Slim Bauer in the field, Arnhem Land, 1972
(photo Tom McKnight)
Memories of Francis Harry Bauer

They call me ‘Slim’ because that’s what I ain’t.

As I was assembling this Volume, I thought frequently of Slim Bauer, the man who introduced me to Geography. Earlier this year I had volunteered to interview Reg Golledge for the Australian Millennium Project, described here by Elaine Stratford. The more I learned of this project, the more I thought that they should consider interviewing Slim, who although American by birth, was certainly Australian by choice. I wanted to put his name forward after completion of my contribution.

The paper here by Deborah Kiersey also reminded me of Slim, as a member of the far-flung Sauerian school. In a small town in remote Northern Australia I had certainly felt its influence. One third of my introductory year in Geography consisted of what would more rightly be taught now as anthropology – *Australopithecus, Java Man, Peking Man, etc.* were a part of my first year Geography course.

Then recently I was reading an authors’ copy of *Gentle Adventures: An Australian Driveabout* – a “bit of bedside reading” by Joan Clemons and Tom McKnight completed after their latest trip to Australia earlier this year, and noted they had stayed with Slim, at his home near Canberra. Tom had suggested some time ago that I should drop Slim a note, but somehow I never got around to it – too busy with editorial duties, teaching, and the general business of living.

So it was with great regret that I learned from Tom, at the Flagstaff meeting of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, that Slim had suddenly passed away, just after moving north to Queensland. During the long drive back to Pasadena, I decided that it would be appropriate to dedicate this volume of *The California Geographer* to the memory of Slim Bauer, and to include some personal memories.

When I entered the University College in Townsville, Australia, it was so new and so small that there was a very limited number of course options. Full-time first year students were required to take four year-long courses. The first three were choices were made, but what to do for the fourth? I fancied Chemistry, but The Rules would not allow it; so it was off reluctantly to Geography.

There I met Doctor Bauer, freshly arrived from California, who was The Geographer. All Australians are, of course, interested in other parts of the world – it comes from the feeling of being so isolated, at the fringe. So an “exotic” American caught our interest. We innocents thought Slim looked funny, and moreover he was funny – he described himself as “pear-shaped”, he spoke with humorous American colloquialisms – “as useless as teats on a boar hog” – and he showed our small class the world. The slides for the geomorphology examples were from such far-
away and fantastic places as Ventura Beach, Colorado, Wyoming...

Humor was one side of Slim, but he was also such a hard taskmaster. The College Library was lacking in printed resources, so Slim placed a number of his own books there as required reading before the weekly tutorials – and to make sure we actually did the required reading, we had to sign an attached card when the Librarian issued each book. He checked it too, and reprimanded any student who had not done the reading.

A field trip to the Atherton Tableland remains indelible, especially the hard floor when we slept in a Hall at the Malanda Showgrounds after trying ineffectually to warm our chilled bodies with cups of hot soup. Tea and scones en route at the home of the parents of one of our members – sugarcane farmers – their daughter Claire took five spoons of sugar in every cup – to help the industry. The Tableland itself was already familiar from family touring holidays, but we saw it now with new geographic eyes – examples of volcanic landforms, land-use changes, various economic activities such as dairying, timber production.

Sometime during this student year, Slim gave me a copy of a publication he had written for the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization) – an historical geographic survey of white exploration and settlement of the Australian Tropics. I still have it somewhere among my papers, the old foolscap size is awkward to shelve. I read it then with fascination, part of the interest being the perceived romance of the fieldwork involved in touring the remotest outback. There was no overt suggestion that geography might be a career path, for any of Slim’s students. I think we were all there by default. But I realize now that my own Master’s field research, many years later, was somewhat similar to Slim’s.

I left the University College after one year for other occupations and interests, including the inevitable European working-holiday-and-tour, and soon lost touch with everyone from that brief period. When I decided several years later to complete my degree, the British had taken over Geography. Soon, I chose to take Geography Honours. Many years later I bumped into Slim at an airport, perhaps Brisbane and he introduced me to his new wife. Later, I read that he became Director of the new North Australia Research Unit in Darwin, but we never met again.

This was all so far away, both temporally and spatially. But during the interview for my current position, at Long Beach City College, I was asked, unexpectedly, what makes a good geography teacher. I answered unthinkingly – knowledge, patience, humor, enthusiasm. Did I know such a person?, a panel member inquired. Yes, I realized suddenly, I was thinking of my first geography teacher in Townsville, Slim Bauer.