

CARL SAUER: MEMORIES ABOUT A TEACHER

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My undergraduate training in geography was at the old Southern Branch, University of California, and I cannot react as an undergraduate to Dr. Sauer as a teacher. But I arrived in Berkeley as a raw beginning graduate student, and I recall that some of my early reactions to him were akin to my undergraduate feelings toward imposing characters. For most of a year I stood in considerable awe of his personality, mannerisms, and quietly cryptic comments. Dr. Sauer was not the jovial and friendly extrovert who skillfully manipulated techniques of getting students to like him, or who smoothly popularized his message to all who would listen. He never became really popular with course enrollees, but he won a following among students, who recognized that through the courses he offered one could learn from him. There was a quiet integrity and authority in his slightly distant reserve, and it was not easy to approach him on a casual basis. But undergraduate students did approach him, and when they did he was receptive and responded gently but appropriately.

In an undergraduate lecture course it was Dr. Sauer's habit, at least in the 1930's, to enter the classroom about one minute prior to the time for the class to begin. He usually sat on a stool in a corner, whittling on a match with a penknife, ignoring everyone and everything. The time for a class to begin passed and he still sat silently. Then, perhaps in another minute, he would begin to speak, slowly, almost hesitantly, silences breaking sentences in two. By the time fifteen minutes had passed, however, the tempo had picked up to the point that it was hard to

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get down a full set of notes. By the end of the hour a listener was aware that, with no notes whatever, Dr. Sauer had quietly given a polished lecture that put new light on an old subject. I had been through a course on North America previously, but auditing Sauer's course presented a new and more challenging North America to me.

Sauer was concerned that the undergraduate program in geography be well arranged, and he participated in that program at all levels. His chief concern, however, lay with the graduates. With them he was always quiet, somewhat cryptic, and at times in the presence of students did not seem to be listening, but to be immersed in his own thoughts. Silences interspersed his remarks. Individuals not yet well acquainted with his manner sometimes felt a lack of attention, as though no real concern existed for contact and communication on the personal level. He often seemed to ignore passive individuals. Occasionally a new graduate student went through a semester without himself approaching Dr. Sauer, to find that he had never been spoken to. Such individuals usually left Berkeley, without ceremony. Those with initiative who approached him with an issue that, hopefully, might catch his interest, were treated to questions and assertions, briefly put, that raised new aspects. One of the common experiences of those who had established a pattern of contact with Sauer was to have him, during a discussion, gently ask: "You don't think that...?" and thus put the issue in a way in which the student had never thought at all.

If, then, a pattern of contact had been established, the student followed up the leads, focused on the questions, and maintained his technique of approach, the pattern could continue until the educational training of a student had been achieved. Sauer wanted his students to learn to think critically, to reject the obvious, and to search beyond the obvious for answers to questions that concerned them, but he made little effort to orient those interests, and he really cared little as to exactly what those questions were. I have often been asked whether I had

trouble, in a department oriented toward Latin America, in choosing a dissertation topic in southern Utah and in going off to China, after having been in the field in Mexico with Sauer. He accepted my decision without questioning it at all, but he persistently asked questions that made me more sharply focus my own concerns in both matters. His concern was not that students follow his interests and region of specialization, but that they learn to become discerning and thoughtful students of a human living system operating in a living landscape. He often pointed up the difference between "distinctive" and "distinguishing" in any analysis. And, as he once put it: "You help a student get started just as you plant a good sapling well and set it straight in the ground. Then you let it grow the way it wants to grow." Eventually, by dint of hard work and persistent sensitive action, one could come to terms with Dr. Sauer. Thereafter, on occasion, one could find that he had been far more observant, aware, and concerned than one had suspected, and that there was a warm and strong affection, a depth of feeling, and a deep humanity behind the reserved and cryptic front.

Three items out of my memories as a student in the department offer illustration of Sauer's effective method of handling students.

1. One morning in the spring of 1930 several of us, graduates all, were sitting in the large room in the basement of old South Hall that then served the department as a hallway, a cartography lab, a conference room, and a library. We were actively arguing the nature and content of cultural geography when Dr. Sauer came quietly in the door. He stopped to listen for a moment, as he often did. He took a couple of puffs on his pipe and spoke briefly, as he often did. That time it was: "How can you fellows argue the nature of cultural geography when you do not yet know much about the nature of culture?" He then turned toward his own office. The issue had been dealt with, and it was up to the discerning student after that.

2. On an early Saturday morning, out with the field course for the first trip of the semester with a class made up of both undergraduates and graduates, Dr. Sauer stopped his car and got out, crossed the road into a field, and sat down on the hillside overlooking San Francisco Bay. We all followed him and sat down, each doing something on his own during the long silence that followed. After about five minutes, Sauer turned to a student (not me) and asked: "What do you see that interests you?" There was no answer. Sauer got up and walked back to the car. At the next stop every member of the class examined everything within range of vision, searching for something that could be discussed.

3. One evening in that large room in the basement of South Hall, after the termination of a seminar meeting in the main Library seminar wing, coffee had been brewed and poured, and the topic of conversation again turned to the processes responsible for creating the interesting landforms of the Berkeley Hills. Most of the graduates participated, while Dr. Sauer sat quietly, only occasionally inserting a remark into the discussion. As midnight approached, Sauer put his pipe in his pocket, put down his coffee cup, stood up, remarked: "The process of slumping is best examined in the field a few days after a good rain," and walked out the door on his way home.

In his own way Carl Sauer employed a very effective teaching method. It did not work equally well on everyone but, for those who could take it, who could learn to meet him in his own way, and who would follow the leads, those students could achieve an education and a manner of operating that would stay with them. As he grew older, the pattern gradually mellowed and softened, but the essential method remained to the end. I had a last letter from him a few weeks before his death, in response to questions I had put to him. He answered by putting questions back to me, interspersed by brief assertive statements. The scholar, productive, alert, knowledgeable, inquiring for eighty-five years, has left his imprint on geography and on many geographers--the Sauer stamp--as a continuing search for the answers to old but ever new questions.