private industry.

The geography faculty has become very successful at winning grants. In the last few years, major funding has been obtained by May Yuan, Scott Greene, and Gavin Bridge; smaller sums have been obtained by Foret, Hoagland, Rundstrom, Spaeth, and Wallach. One negative consequence of the energy put into research, however, is that there has been a sharp decline in the range of courses offered. Regional geography is almost gone; so, for the moment at least, are urban and political geography. An even more insidious consequence is that research projects tend to be valued in direct proportion to how much money they bring to the institution: in their enthusiasm for dollars, administrators welcome grants in proportion to their size, not their intellectual significance.

Enrollments have inevitably declined, weakening the case for new faculty appointments. The problem has been compounded by the fact that nearly a decade has passed since the department had a charismatic lower-division instructor who could both build enrollments and attract majors. The last such person was Brock Brown, a graduate student who in the late 1980s and early 1990s attracted hundreds of students to his

introductory class in human geography. In those few years he quadrupled enrollments in that course, which became the department's most popular course at the same time as enrollment in physical geography declined for lack of a popular instructor. Brown left for the University of Colorado and subsequently took a position at Southwest Texas State University. With his departure, the enrollment in human geography declined drastically. Dick Nostrand has regularly taught the class very successfully, but he does not want to teach to a group of 400 or more, as Brown did.

### Assessment and Outlook

Standing back and pondering this history, one might consider first the department's alumni and current students. The alumni includes not only academics—including people who have gone on to chair departments at the University of Texas and Southwest Texas State University—but also investment bankers, airline pilots, district attorneys, city planners, intelligence analysts, and professional staffers in federal and state agencies. Current students include Blake Gumprecht, a doctoral student whose expanded master's thesis, published as *The Los Angeles River* (Gumprecht 1999), has attracted much attention. Another doctoral student, Rezaul Mahmood, has published enough articles in major journals to secure tenure at most schools. Emma McCauley, a 1999 recipient of the B.A. degree in geography, won in her senior year a Sierra Club Earth Fund Award, a major prize.

The faculty is as gifted and productive now as it has ever been, perhaps more so. Because it is young, it is short on institutional memory and weak on cross-campus political connections, yet it is very long on talent. People like May Yuan, Philippe Foret, Gavin Bridge, Bruce Hoagland, Scott Greene, and Aondover Tarhule have the potential to make geographers around the country take notice of Oklahoma.

It may be tempting fate to say so, but the faculty, young and old, seem today to be more closely knit and mutually tolerant than has been the case in the department for 20 years and more. With a unanimity that surprised even them, they agreed a year ago that the department's strengths lay in earth-system interactions, geotechniques, and landscape interpretation. The undergraduate curriculum was therefore revised around a set of four concentrations in earth-system interactions, environmental geography, geotechniques, and landscape interpretation. The senior seminar was coupled with a new course designed to give incoming majors a better sense of the discipline and of the careers to which it may lead. Graduate students are being more energetically recruited and more selectively admitted. Facilities, meanwhile, are very good, not only in terms of space but in terms of equipment. Graduates from the 1950s sometimes come by and comment on how luxurious Sarkeys Energy Center is, in comparison to the conditions they knew back in Gittinger Hall.

Relations between the department and the college, as well as with the university's central administration, are good. The dean is very supportive of geography, and a recent department review, a process through which OU departments pass approximately every seven years, led to entirely positive reactions from the provost.

New funding, it is true, seems to be available only on a matching basis, spurred by research grants or private donations. Fundraising has therefore become a way of life in the department, just as it has in so many others. Most of the new funding comes from faculty research grants. In the 1999 academic year, indirect-cost recovery on geography grants brought \$88,000 to the university, which returned about \$26,000 of that sum to the department. But fundraising also means better alumni relations. The department has a list of some 700 alumni, many of whom could be very helpful in funding scholarships, student fieldwork, and visiting speakers. Over the years the connection between them and the

department has become finely attenuated. A board of visitors was recently established, however, and Dick Nostrand has been writing newsletters that are now being issued semi-annually.

All these departmental assets—talented faculty, revised curricula, more support for graduate students, good facilities, solid administrative backing, improved alumni relations—are valuable yet not unique to the department. How, then, can geography at OU develop a competitive edge? In its own region, the department stands a tier below such schools as the University of Texas or the University of Colorado. Nationally, it ranks “thirty-something” among the nation’s fifty-odd schools granting doctoral degrees in geography. Is it reasonable for the department even to hope for the kind of energy and success that characterized it during the mid-1970s?

Perhaps the department should capitalize on the huge concentration of meteorology and related federal laboratories in Norman; such an orientation, perhaps emphasizing applied climatology, could certainly tap one of Norman’s greatest strengths. Alternatively, the department could jump into web-based instruction, still very primitive in geography and therefore a domain where OU’s small size is not yet a disadvantage. (A step in this direction is Wallach’s human geography, on-line with text, slides, and websites at <http://geography.ou.edu>.) Some might have the department capitalize on OU’s strong support for interdisciplinary research centers: Scott Greene now directs the Environmental Verification and Analysis Center; and Philippe Foret is considering ways to organize a Center for the Analysis and Representation of Landscape. Some might have the department return to its roots and focus more intensively on Oklahoma-based research. Some might have the department simply hire the most gifted people on the horizon—good advice if one is lucky enough to snag them.

The department is doing all these things, to some degree, and it’s hard to imagine most of the faculty working harder than they already

do. If the department is now in fact regaining some fraction of the stability that it possessed during the 1950s and 60s, it may yet regain some of the momentum and enjoy some of the success that it briefly possessed a generation ago.

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