

## Homage To A Quintessential Geographer

An old-timey geographer (i.e., before the quantitative revolution) needed a suitable habitat, and Slim Bauer had one—the Australian Outback—that suited him perfectly. Not that Slim didn't have experiences in other venues—New York, California, New Zealand, Fiji, Singapore, etc.—but it was Australia in general and the Outback in particular that provided the arena for the bulk (no pun intended) of Slim's professional, and some non-professional, activities.

In the first place, he looked like an Outback type. A bald pate, often obscured by a bandanna handkerchief when he was in the field. A facial profile that resembled a loggerhead turtle. A pear-shaped body supported by massive legs that enabled him to walk all day (albeit not rapidly) without collapse.

Slim loved the Outback, and met it on its own terms. He carried the proper tools of his trade in the pick-up or van that was his current vehicle—sleeping bag, camp stove, axe, shovel, chain saw, typewriter. He was a standard bearer in the long tradition of field geographers, taking notes all day and then organizing and typing them up each evening, often in front of the campfire.

But Slim was as comfortable in the dusty archives as he was in the sandy desert. His writings are well balanced between physical and cultural geography; the sequent occupance of the Gulf of Carpentaria lowland or the geomorphology of Kangaroo Island were equally grist for his mill. This was in part a reflection of his geographic education. He was trained by or derived influence from a distinguished suite of mentors and colleagues, including Carl Sauer, John Leighly, Oskar Spate, Joe Jennings, and Graham Lawton.

### **My favorite vignettes of Slim include the following:**

1) In preparation for my first trip to Australia, in 1961, Slim and Keith Thomson spent an evening in my West Los Angeles living room telling wild tales about the land Down Under, and doing all they could to confuse me about quids, bobs, and guineas.

2) Slim taught for a while at Cal. State, Hayward, and his field class was the talk of the campus. It was a severely practical course. Court Wilmott still recounts with awe the Saturday morning exercise in which Slim drove the class vehicle (a Land Rover) into a marsh until it was thoroughly stuck in the mud. Slim then got out of the vehicle and reclined in the shade of a tree, telling the class, "Now extricate it."

3) Slim also taught for a couple of years at University of California, Riverside. One of the prominent wall decorations in his office was a

label for Swan Lager, which Slim at that time considered to be “the best bloody beer in the world”. When he left Riverside for another position, the students sponsored a farewell party, and decided they wanted to serve Swan beer. Somehow they found the telephone number of the General Manager of the Swan Brewery, and called him.

As it turned out, the call awoke the G.M. at his Perth home at 2:00 A.M. The students told such a compelling story, however, that he dispatched via airmail a case of Swan to Riverside without cost, substantially contributing to the success of the party.

4) I discovered Slim’s virtual footprints very widely in the Outback. With remarkable frequency during a conversation with an Aussie, Slim’s name would come up—with a dentist in Katherine, a garage mechanic in Boulia, a barber in Cloncurry, a publican in Tennant Creek.

5) Slim and his beloved wife June got bogged one day on the Birdsville Track. It was not mid-summer, but the weather was blisteringly hot, the bushflies were ferocious, and the mud was tenacious. It took about two hours of shovel work to break that vehicle free, and the photo that June took to record the final result shows a giant of a man stripped down to his Jockey briefs, covered from head to toe with mud, but with a triumphant smile on his face.

6) After retirement, Slim and June set up housekeeping in a lovely two-story home in the Canberra suburb of Hackett. Despite increasing distress from his bad hip, for years Slim kept up the ritual of bringing a cup of tea and a sliced pawpaw upstairs for June’s breakfast in bed (except on the days that June brought breakfast to him).

7) On several occasions in the Bauer living room I had consulting sessions with Slim in which we poured over his voluminous field notes, seeking to characterize a region or lay out a route to some place I wanted to visit. I particularly remember (perhaps because he introduced me to Bundaberg rum on that occasion) a lengthy consultation about the nature of the Barkly Tableland and the most feasible track from Mt. Isa to Borroloola.

8) On one of our last times together, the McKnights and the Bauers set out from Canberra for a picnic in a lovely forest at Captains Flat. As we went down a narrow, steep decline, we found that a large tree had fallen across the road, completely blocking it. Fortunately, we were in Slim’s vehicle, which was fully equipped. He pulled out his chain saw and in short order we were again under way for the picnic spot.

Slim Bauer was a Yank who loved Australia as only a geographer can love a landscape.

Tom McKnight