



JOHN ERNEST KESSELI

JOHN ERNEST KESSELI: AN APPRECIATION

On May 23, 1962, John E. Kesseli celebrates his sixty-seventh birthday. The following month he retires from active teaching on the faculty of the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley.

He is the last to step down of the triumvirate Sauer, Leighly, and Kesseli, whose strikingly individual personalities and vigorous scholarly interests have given Geography at Berkeley its character during the past thirty years. John Kesseli has been an exacting and challenging teacher and adviser. He has focused his attention on a rigorous and disciplined training of students, both graduate and undergraduate.

As one former student, Edwin Hammond, has put it, "From John Kesseli one received vigorous instruction in three closely related principles: that the collection of scientific evidence must be thorough and unbiased; that nothing is true simply because someone said that it is true, and that good scientific answers are usually hard to come by. He stressed the value of skepticism and healthy heresy. He emphasized the importance of clear, effective, and honest reporting. He opened up almost endless prospects for research by making clear how few things are really well understood or proven. He taught the value of discipline in scholarship without getting it mixed up with the quite different notion of authority."

For ten years, from 1946 to 1956, he served as graduate adviser in the department. His often blunt, yet wise and deeply humane, counsel made a profound imprint on many students. Between 1948 and 1959 Kesseli was in charge of 16 of the 36 M.A. theses completed at Berkeley, and he directed five doctoral dissertations in geomorphology. It was his manner to work page by page over each manuscript with the student by his side, laboriously, until the job was done right. He permitted no fuzzy thinking or insufficiently supported conclusion to go unchallenged. His critical, analytical mind was the perfect whetstone for the serious student who not only learned to think rigorously and logically, but also acquired a new respect for the English language.

For most of his career at Berkeley Kesseli has been in charge of foreign language training and examinations for Ph.D. candidates. For this task he was uniquely equipped. His was a private tutoring system, demanding of his time, and (despite his disclaimers) productive of results.

He labored endlessly on his courses. They were tough but popular. For many years he taught the large introductory physical geography course and his mimeographed syllabus continued to be used after he turned the responsibility over to younger members of the staff.¹ His regular classes

¹ *Outline of Physical Geography*. California Book Co., Berkeley, 1939. 102 pp.

included Analysis of Land Forms, Map Reading, Photogrammetry, a Saturday field course, and, occasionally, Cartography. For many years his Analysis of Land Forms was considered by the graduate students a "make or break" course. An "A" from Kesseli was the best evidence available that a student had the stuff to continue on toward an advanced degree.

Born in Paris, a Swiss citizen, Kesseli spent his boyhood in St. Gallen, Switzerland. Here his love for glaciated country, later transferred to the Sierra Nevada, first developed. His first publications were on Alpine tectonics and on moraines.² He was attracted to physical geography and studied at Halle, Munich and Lausanne, especially with the geologist Johannes Walther and the geographer Otto Schluter. He also taught in St. Gallen schools and in Lausanne. In 1930 he came to the United States, teaching for a year at the Thatcher School for Boys at Ojai, Ventura County, before going to Berkeley to resume his graduate studies in Geography. In 1932 he was appointed to the Berkeley staff with special responsibility for geomorphology. His doctorate, based on detailed field studies of glaciation in the Mono Lake sector of the Sierra Nevada, was awarded in 1938. Substantial portions of this meticulous job were later published in the University of California Publications in Geography,³ while shorter articles deriving from this field work appeared elsewhere.⁴

It was in these years that he produced his classical, widely-quoted paper on the concept of the graded river, articles on soil slips in the Central Coast Ranges, a revision of the Köppen climatic classification for California,⁵ his lucid, English-language summary of the studies of slope development by Walter Penck and Sieghard Morawetz.⁶

The war years were spent in Washington, working with Army Intelligence in the Pentagon. His decision to come back to Berkeley in 1946

² "Neuere Ansichten über die Tektonik der subalpinen Molasse zwischen Linth und Rhein," *Jahrbuch der St. Gallischen Naturwissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft*, Vol. 61 (1925), pp. 147-169; "Die Jungmoränenstadien in den Quertälern der st. gallisch-appenzellischen Molasse," *Ibid.*, Vol. 62 (1926), pp. 56-80.

³ Studies in the Pleistocene Glaciation of the Sierra Nevada, California," *University of California Publication in Geography*, Vol. 6, No. 8 (1941), pp. 315-362

⁴ "Rock Streams in the Sierra Nevada, California," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 31 (1941), pp. 203-227; "The Origin of the Valley of June, Gull, and Silver Lakes (Horseshoe Valley), Mono County, California," *Journal of Geology*, Vol. 47 (1939), pp. 748-758.

⁵ "The Concept of the Graded River," *Journal of Geology*, Vol. 49 (1941), pp. 561-588; "The Climates of California According to the Köppen Classification," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 32 (1942), pp. 476-480; "Disintegrating Soil Slips of the Coast Ranges of Central California," *Journal of Geology*, Vol. 51 (1943), pp. 342-352.

⁶ *The Development of Slopes, A Summary of Studies by Walther Penck and Sieghard Morawetz*, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley (1940), 30 pp. (mimeo.)

must have been a difficult one, for he had won many friends and high respect in Washington intelligence circles and had been strongly urged to stay on there.

A growing concern for a more geographical geomorphology was expressed in his 1950 presidential address before the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers when he spoke out strongly against deductive or explanatory classifications of land forms and urged instead improved empirical descriptions of geomorphic landscapes.⁷ Another address, in this period, before the American Society of Photogrammetrists also took for its theme the importance of good geomorphic description and the role that aerial photography might play in it.⁸

In later years his interests have shifted increasingly toward teaching, including the activities of the California Council of Geography Teachers and the improvement of his own courses, especially his favorite, the Geography of California. That the latter, despite much urging, was never rendered onto paper is typical of Kesseli's attitude and philosophy. A perfectionist, he has always been unwilling to associate himself with what he considers to be inadequate work, that is, anything less than the very best. Despite the extraordinary extent of his travels in his adopted and beloved state, he has insisted that he does not know enough about California, especially its economic geography, to do the sort of job that needs to be done. However, he knows California as few men have or will. The state has been his first love, and although he has urged his students to get out into unfamiliar environments and cultures, he has always focused his own attention closer to home.⁹ For this circumstance a generation of California geographers can hardly be other than grateful.

Publication of the following supplement to *The California Geographer*, a modest sort of *Festschrift*, composed of papers contributed by his students, has been made possible by financial contributions of more than forty former students and friends who hope that he will accept the compliment and expression of affection that it is intended to represent.

THE KESSELI FESTSCHRIFT COMMITTEE

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⁷ "Geometric Landscapes," *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, Vol. 12 (1950), pp. 3-10.

⁸ "Use of Air Photographs by Geographers," *Photogrammetric Engineering* (Sept. 1952), pp. 737-741.

⁹ E.g., most recently: *Desert Flood Conditions in the White Mountains of California and Nevada* (with Chester B. Beaty), Hq., QM Res. and Eng. Command, U.S. Army. Technical Report EP-108, 104 pp., 1959.