



CARL O. SAUER: NASCENT HUMAN GEOGRAPHER AT NORTHWESTERN

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Carl Ortwin Sauer (1889-1975) ranks as one of America's leading and most influential geographers. His concern with culture history and material culture, as two related explanatory devices for man-land studies, helped eradicate a generation of geographical thinking imbued with physiographic *cycles* and environmental *influences*. As the foremost progenitor of both cultural and historical geography on this continent, Sauer and his "school" at the University of California Berkeley, engendered some of the best known and most scholarly students of American academic geography of the past fifty years. That there is considerable interest in Sauer's intellectual development is both understandable and well justified.¹ The purpose of this brief research note is to call attention to an important period of Sauer's life which is virtually unknown to most geographers.

While many will readily recall that Sauer's Ph.D. was earned in geography at the University of Chicago, few will remember that he spent the first year of his graduate studies (1908-1909) at Northwestern University as a prospective

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petrographer in the Geology Department. This single year in Evanston, Illinois, was a turning point for Sauer's education; and, although neither Sauer nor anyone else at the time could have known it, the circumstances that drove Sauer to Chicago and the concomitant switch to geography would result in a lasting impact on the young scholar's newly chosen vocation.

When Sauer graduated with an A.B. as well as a B.S. from his now-defunct Missouri alma mater—Central Wesleyan College (C.W.C.)—his aim was to matriculate at Northwestern as a petrography student.² Unfortunately, the record regarding what Sauer planned to do with a petrography degree is unclear. Because he was so fascinated with the geological reports he had read at C.W.C., it is possible that he was interested in conducting survey work for the government.³ Since his father was a college professor, however, and given that Sauer himself had teaching experience at Central Wesleyan, it is also possible that he considered a career as an instructor of geology. He certainly had great admiration for his geology instructor at C.W.C.—Professor John H. Frick (1845-1927)—and occasionally Sauer would return to this Methodist college and lecture in Frick's geology class.⁴ Whatever the source of Sauer's actual motivation, it is a fact that he enrolled at Northwestern with the intent of becoming a petrologist.⁵

A document from C.W.C. archives attests to Sauer's early course work at, and impressions of, Northwestern. The document is a letter written by Sauer during his first month of graduate school in Evanston. It originally was addressed to Professor Frick and then published in the *Central Wesleyan Star*⁶—a combined journal, newspaper, and alumni information sheet. Beyond calling attention to the young scholar's temperament during this period, the letter is important for several related reasons. The remainder of this article consists of a discussion of those reasons, followed by the letter itself reprinted in full.

The most obvious value of Sauer's letter is, indeed, the letter itself. The mere fact that Sauer took the time to write to Frick and detail his then-current state of affairs, tells us something about the relationship between the two men. In the opening paragraph of his letter, we note that Sauer refers to himself as one of Frick's "disciples." Elsewhere, I have called attention to Frick's influence on Sauer, and this letter certainly lends insight into Sauer's "intellectual debt" to his former geology professor.⁷

A second obvious but nonetheless important aspect of this document is Sauer's enumeration of his course work and kindred thoughts at the time. He notes that his physiography course is little more than "an extended advanced course in physical geography and detailed study of the features of various parts of this country." In light of this comment, it is perhaps instructive to recall Sauer's 1924 statement which carefully distinguishes between physiography and physical geography, where he argues that the latter must account for the "natural region" with precise attention paid to process and the interrelation of humans and their physical environment.⁸ Further, the letter is important in that it confirms Sauer's later recollection that he attended Northwestern with a petrography degree in mind.⁹

Third, the letter reveals Sauer's vacillating evaluation of his baccalaureate training at Central Wesleyan vis-a-vis his more recent encounter with graduate work at Northwestern. At the outset he explains that his alma mater was well recognized "in the eyes of the teachers" at Northwestern, and that his coursework from C.W.C. was "fully accepted without question or investigation." Yet, by the close of the short letter, there is apparent uncertainty in Sauer's mind, and his opinion of the German-Methodist institution seems to waver. Thus he instructs Frick what the professor might do better to prepare future students for similar graduate work.

The 1908 letter to Frick is important for an understanding of Sauer's evolving intellectual development. Because Sauer indicates the courses he is taking as well as their respective instructors, those concerned with determining who may have been influential in the young man's view of himself and his career cannot ignore the six professors he cites in this letter. By the same token, the letter provides further evidence that one of these individuals (Decker) was instrumental in helping Sauer decide to transfer to the University of Chicago and turn his attention toward geography.¹⁰

This archival document is of particular relevance for anyone familiar with Sauer and his almost fanatical predilection for fieldwork. It is well known that field observations were fundamental to Sauer's mature view of geography.¹¹ We know, that as a student of Frick's, Sauer was required to attend field trips as an undergraduate.¹² Further, it is readily apparent that a good percentage of his tenure as a Ph.D. student at Chicago was spent in the field collecting data.¹³ From this early letter to Frick, we discover that the tradition went unbroken during his year at Northwestern. "They place much emphasis upon field-trips," wrote Sauer. "Even First Year [sic] geologists" he elaborates, "are required to go on short excursions *almost every Saturday . . .*" (emphasis added). It is not difficult to understand why, for the remainder of his life, Sauer had such a high regard for fieldwork. His childhood, adolescence, and graduate school days were suffused with experiences requiring first-hand field observations.

A final note of importance in Sauer's letter is the last sentence of the concluding paragraph: "I wish you could teach a full year of geology at C.W.C. [and] *also make physical geography a freshman or sophomore study of a full year and put them through it hard*" (emphasis added). Sauer enrolled at Northwestern as a geology student and yet, within the first month of his studies, he was writing home convinced of the value of physical geography. Why would a student whose

chief study was petrography find such immediate interest in geography? The answer lies, I believe, in Sauer's already growing recognition of his relative isolation in a career devoted to petrographic research. Petrography was preoccupied with the local, immediate, descriptive conditions of rocks and minerals. There was little or no desire to understand their importance from a wider perspective.¹⁴ Geography, on the other hand, forced students out of the laboratory and into contact with a dynamic natural environment. In contrast to petrography, a geographic study was field-oriented, where both your research *and* your analysis focused not on minerals or crystals, but on the landscape and the larger picture—the surface of the earth. Years later, Sauer recounted this rising awareness:

I worked at petrography for a year and I learned that you did not look at the country or the beds of the rock, you looked in thin sections. They were interesting, they made very interesting patterns when you turned the stage. I knew well before the year was advanced that if that was geology that was not my dish.¹⁵

This concern for the large picture was, of course, something terribly important to Sauer. Rarely one to dwell on details, he was forever concerned with synthesis and the whole.¹⁶

Though he may not have realized it at the time, petrography's lack of concern for man was also a probable factor in Sauer's leaning toward geography. This neglect of the human component undoubtedly contributed to his decision to terminate his work in the Chemistry Department after that first term at Northwestern. In a letter written less than two months after the one reprinted below to Frick, Sauer explains to his brother and sister-in-law that "I like my work first rate, all but Chemistry. Well, I'm going to quit that and take up topographic mapping the second semester, and then I'll be satisfied."¹⁷ As did geography, topographic mapping allowed Sauer to examine the world not through a microscope, but from a panoramic perspective. Petrography

and chemistry consequently would fall by the wayside as they were both too concerned with analysis and minutia. Moreover, petrography was completely devoid of human action; geography allowed Sauer not only to focus broadly, but also to accommodate his interest in the broader picture *and* living things.

As an independent discipline, geography did not exist at Northwestern until 1945.¹⁸ In Sauer's era, the university offered only two semester-length courses in geography, and both were supplementary to a degree in geology.¹⁹ Thus, given Sauer's interest in and growing awareness of the big picture, it was only logical that he look elsewhere. One of his instructors, showing sagacious foresight, suggested that Sauer drop geology and consider working with Rollin D. Salisbury (1858-1922) at the University of Chicago, in the oldest graduate department of geography in North America.²⁰ When the school year was over, Sauer acted on his confidant's advice and made the decision to move across town and become a student of human geography at Chicago.

There was no way for Sauer to have known it at the time, but his drift away from geology and Northwestern would be of monumental importance to geography. His practical interests in field mapping²¹ and his concerns with methodologic issues²² eventually altered the course of academic geography on this continent. Sauer became a geographer and, though he never lost sight of his training in the earth sciences, the bulk of his subsequent work was concerned with humans and their use of the landscape—the larger picture.

With this short preface in mind, there follows a copy of Sauer's complete letter to Professor Frick. It was written on October 26, 1908 (two months prior to Sauer's nineteenth birthday), and published in the November, 1908, issue of the *Central Wesleyan Star*. The letter is virtually unedited. I have merely added several words (in brackets) and two foot-

notes to provide the reader with a few necessary facts. It is possible, however, that the letter may have been edited before it was printed in the *Star*.

My Dear Professor:

Now that I know what I am doing, I thought you might be interested in hearing about the progress of one of your disciples. In general terms, my school work and I seem to agree very well, my teachers are very kind and helpful and I hope to do well enough to maintain, at least partially, the high standard which Central Wesleyan College holds, and deserves too, in the eyes of the teachers here. All my work was fully accepted without question or investigation. Most students have a hard time in getting their credits from other schools recognized. The teachers did not ask me to produce a thing.

The following comprises my work:

Physiography, taught by Decker [Charles Elijah Decker, 1868-1958] until a Dr. Mansfield [George Rogers Mansfield, 1875-1947] from Harvard comes, really an extended advanced course in physical geography and detailed study of the features of various parts of this country.²³

Assaying taught by Coghill [William Hawes Coghill, b. 1876] a mining engineer, with the practical work performed at the furnace in jumpers and overalls.

Chemistry—qualitative analysis is my largest class, about 40. Our teacher Whittlesey [Theodore Whittlesey] is author of the text book used. Almost all laboratory work as is practically all my work. Thus I have my evenings almost entirely free and this gives me a chance to cary[sic] on supplementary reading.

Mineralogy taught by Coghill. We are working at crystallography now. They have a good collection of minerals but the one at C.W.C. ranks up well with it and your collection of fossils is almost the equal of Northwestern's.

Petrography. This is my chief study and is taught by Prof. Grant [Ulysses Sherman Grant, 1867-1932]. There are only about six of us. We each have a petrographical microscope and devote most of our time to the microscopical study of rocks, in many cases the only sure way of identification.²⁴ It is about the toughest proposition I ever ran up against and I am in for my hardest work in here mastering the optical properties of the minerals.

This is about the work mapped out for me. My preparation, especially my additional summer's work, is sufficient for me to fall in line and keep up with the rest. They place much emphasis upon field-trips. I was near Michigan City, Ind., on Saturday studying their sand dunes. Next week, we are to go to Southwestern Wisconsin to Platteville and Madison. Next spring we are to spend two weeks in the Lake Superior region. Even First Year geologists are required to go on short excursions almost every Saturday, one trip of a full day (one hundred miles) and a trip of two days' length to the Devil's Lake country. Each first year student must also make a rock collection of 25 specimens, etc. I wish you could teach a full year of geology at C.W.C. [and] also make physical geography a freshman or sophomore study of a full year and put them through it hard.

I am your devoted scholar and friend.

Carl Sauer.

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NOTES

1. Recent attempts to ground Sauer's work in varying research traditions include the following: William W. Speth, "Carl Ortwin Sauer on Destructive Exploitation," *Biological Conservation*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1977), pp. 145-160; Michael Williams, "'The Apple of My Eye': Carl Sauer and Historical Geography," *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (1983), pp. 1-28; Earl W. Kersten, "Sauer and 'Geographic Influences'," *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, Vol. 44 (1982), pp. 47-73; Martin S. Kenzer, "Milieu and the 'Intellectual Landscape': Carl O. Sauer's Undergraduate Heritage," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (1985), pp. 258-270; J. Nicholas Entrikin, "Carl O. Sauer, Philosopher in Spite of Himself," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 74, No. 4 (1984), pp. 387-408; James S. Duncan, "The Superorganic in American Cultural Geography,"

- Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 70, No. 2 (1980), pp. 181-198; William W. Speth, "The Anthropogeographic Theory of Franz Boas," *Anthropos*, Vol. 73, No. 1-2 (1978), pp. 1-31.
2. John Leighly, "Carl Ortwin Sauer, 1889-1975," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (1976), pp. 337-348, especially p. 337.
 3. Leighly, p. 337; Kenzer, p. 262.
 4. Kenzer, pp. 262-263.
 5. I am intentionally using the terms petrography and petrology synonymously, as did Sauer in 1908 (see note 24 below). Petrography was merely one of several approaches to the more scientific, law-seeking petrology. Moreover, in 1908 there was seemingly little difference between the two terms. See F. Y. Loewinson-Lessing, *A Historical Survey of Petrology*, translated by S. I. Tomkeieff (Edinburgh and London: Oliver & Boyd, 1954), pp. 1-9.
 6. "A letter," *Central Wesleyan Star*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1908), pp. 19-20; also see Martin S. Kenzer, "The Central Wesleyan College Archives at Northeast Missouri State University: A Very Special Collection," *Special Collections*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1985), pp. 13-20.
 7. Kenzer, note 1 above, pp. 262-263.
 8. Carl O. Sauer, "The Survey Method in Geography and Its Objectives," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1924), pp. 17-33, especially pp. 21-23.
 9. Maynard Weston Dow, "Geographers on Film: The First Interview—Carl O. Sauer Interviewed by Preston E. James," *History of Geography Newsletter*, No. 3 (1983), pp. 8-12, especially p. 8.
 10. Dow, p. 8.
 11. Robert C. West, *Carl Sauer's Fieldwork in Latin America* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1979); Martin S. Kenzer, "Carl Sauer and the Carl Ortwin Sauer Papers," *History of Geography Newsletter*, No. 5 (1985), in press; Carl O. Sauer, "The Education of a Geographer," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (1956), pp. 287-299, especially pp. 295-296; Carl O. Sauer, "Foreword to Historical Geography," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1941), pp. 1-24, especially pp. 14-17.
 12. Kenzer, note 1 above, p. 262.
 13. Carl O. Sauer, *The Geography of the Ozark Highland of Missouri*, Bulletin No. 7, The Geographical Society of Chicago (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1920), p. ix; Carl O. Sauer, *Geography*

- of the Upper Illinois Valley and History of Development, Bulletin No. 27 (Urbana: Illinois State Geological Survey, 1916), p. 11; Carl O. Sauer, "Geography," in *Starved Rock State Park and its Environs* (by C. O. Sauer, G. H. Cady, and H. C. Cowles; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1918), pp. 3-83; Carl O. Sauer, "Status and Change in the Rural Midwest—a Retrospect," *Mitteilungen der Österreichischen Geographischen Gesellschaft*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (1963), pp. 357-365, especially pp. 357-368.
14. Loewinson-Lessing, pp. 27-32.
 15. Dow, p. 8.
 16. Sauer, "Foreword," note 11.
 17. Carl O. Sauer to brother and sister-in-law, December 16, 1908, private correspondence in Sauer's daughter's possession.
 18. Martin S. Kenzer, "The Formation of an Independent Department of Geography at Northwestern University: A Chapter in the Growth of American Geography Following World War II," *History of Geography Newsletter*, No. 3 (1983), pp. 30-37.
 19. These were the two halves of Geology A2 (Physical Geography: Meteorology & Physiography of the Lands). "Annual Catalogue, 1908-1909," *Bulletin of Northwestern University*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (1908), pp. 92-94.
 20. William D. Pattison, "Rollin Salisbury and the Establishment of Geography at the University of Chicago," in *The Origins of Academic Geography in the United States* (edited by Brian W. Blouet; Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1981), pp. 151-163, especially p. 151; Preston E. James and Geoffrey J. Martin, *All Possible Worlds: A History of Geographical Ideas* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2nd ed., 1981), pp. 310-315.
 21. Carl O. Sauer, "Proposal of an Agricultural Survey on a Geographic Basis," *Michigan Academy of Science*, Nineteenth Annual Report, 1917, pp. 79-86; Carl O. Sauer, "A Soil Classification for Michigan," *Michigan Academy of Science*, Twentieth Annual Report, 1918, pp. 83-91; Carl O. Sauer, "Mapping the Utilization of the Land," *Geographical Review*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1919), pp. 47-54; Carl O. Sauer, "The Problem of Land Classification," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 11 (1921), pp. 3-16.
 22. Wellington D. Jones and Carl O. Sauer, "Outline for Field Work in Geography," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, Vol. 47, No. 7 (1915), pp. 520-525; Sauer, "The Survey Method," note 8; Carl O. Sauer, "The Morphology of Landscape," *University of California Publications in Geography*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1925), pp. 19-54; Carl O. Sauer, "Recent Developments in Cultural Geography," in

Recent Developments in the Social Sciences (edited by Edward Cary Hayes; Philadelphia and London: J. B. Lippincott, 1927), pp. 154-212; Sauer, "Foreword," note 11.

23. The Northwestern catalogue lists this as a full-year, two-semester course, Geology B2 (Physiographic and Glacial Geology: Physiographic and General Geology of the United States & Glacial Geology). From Sauer's description, however, there seems to have been more geography than geology involved. "Annual Catalogue," note 19, p. 93.
24. Listed in the catalogue as Geology C3 (Petrology) with the same basic description given by Sauer. "Annual Catalogue," note 19, p. 93.