

A HISTORY OF THE
DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY -
UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

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A few years ago it was with a certain sense of irony, and slightly dark humor that the faculty of the Department of Geography at the University of Arkansas received the news that they were to be merged with Geology to form a new department – Geosciences. The date of the merger, January 1st 1999, was a year and six months after the fiftieth anniversary of a hard-fought break from Geology and the formation of an independent Department of Geography. Needless to say, the planned Golden Anniversary celebration was cancelled.

Creation of the Department

Classes in geography have been taught at Arkansas since the late 1880s, but were always taught by faculty in other fields (usually Geology) and were always physical geography. In the 1920s the classes expanded somewhat and were formally moved into Geology. It was not until 1946 that the first faculty member with a degree in Geography was hired within the Department of Geology to handle the expanded geography offerings, which by this time included not only Physical Geography but Social/Economic Geography; Conservation and Natural Resources; Political Geography, North America and the Geography of Europe.

The departure of one of the Geology faculty in Spring 1946 opened up a position that was filled by Orland Maxfield, a young geographer from

Illinois with an M.A. in Geography from the Ohio State University. Within a year it became clear that the position of a geographer within the Department of Geology was a difficult one, there was no Geography degree and the distribution of funds between Geography and Geology had become problematic. Unhappy at the limited support that he and his students received within the Geology department, Maxfield resolved to leave and began to look for a position elsewhere. After accepting a position at the University of Missouri he informed the administration of his intent to leave and was asked if there was anything that administration could do to change his mind. The solution, proposed by a remarkably amicable Dean Gurdon Nichols, was the separation of Geography from Geology and the creation of a new department, which at its inception had just one faculty member. The immediate need was for a second geographer and one with a Ph.D. who could function as Chair of the new department. In the Fall of 1948, the arrival of Dr. Irene Moke, with a Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska, resulted in the Department of Geography at the University of Arkansas becoming one of the first departments in the country to engage a female chair (a rare bird almost 60 years later).

The B.A. in Geography was authorized for the beginning of Fall 1948. Classes expanded to meet student demand, with the new offerings consisting mostly of regional classes. In early 1950 the graduate school was contacted with an enquiry about a master's degree in Geography and when asked if the department would provide such a service, the two resident members of the faculty readily agreed that they could. By summer 1951 the first M.A. degree had been completed. Both the B.A. and M.A. programs expanded slowly, and in an era of national expansion of programs, many of the M.A. students tended to come directly out of the B.A. With the expansion of student numbers there was a need again for another faculty member and in Fall 1953, James E. Vance Jr. joined the department fresh from his Ph.D. at Clark University. With his interest in Urban Geography, that course was added to the offerings, creating the first systematic course in the upper division series. While Jay Vance moved on in 1955, his replacement, Tom Scott brought an interest in Transportation Geography, which became the next systematic course on the books. Scott also moved on after two years, but finding himself

dissatisfied with his new position at the University of Houston, he returned to Fayetteville in 1958.

Expansion and Change 1960s-2000s

Throughout this time Irene Moke had remained chair, presiding over a slowly growing department. Further growth took place with a new line in 1963, filled by Earl Neal (Ph.D. Tennessee), and a fifth, in 1966 which was filled by Les Clendenon (ABD). Moke stepped down from the chair position in 1964, to be replaced, reluctantly, by Tom Scott from 1964 to 1966 and then more permanently by Orland Maxfield, who became eligible to become chair after he had completed his Ph.D. at Ohio State in 1963. The sixties were a time of growth in student numbers in the B.A. and M.A. programs, but most particularly in general enrollments as various geography classes became requirements for business and education majors.

The first serious controversy struck the department in 1967-68 as Earl Neal, teaching primarily human, and regional courses was tenured without promotion. This was the first time a Ph.D. in the department was tenured but not promoted.

Shortly afterwards a sixth new line was created, filled by Grant Roberts, this line was to have a very high turnover in the next decade as it was continually filled by ABDs who were replaced after they failed to complete their dissertations. Grant Roberts was replaced by Kevin Ferguson, in turn replaced by Larry Handley, and then by Jim Allen (who had completed his Ph.D.). In addition, in 1973 Les Clendenon was also let go when he failed to finish his dissertation. This position was filled by a spanking new young Ph.D. from Kansas, Tom Graff, who remains the longest serving faculty member in the current department. Irene Moke retired in 1977 and her position was filled by John Hehr, the first faculty member to be hired with an established research background. This hire also reinforced the department's growing trend toward research rather than teaching. Hehr's research focus quickly created friction in the department that was still chaired by Orland Maxfield, who believed that teaching and student guidance should be the primary mission of the department. The conflict between Hehr and Maxfield came to a head in 1978 over whether to retain Larry Handley who had not finished his Ph.D.

The conflict was resolved rather dramatically when the Dean, on direction from the upper administration, appointed John Hehr as the new department chair in 1979, ensuring the termination of Handley and signaling a definitive shift in department focus towards a more research oriented position. Within a few years this shift resulted in the retirement of Tom Scott, a consummate teacher, but like many senior faculty, unable to develop a research program after twenty-five years of teaching.

Scott was replaced by Dick Smith, creating another new direction for the department. While Smith brought a concentration in demographics and economic geography to the department his primary interest was in cartography, and particularly computer mapping. Over the next decade he was to create one of the earliest digital state atlases and eventually formed his own company which employed a series of U of A geography graduates. Meanwhile, Larry Handley's replacement, Jim Allen also moved on after a few years opening up a position that was filled by John Dixon, an Australian with a Ph.D. from Colorado and a concentration in polar geomorphology. This specialization again enhanced the physical geography offerings in the department and further strengths were added when John Hehr moved to a position as Associate Dean in 1987 and his position was filled by David Stahle, a dendrochronologist who brought a proven record of receiving national funding. Stahle, together with colleague Malcolm Cleaveland, who was hired in 1990 to replace Orland Maxfield, have formed one of the outstanding dendrochronology research groups in the United States, if not the world. They have continued to receive funding on an ongoing basis from NSF, NOAA and most recently the NIH and have become among the most sought after experts on climate reconstruction and global change in the US.

Orland Maxfield's retirement in 1990 marked the end of an era, he had formed the department in 1948 and had seen it grow from two faculty, a few classes, and a B.A. degree to a substantial department of research-active faculty with annual class enrollments of 1200, an undergraduate program that produced approximately five or six degrees a year and a graduate program of with a consistent enrollment of around twenty M.A. students. Orland also still holds the record for the longest serving University of Arkansas faculty member to retire at 65 (44 years).

The last of the old guard to retire was Earl Neal. Hired in 1963, his deteriorating health forced him into retirement in 1992, and unfortunately he was to die within a few months of retirement. His replacement was the department's second woman, Fiona Davidson, like Irene Moke, with a fresh Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska. With a specialization in political and economic geography she became, with Tom Graff, the core of the human geography program. With the extensive turnover of faculty that took place from the mid 1970s to the early 1990s there was an inevitable shift in the research and teaching focus of the department. More classes in physical geography and techniques were added, Geomorphology, Natural Regions of North America, Oceanography, Climatology and Computer Cartography, at the same time, regional and human classes were allowed to lapse. Historical Geography and the Geography of Arkansas (both classes developed and taught by Orland Maxfield) ceased to be taught, as did Soviet Geography and Transportation. Changing technology in the 1990s also brought the need for classes in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which were offered both in the department and through the affiliated Center for Advanced Spatial Technology.

One final faculty change took place at the end of the century with the retirement of Dick Smith in 2000. This retirement provided the opportunity for the department to work with the Middle Eastern Studies Program to create a position for a geographer with a Middle East specialty. In addition, the hire had to be an accomplished cartographer to fill the growing need for classes in cartographic design and computer assisted mapping. This rather unusual search produced a number of outstanding candidates – but the eventual hire was Tom Paradise, an associate professor at the University of Hawaii-Hilo. With specializations in the Middle East and Cartography, extensive research interests in the weathering of historic buildings, and an internationally acclaimed atlas to his name, Paradise represented the department's first hire with tenure and at full professor. He added classes in the Geography of the Middle East and Hazards. In addition, his research interests, combining physical processes with human impact provided an ideal bridge between the human and physical sides of the department and complemented an increasing focus on human-environment interactions.

This new focus came about largely as a response to the creation of an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in 1997. The Environmental Dynamics program (ENDY), encompassing Geography, Geology and Anthropology, was designed to allow students to specialize in the interface between humans and the environment at a time when such research was becoming increasingly popular. In addition, the cooperation of the three small departments created a critical mass of faculty large enough to support a Ph.D. program. While Anthropology has since created its own separate Ph.D., ENDY continues to attract a large number of Anthropology students and has become a very successful program with an average production of four Ph.D.s a year and a total current enrollment of thirty-six, the fourth largest Ph.D. program at the University of Arkansas.

Another successful affiliated venture is the Center for Advanced Spatial Technology which was founded in 1990 as a place to support the work of the expanding number of GIS technicians in Geography, Anthropology and Agriculture. The center was initially funded as part of the Department of Agriculture's NCRI (National Center for Resource Innovation) program. However, in the decade that followed, grants, private and state contracts, and corporate donations of technology ensured the consistent growth of a program that is now one of the largest and best funded academic GIS centers in the country. Housed in Geography, the center employs large numbers of current graduate and undergraduate students and provides facilities for students and faculty research as well as additional post-graduate training for students as they enter the job market.

When it was created in 1948 the Department of Geography was physically separated from Geology and occupied a small area of the Student Support building. However, sometime in the 1950s a more appropriate space was found in Science Engineering. With the expansion of the department in the 1960s came a move from the Science Engineering building, where Geography occupied a small area on one floor, to Carnall Hall in 1970. The department shared space in the former women's dormitory with Sociology, creating a Social Sciences enclave at one of the quieter, shaded corners of the campus. For all its charm and quirks, like faculty having closets in their offices, age finally took a toll on Carnall Hall and by 1991 the building was no longer

fit to be occupied (those faculty who remember being in the building might argue that it was never fit to be occupied). The university had kept the building in use as long as possible but buckling floors, barely functioning heating and no air conditioning, leaks in the roof and insects in the basement, coupled with the opening up of space in the newly renovated Old Main building, made it desirable to move the faculty to more comfortable quarters.

Sociology moved into Old Main and for a brief spell it appeared that Geography too would get renovated space – however it was not to be. History was moved out of Ozark Hall, into Old Main and Geography took the available space in Ozark, sharing the first floor with Geology – a decision that was to have repercussions a few years later. Ozark remains the home of the department, which occupies offices, labs and classrooms on all three floors of the building (Figure 1). The space is shared with the College of Nursing, the Graduate School, and the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, as well as with the affiliated Center for Advanced Spatial Technology. Meanwhile, after a decade long period of abandonment and administrative indecision, Carnall Hall will reopen next year as the renovated “Inn at Carnall Hall” – a fine use for one of the most historically significant buildings on Campus.

The end of the 1990s saw the Department of Geography come full circle. There had been several attempts over the years to merge Geography and Geology, all of which had been successfully defeated. However, in 1997, with a new Chancellor in place, and a new heightened focus on research funding and the ability of departments to sustain nationally funded research programs, the College of Arts and Sciences dean felt that small departments were at a disadvantage in the funding race. Geography and Geology, occupying adjacent space in the same building was the first casualty. The only subject for debate was the name of the new unit and while there was some discussion of a combined Geography/Geology name – the final decision was for Geosciences, an increasingly common designation for combined departments. The merger left the state of Arkansas with no free-standing Geography or Geology department, but that aside, has had relatively little impact on the faculty, students, classes and programs. The administration of the department currently consists of a chair from Geography and vice-chair

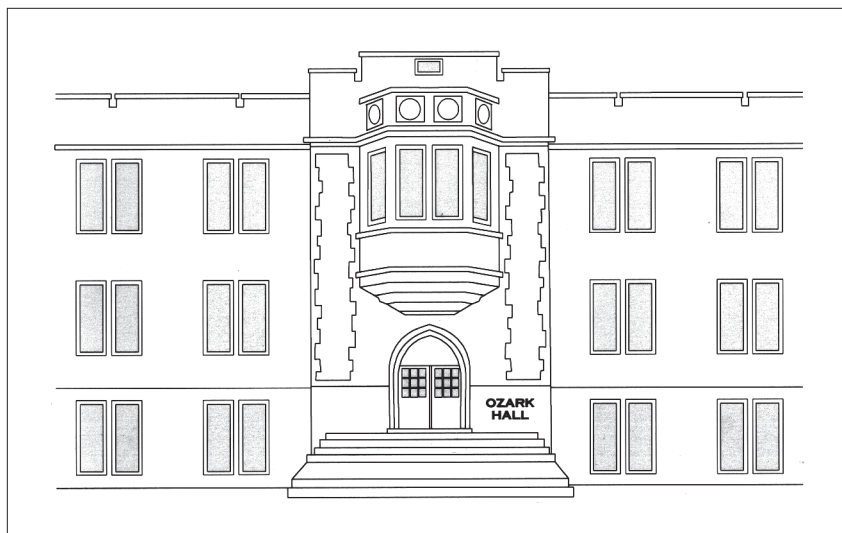


Figure 1. Ozark Hall.

from Geology with the plan that the administration will always be split between the two divisions. Faculty meetings are larger and sometimes livelier, and department functions are certainly more entertaining. While the student honors societies have remained separate the creation of a Supporting Women in Geosciences chapter together with co-ordination of service activities such as community clean-ups and organization of department events has led to a much greater integration of the student body that was common in the past.

The immediate future for Geosciences looks extremely promising. In 2001, the Walton family of Bentonville presented the University of Arkansas with a \$300 million endowment, the largest single gift to a public university in the country. The additional endowments that make up the Campaign for the 21st Century, currently standing at around \$500 million, together with the Middle East endowment of \$40 million, provide extensive opportunities for students and faculty alike. The Walton endowment is to be used for graduate support and a new honors college. In the initial round of funding requests ENDY (through Geosciences) was granted additional GA positions for outstanding Ph.D. students. In addition, there is the possibility that several new faculty positions will be created, particularly to fill the growing need for

a GIS/spatial sciences specialist, as well as water resources and a hazards/risk position.

In addition, the degree programs and classes are expanding as the number of majors and masters students has grown. An increasing number of students are not only majoring in Geography, but are adopting Geography as their second (or with honors students, third) major. The interdisciplinary teaching and research focus of a number of the Geography faculty, with links to Anthropology, Middle East Studies, European Studies, Humanities Honors and Biological Sciences has exposed an increasingly large number of new students to the opportunities that Geography offers.