

Hispanic Lands and Peoples

Selected Writings of James J. Parsons

Edited by

William M. Denevan





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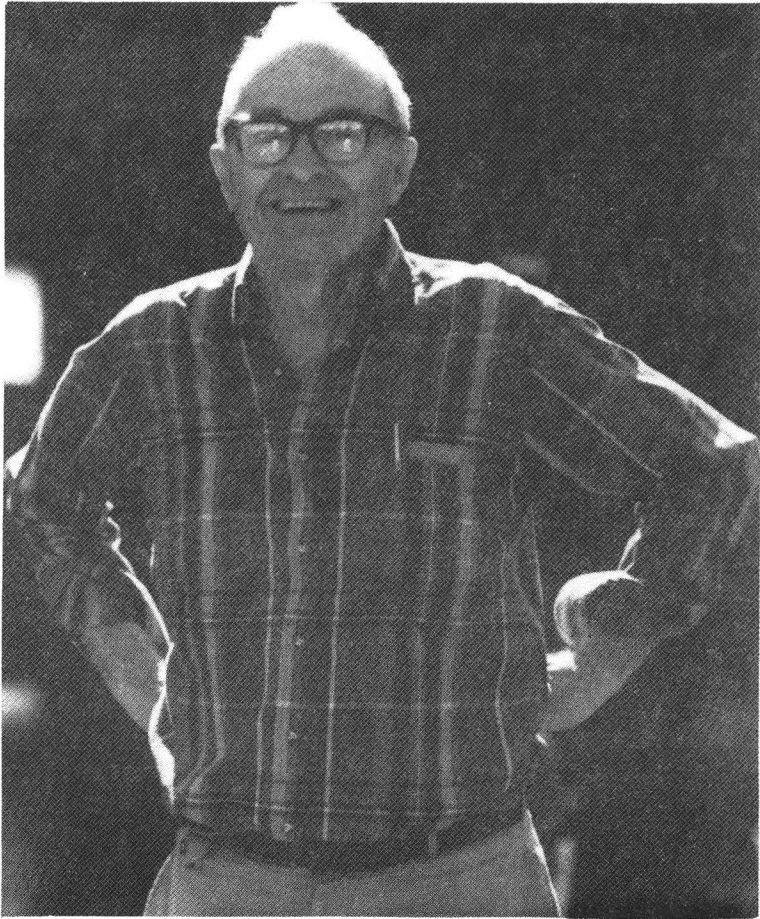
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JAMES J. PARSONS

In Río Negro, Antioquia, Colombia, November 8, 1987. Photo by Pedro J. Restrepo. Reproduced by permission.

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Selected Writings of
James J. Parsons

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Preface

Mentors are forever, they say. This has certainly been true of Jim Parsons for me, as it was with Carl Sauer for him, and Rollin Salisbury for Sauer. But although I was an undergraduate in geography at Berkeley in 1951-53 and later periodically a graduate student there for a decade, I didn't take a course from Parsons or scarcely speak with him for several years. I did run into him out of the blue at a sidewalk cafe in Belém at the mouth of the Amazon in September of 1956. Clearly something in common had brought us to that tropical place. It took awhile, but once the connection had been made it became a firm and lasting one, as it has been for most of Jim's many students. The association has been one of edification, inspiration, and support for me, and with this anthology of selected papers I wish to both honor and thank Jim for all of us.

James Parsons is a geographer. He is a cultural geographer, an historical geographer, a biogeographer, a conservation geographer, an economic geographer, a tropical geographer, and a Latin Americanist geographer. But just plain geographer will do--the kind who looks at questions about people, economy, and environment in a regional context. And he is one of the very best at this sort of thing, venturing out into near and far corners of the world to try to make some sense out of what is going on there by means of field observation, talking to people, reading the newspapers, and delving into libraries and archives, records and maps.

To be in the field with Jim is a humbling experience, as he describes, explains, and clarifies what is not at all so clear. He scribbles things on backs of envelopes and scraps of paper, probably in field notebooks but I have never seen one. And if he is driving he may get lost temporarily, not because he doesn't know where he is but because his eyes are not on the road but on the land, while his mind is somewhere else putting it all together. A lot of what he sees

must be stashed away deep inside permanently, not for a few days or weeks as with most of us. Then he comes home to Berkeley, does some more library research, and after awhile it all comes out in an article or monograph, well reasoned, well documented, and in some of the finest prose we can find in geography. We have brought together pieces of Jim's best research and best writing in the collection of papers presented here.

The idea for this anthology arose in discussions with Kent Mathewson, with encouragement from David Robinson, editor of the Dellplain Latin American Studies series. The selections included are largely my choices but with suggestions from Kent, and they also reflect some of Jim's own preferences. The emphasis is on Parsons' work in Latin America and in Spain, with the resulting neglect of his publications on other regions, particularly California.

The organization of the 30 papers included here is somewhat arbitrary but does reflect Parsons' major research themes and regions; a number of items could be placed in more than one category. Part I contains statements about geographical research in general and in Latin America. Part II focuses on Colombia, the scene of Parsons' most persistent field work. Part III consists of historical geographical studies elsewhere. Part IV is on ancient agricultural fields in South America. Part V is a sampling of Parsons' many publications on the human impact on the natural environment of Latin America. Part VI covers a variety of topics on Spain and the Canary Islands. The Postscript is a plea for the humanistic approach to geography, as well as to learning in general.

To meet space limitations and still retain diversity, an emphasis has been given to including mostly shorter publications. Only portions of some articles appear (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 17). From Parsons' monographs chapters were selected which would make sense independently (Chapters 5, 7, 8, 9, 23). Chapter 4 on "Geographical Research in Latin America" has been reworked by Parsons for this volume. Otherwise, the texts of the articles are as originally published except for a few minor corrections. Most of the original photos have been deleted, as well as a few of the maps.

A capsule biography is in order. James J. Parsons was born in Cortland, New York, on November 15, 1915, but moved with his family to Pasadena, California, in the early 1920s. He received an A.B. in Economics from Berkeley in 1937 and an M.A. in Geography from Berkeley in 1939, with a year in between as news editor for the Ukiah *Redwood Journal*. He served in the U.S. Army from 1941 to 1945 (private to major), applying his geographic skills to Air Force intelligence in the Pacific Theater. He and Betty were married in 1942. He returned to graduate school at Berkeley in 1945

to pursue a Ph.D. under Carl Sauer, with a dissertation on "Antioqueño Colonization in Western Colombia" in 1948.

Parsons has spent his entire academic career at Berkeley. He entered the faculty as an Instructor in 1946, rising to Professor in 1960, and retiring in 1986. He was Chairman of Geography in 1960-66 and 1975-79. He was Chairman of the Center for Latin American Studies at Berkeley in 1965-66, 1970-73, and 1979-80. His services to professional geography are also considerable, including President of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers (1954-55) and Councilor (1960-62), Vice President (1973-74), and President (1974-75) of the Association of American Geographers.

Honors awarded include Guggenheim Fellow (1959-60), Doctor Honoris Causa from the Universidad de Antioquia (Colombia, 1965), Estrella de Oro Medal (Colombia, 1977), Honors from the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers (1978), Honors from the Association of American Geographers (1983), the David Livingston Memorial Medal from the American Geographical Society (1985), The Berkeley Citation (University of California, 1986), Honorary Professor, Universities of Caldas (Colombia, 1987), and El Orden de Pedro Justo Berrio (Colombia, 1987).

Parsons has made so many trips for research and meetings to Latin America, Europe, and elsewhere that even he would be hard pressed to list them all. Colombia has seen the most of him, as he has returned again and again. However, he has also undertaken substantial field work in the Caribbean, Mexico, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Spain, and the Canary Islands. He has been a prolific writer, with some five books and monographs and over 100 articles and notes in a wide variety of journals in and out of geography. A significant contribution has been his willingness to prepare book reviews, far more than his share, with nearly 70 in all.

Since 1950, Parsons with Sauer, plus Hilgard Sternberg and Bernard Nietschmann, have maintained at Berkeley probably the premier center in the world of graduate training in Latin American geography (37 Ph.D. dissertations). Jim has supervised 34 Ph.D. dissertations, of which 17 are on Latin America. The latter are by Charles Alexander (Venezuela, 1955), John Street (Haiti, 1959), Campbell Pennington (Mexico, 1959), David Harris (West Indies, 1963), William Denevan (Bolivia, 1963), Lee Pederson (Chile, 1965), Gene Wilken (Mexico, 1967), Jim Krogzemis (Colombia, 1968), David Radell (Nicaragua, 1969), Elinore Barrett (Mexico, 1970), Peter Rees (Mexico, 1971), Thomas Veblen (Guatemala, 1975), Janet Crane Schuh (Peru, 1977), Gerald Fish (Mexico, 1980), Michael Murphy (Mexico, 1983), Luis Calero (Latin American Studies, Colombia, 1987), and Karl Zimmerer (Peru, 1989).

Non-Latin American Ph.D. dissertations supervised by Parsons include: Ward Barrett (1959), Alvin Urquhart (1962), Robert Frenkel (1967), Bret Wallach (1968), Tom Pagenhart (1969), Christopher Salter (1970), Bryce Decker (1970), Robin Doughty (1971), William Bowen (1972), Rowan Rowntree (1973), Marshall McLennan (1973), Marijean Eichel Hawthorne (1975), Franco Ferrario (1977), Randall Rossi (1979), Krimhilde Henderson (1980), Noritaka Yagasaki (1982), and Barbara Brower (1987).

These are the facts about Jim Parsons. The "Introduction" by Robert West, a fellow grad at Berkeley in the 1940s, and the "Appreciation" by Kent Mathewson, a third generation Parsonite, give insight into the man, the scholar, and the teacher. Then comes our sampling of his thoughts and scholarship regarding geography and Hispanic lands and people. A full listing of Parsons' publications to date follows the text. "We shall be known by our works and saved by them alone," Jim once said. He provides us here with some pretty fine works.

*William M. Denevan
Madison*

Introduction

James Parsons stands as one of the most influential, best known, and in terms of publications one of the most prolific geographers in the United States today. His fields of inquiry have been concentrated mainly in Latin America, especially northern South America, in Spain, and lately in the Canary Islands. But he has also published on various parts of the United States, principally California, his adopted state, where he has lived most of his life. And several of his works deal with the world distribution of a particular phenomenon, the destructive exploitation of the green sea turtle.

In both teaching and research Parsons' philosophy of geography appears to have evolved from several sources. Paramount was the teaching of Carl Sauer, who helped to instill in him the historical approach for the understanding of landscape and the ecological concept of man's relation to his environment. Equally important was Sauer's insistence on fieldwork in geographical research, a tenet that Parsons adopted enthusiastically as evidenced by his lengthy travel experience abroad and at home. A keen observer of man and nature and an indefatigable worker in library and archive, Parsons has been able to amass quantities of data for his numerous publications and classroom lectures. More than once he has stated publicly his belief that geographical research is fundamentally an exercise in "exploration and discovery," not necessarily in the sense of a James Cook or a Robert Parry, but in a desire to satisfy personal curiosity about areas and peoples and to impart one's findings to student and public. Like Sauer, Parsons is basically a humanist.

By no means, however, has Parsons been a clone of his mentor in ideas and writings. Whereas Sauer's contributions, particularly those on Latin America, dealt largely with the past, those of Parsons usually include explanatory description of the contemporary scene and emphasize the economic bases of livelihood, historically

derived. That emphasis may in part stem from his early training in economics at Berkeley. It also may have been encouraged by his early experience in journalism, having worked as a reporter on a local California newspaper. And that same experience may well have enhanced his ability to produce the precise, facile prose that characterizes his professional writings. His simple, direct English, unencumbered by jargon, makes all of his works a delight to read.

Parsons' renown among both peers and students derives not only from his publications but also from his long association with various geographical organizations in the United States and abroad. Since the mid-1950s he has rarely missed an annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, having served on various of its committees and as its president. Active participation in other organizations, such as the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, the California Geographical Society, and the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers, further enhanced his exposure to colleagues and students alike. From all these societies he has received awards for excellence for his studies in the Latin American tropics and in Spain. Moreover, Jim's affable personality has helped gain him lasting respect among all who meet him, especially among students.

Parsons' first and one of his most lengthy research papers was his doctoral thesis on Colombia, done under Carl Sauer. Published in the *Ibero-Americana* series in 1949, "Antioqueño Colonization in Western Colombia" (see Chapter 5) immediately caught the eyes of Colombian scholars, and a year later a Spanish translation appeared; two subsequent Spanish editions have been published. Here was the first organized presentation of Antioqueño settlement history—the story of a unique segment of the Colombian people who have developed an agricultural economy based on coffee and stock raising and eventually a thriving industrial complex within the rugged northern Andes. This study has served as a model for other historical and geographical investigations in Colombia and a challenge to others, including historians and sociologists, to expand on and in some cases to correct a few of Parsons' original ideas on Antioquian expansion.

Although Parsons' interests have turned to many other themes, the call of Colombia has remained with him until the present, having returned to his adopted "patria chica" many times for work in field and archive. His monographs *Antioquia's Corridor to the Sea* (1967) (see Chapters 7 and 8) and *San Andrés and Providencia* (1956) (see Chapter 9) and their Spanish translations, as well as several journal articles attest to this attraction. For his work in Colombia he has received at least three prestigious awards from his

Antioqueño friends and colleagues. Parsons' frequent revisits to Colombia illustrate his firm belief that a geographer, to understand well a foreign land and people, must return repeatedly over a long period of time to the locale of study. Whenever he returns to Medellín or some other city in Antioquia he is still hailed in the local press as "Parsons, el antioqueñólogo."

An important contribution to the historical geography of aboriginal agriculture in the Americas stems in part from Parsons' work in Colombia. On one of his field excursions to Antioquia (ca. 1963) quite by accident Parsons observed from the air a large area of geometrically arranged swales and ridges, theretofore unreported, in the seasonally inundated San Jorge River floodplain in northern Colombia. These he termed "ridged fields," and subsequent investigation on the ground with air photos suggested their construction by pre-Columbian Indians for planting surfaces raised above flood level. Somewhat similar features had been briefly reported as early as 1901 in the Lake Titicaca Basin, but it was not until the early 1960s that William Denevan, one of Parsons' graduate students, thoroughly investigated ridges in lowland Bolivia and described them in his doctoral thesis. Parsons also found ridged fields in the lowlands of eastern Ecuador (see Chapter 15) and others reported them in Surinam and in the Venezuelan Llanos. After publication of Parsons' (and coauthor Bowen's) initial report on the Colombian ridged fields (see Chapter 14), their finds were written up in *Time* magazine (August 5, 1966), giving the authors national recognition among the general public. Subsequently anthropologists and geographers began to search for evidence of long abandoned raised fields in other parts of the lowland tropics, especially in southeastern Mexico, where they have been found in wet areas of southern Veracruz, the Yucatan peninsula, and also in neighboring Belize. Thus, new evidence of a sophisticated aboriginal agriculture in the tropical lowlands of America long before European contact may help to give credence to suggestions for high lowland densities among pre-Columbian populations.

Colombia was not the first Latin American country that Parsons visited during his graduate days at Berkeley. During the intersemester break, December 1940-January 1941, when I was still working on my dissertation under Professor Sauer, Jim and I made a trip into northern Mexico and, being adventuresome souls, crossed the Sierra Madre Occidental over the colonial "Topia Road," a trail that led from Tepehuanes, Durango state, to Culiacán on the Pacific lowlands. We drove from Berkeley to Chihuahua City in Jim's car, then by rail to Tepehuanes where we obtained mules and a guide to take us to Valle de Topia in the sierra. From there we followed a

mailman and a loaded burro on foot down a treacherous dry-season trail, crossing a stream some 300 times, and finally arrived at Culiacán. The trip across the sierra took ten exhausting days of travel by mule and foot. From Culiacán we returned to Durango City in an old three-engine passenger plane, recrossing the sierra in one hour, and thence home by rail and car. This may have been Jim Parsons' first "fieldwork" in Latin America, and perhaps it whetted his desire to continue geographical investigations in that part of the world. After returning to Berkeley we composed a joint paper on the historical geography of the Topia Road and brazenly sent it to the *Geographical Review*. We soon received word from editor Gladys Wrigley that our paper had been accepted for publication in the July 1941 issue of the *Review* (see Chapter 11), in which Carl Sauer's famous paper "The Personality of Mexico" would appear. This was Jim's second publication (his first, on hops in California in 1940). Through the years Parsons on occasion attended conferences in Mexico City, but he did not return to the country for investigations of any import until recently. In 1985 he began a study of native Mexican ornamental plants, delving into their origin, distribution, and role in pre-Columbian Indian and present-day cultures.

Although his first substantial work in Latin America resulted from his research in Antioquia, no less important are Parsons' concerns and resulting publications relative to present-day ecological problems that he has encountered in the tropical lowlands of northern South America and Central America. Foremost among such problems, in his view, has been the impact of man on natural vegetation, much of which has resulted in environmental deterioration. Likely, it was Carl Sauer who introduced him to this phenomenon, and once in the field he was quick to recognize the change in the extent and composition of tropical forest and savanna effected through human action. Parsons' work on vegetation began in 1953 with his study of the anomalous pine savanna along the rainy Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and easternmost Honduras (see Chapter 17). Later studies involved the grasslands of northern Colombia, the Llanos of Colombia and Venezuela (see Chapter 18), and the pastures of Central America (see Chapter 19). All of these studies carry the theme of rapid clearing of the rain forest and its replacement by grasses to further the livestock industry. Once established the grasses are maintained largely through the use of fire, a process long known to cattlemen and Indian hunters. However, this activity has not been overly detrimental to the environment in some cases, as Parsons indicates in his revealing study on the introduction of African grasses into tropical America, where they have replaced the less nutritious native species, making pastures in both highland and

lowland more productive for the livestock industry (see Chapter 20). Nonetheless, the progressive disappearance of the lowland rain forest, especially in Central America, may well result in the loss of an enormous floral and faunal diversity, a decrease in soil fertility, and serious soil erosion in hilly terrain (see Chapter 21).

In his studies of man's impact on the environment Parsons has dealt with only one animal, the green sea turtle. His interest in this reptile and its exploitation probably began while he was engaged in work on the Colombian Caribbean islands of San Andrés and Providencia, where a number of turtle fishermen are based. In the Caribbean the depletion of the sea turtle through overhunting and egg robbing is representative of a world-wide pattern of the exploitation of a living resource to the brink of extinction. Thus, ever curious, Parsons extended his study to include all of the world's tropical seas, resulting in a book-length treatise, one of its kind, but probably appreciated more by biologists than by most geographers (see Chapter 23; also 22).

Parsons' concern with ecological problems coincides with the growing public interest in the environmental movement within the United States, Canada, and a few Latin American countries. The Geography Department at Berkeley is one of the few in the U.S. where students are made keenly aware of such problems. Among geographers, Parsons, with his departmental colleagues Sternberg, Nietschmann, Luten, and others, has been in the forefront of the environmental movement on the Berkeley campus, including supervision since the 1960s of numerous doctoral dissertations related to that subject.

In 1959 Parsons received a Guggenheim Fellowship for a year's travel and study in Spain and Portugal. Visits to the Iberian Peninsula are logical and necessary steps taken by many Latin Americanists seeking information on European origins of culture traits found in the New World, or searching for documents in archives to reconstruct aspects of Hispanic-American colonial history and geography. Parsons, however, was concerned not so much with those goals as with the exploration of the countryside in a land new to him. The title of his grant proposal to the Guggenheim Foundation is: "The Forest Gathering and Herding Economy of the South of Spain and Portugal." Thus, in his writings on Iberia he concentrated on explanatory description and historical development of various present-day economic activities that dealt with the exploitation of natural resources, mainly vegetation and its deterioration through human misuse (see Chapter 25). Innovative farming techniques that he encountered also intrigued him (see Chapter 27), as did aspects of architecture.

To date, Parsons, with wife Betty, has made four study trips to Spain and surrounding areas (1959-60, 1972, 1979, 1984). Having devoted his attention to southern Spain and Portugal during the first two field seasons, he spent the last two mainly in the Canary Islands, where various landscape features aroused his curiosity (see Chapter 30). And some of his latest writings are concerned with the role of the Canaries in the transfer of artifacts and lifeways to the New World, including the extraordinary migrations of Canary Islanders into the Americas during the last 400 years (see Chapter 28).

Probably most of Parsons' colleagues would consider his accomplishments through his many contributions to geographical literature. But others, especially his students, will rarely forget his warm, relaxed demeanor, his unfailing positive attitude, and his strong encouragement to achieve. Even in the field those personal characteristics reveal themselves in his down-to-earth rapport with both rural informants and urban intellectuals, who, responding to his open, friendly nature, have often looked upon him as one of their own.

*Robert C. West
Baton Rouge*

An Appreciation

When thinking of James Parsons, many qualities come to mind. Openness and accessibility are two of the obvious ones. My own introduction came through correspondence as a prospective graduate student. My inquiry was addressed to Professor J.J. Parsons, Graduate Advisor. I indicated interests in Latin America, biogeography, cultural historical studies, and noted that I had been editor of my college newspaper. I knew Parsons to be a student of Sauer's and also of Latin America and biogeographical topics, but I had no idea of the extent of his wide-ranging expertise beyond these rather standard Berkeley School pursuits. Neither did I realize that citing experience in journalism would strike such a sympathetic chord, nor did I know that Parsons' term as Graduate Advisor had lapsed, and that he was on sabbatical in Spain. But instead of receiving a routine response (given the circumstances) from the department, I soon had a long hand-written letter from Parsons in the field. He strongly encouraged me to pursue the directions I had mentioned. Remarkably, there was little emphasis on recruitment *per se*; rather there was this enthusiastic invitation to join in the adventure and challenge of doing geography along lines that I only sketchily understood at the time.

As it turned out, I never made it formally to California and studied instead at Wisconsin. This seems to have made little difference. I soon discovered, as others have, that being one of Parsons' students is not something limited to Berkeley enrollment or even to being a geographer. I hope to speak for all of his many students, both formal and informal, especially those who have become part of this collectivity in recent years, in thanking him for his advice, encouragement, and example. There is the temptation to elaborate on the full range of his many contributions, but that can and will be done in other contexts. Now is the time to enjoy what is

available here and elsewhere and to anticipate what still awaits us. I would like to make a few general observations on the ways his writings can inform future generations of geographers.

The work presented in this volume is by no means the complete Parsons. While it covers much of the core, important pieces from what some might assume to be the periphery are necessarily omitted. These include his work on California and on the economic geography of the United States. A larger picture emerges than just the cultural geography of Latin America and Spain. Involved in part is the integration of economy and ecology. At the same time, Parsons' eclecticism, with no apologies, is startling, and is not fully apparent in this volume (e.g., letters in the landscape, residential choices of airline pilots, domestication of the canary, fog drip, subdivisions without homes).

Appreciation has various meanings. Of course, the main sense implied here is that of saluting one of geography's most esteemed scholars. But another of its meanings, "to increase in value," might also be invoked. Parsons, through his own highly personal style and efforts has not only added significantly to many subfields of the discipline, but he has "appreciated" the whole enterprise of geography with his example, his leadership, and above all his infectious curiosity and enthusiasm. In an age when nominations for the title of "total geographer" are apt to be proffered to those who have striven to reduce the logos of place to the most parsimonious theorems and operations possible, Parsons' approach is indeed far afield. But in the long view he is clearly in the mainstream, marking for those who will follow currents that are strong and durable.

Agreeably, the collection in hand confirms the image most hold of James Parsons as a devoted student of cultural, historical, and regional geographic topics. He is one of this century's most accomplished Latin Americanist and Iberianist geographers. In the various places he knows well and is well known, such as Colombia, the western Caribbean, and the Canaries, local scholars have no difficulty locating him in the tradition (and often in the company) of those who have gone before: Humboldt, Hettner, and Sapper. However, in focusing on his accomplishments as an authority on particular places, we are in danger of losing sight of his range of interests and expertise. Even after close inspection of his publications list, synopsis does not come easily. In a sense, the contents of this bibliography are a resounding affirmation of his own stated belief in the importance of studying questions of geographical diversity and uniqueness. And befitting his own training under Sauer at Berkeley, one can readily see the importance given to asking genetic questions and pursuing historical themes.

The directions of Parsons' scholarly productions and persona were already apparent in his early publications. His article with Robert West on the Topia Road in Mexico (*Geographical Review*, 1941) anticipated a Latin American and culture history bent well before field work in Colombia. His first published effort, however, dealt with "Hops in Early California Agriculture" (*Agricultural History*, 1940). The article is based on his 1939 Master's thesis in geography at Berkeley on "The California Hop Industry: Its Eighty Years of Development and Expansion." Seeds of subsequent interests and projects are quite evident in this study. The predictable historical themes of agricultural diffusions and colonization are well developed, but one can also see that Parsons was well aware that California agriculture was taking on an "industrial" character, or in Cary McWilliams' now famous phrase, becoming "factories in the fields." This willingness to follow the facts wherever they lead, including into the industrial present, was no doubt reinforced by his stint as a journalist after college before he turned to geography full time. Somewhat in contradistinction, one can imagine his mentor Carl Sauer taking the hop theme and tracing it back along its diffusion paths to the plant's earliest uses and domestication.

Parsons' work on hops in California represents the beginning of a sustained commitment to writing on topics investigating different aspects of California's regional geography--some 16 publications, culminating in his masterful study of the San Joaquin Valley (*Geographical Review*, 1986). This aspect of his scholarly production has been somewhat overshadowed by his better-known writings on other Hispanic lands. Included are economic studies of agriculture, home-building and residential location, manufacturing, and energy use. These are hardly topics that one associates with Berkeley School geography. Yet each is written with the verve and inquisitiveness that distinguishes Parsons' best work on tropical landscapes, or historical studies of ecological disruptions.

Parsons' undergraduate training was in economics. Apparently, allegiance to this earlier training, if not calling, has prevented him from abandoning the discipline he studied for his first degree. Even at present he lists among his geographic specializations "descriptive economic geography." Surely he is among the only, if not the only economic geographer today who is willing to qualify his epistemological orientation in such honest if unfashionable terms. Yet an earlier generation of economic geographers also saw their task to be essentially one of doing "an honest job of reporting" as Parsons (here echoing Sauer) is fond of saying. Perhaps the worst causalities of the recent but now waning Great Enforced Modernization of Geography Campaign have been within some of the very

precincts from which it was launched. Parsons' continuing contributions to the literature of economic geography are poignant reminders of these losses.

One might even look back to economic geography's halcyon days when direct observation of phenomena in the field played a large part. In important ways Parsons' work and outlook is an implicit realization that the sciences of economy and ecology not only share the same etymological origins or grounds, but, as Kenneth Boulding and others have also pointed out, the two disciplines are necessarily interdependent whether or not the practitioners of either field care to acknowledge it. Parsons in his unassuming way has given us some first rate examples of how the mediations might proceed.

In perhaps more obvious ways, Parsons' prospectings have added many facets to his and our knowledge of specific regions. From California-as-home to New Caledonia to Colombia and beyond and back again, he has crisscrossed both the Caribbean Mainland and Rimland, seeing California each time anew, and finally back tracking all the way to Iberia--the Hispanic source lands along with their Atlantic isles. Mediterraneanist of both the New and the Old Worlds, Parsons is exemplary as chorologist on these terrains. This distinction is a reflection of not only his extensive direct knowledge of these places, but also his willingness or even insistence that one must see and study economies and ecologies as indivisible. All of this is in tune with current "rediscovery" of regions and the regional approach throughout geography. It is of course to his credit that Parsons never abandoned these interests.

If this persistence strikes some geographers as mildly prophetic, his labors before a larger audience have a similar resonance. Parsons has been well received by various publics, especially in places in which he has come to feel at home. Return visits to favorite places elicit newspaper headlines of his arrival. His work appears in local newspapers in Colombia and elsewhere. Scholars in various countries have written on his style of geography and his contributions. For example, in the Catalan journal *Documents d'Anàlisi Geogràfica* (7:177-191, Barcelona 1985), Xavier Sanclimens i Solervicens discusses "L'obra de James J. Parsons sobre Espanya." There is also the interview of Parsons by Antioqueño sociologist Alejandro Reyes Posada (*Estudios Sociales*, 1:195-211, Medellín, 1986). Parsons is known to Californians outside the academy as well as to the readership of popular publications such as *Co-Evolutionary Quarterly* and *Whole Earth Review*. At a time when "public intellectuals" are said to be largely a vanished tribe, and academics, even those who profess a duty to make a public difference, are caught up

in ever more centripetal forms of discourse, it is indeed a pleasure to hear of the range of audiences Parsons reaches.

Unfortunately, little of this informal record of the public Parsons is immediately retrievable. However, the written record we do have is certainly a generous one. In describing the man himself, this remarkable spirit of generosity may be the single attribute that will come to mind most quickly. Those who have been fortunate in knowing James Parsons in the field, in the classroom, at conferences, as a colleague, or simply as admirers of his work, will attest that his contagious sense of affinity for all sorts of people and a multiplicity of remarkable places is something that is impossible not to share. As his written work here and elsewhere attests, Parsons' circle of admirers should only grow wider and wider with time.

*Kent Mathewson
Chapel Hill*



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PART ONE

The Geographer in Latin America



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1

An Independent Field of Inquiry*

Geography stands as an independent field of inquiry by virtue of its concern with the place-to-place variation of the earth's surface and its human societies and the causes and consequences of this variation. It is unique as to point of view, of which the map is an effective mirror. Man's evaluation of the relative habitability of the earth, in good part a cultural judgment, is expressed through the uneven distribution of population and such material marks of his occupancy as houses, cities, factories, roads, farmsteads, and fields--and these features and their distributions are the raw material of most geographical investigation. The understanding of why and how people live where they do and the nature and durability of man's relationship with and dependence upon the physical environment are major themes within geography.

Although geography's organizing principle is spatial, as that of history is chronological, the manner in which a contemporary landscape has evolved cannot be understood without the perspective of time. The historical orientation of geography has been especially pronounced in the Latin American field, where the lines of history are deeply etched on the land and its people. Indeed, the interests of cultural anthropologists, historians, and geographers have often fused in Latin American studies, as in investigations of the origins, spread, limits, and modifications of culture traits or cultural complexes, until the distinction between them often becomes blurred. Much of geography's strength stems from its flexibility--its ability to work with

*Excerpted (pp. 33-36) from "The Contribution of Geography to Latin American Studies," in *Social Science Research on Latin America*, Charles Wagley, editor, copyright (c) Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 33-85 (1964). Used by permission.

materials from both the physical and social sciences from its own distinctive and integrating point of view.

For its relative lack of concern for theory, its neglect of methodological innovation, its wariness of broad generalizations, and its past tendencies to be satisfied with "mere description," geography of late has been chided by some of its own and passed by unrecognized by others. There are many misconceptions of what geography is, even its confusion with "geology" or the not infrequent assumption that it is little more than the study of place names, the proving of "influences" of the environment on human activity, or gazetteer-like description.

Most geographical work transcends the boundaries of the social sciences, drawing on the ideas, field techniques, and observations of natural science. It considers the whole wherever possible in terms of mapped distributions and the interrelationship of physical phenomena, cultural attitudes, and economic activities. As a bridge between the natural and the social sciences, but with its own distinctive set of problems, the field of geography has a unique opportunity to contribute to the fuller understanding of man's place in nature, especially through its emphasis on empirical relationships and on the application of spatial and ecologic thinking to the human use of the earth. Potentially it has important contributions to make to scientific programs concerned with land utilization, food production, water supply, industrial development, urban and regional planning, and natural resources conservation. It may equally be concerned with man's attitudes about the earth and his attachments to the local character of places. The appreciation and enjoyment of landscapes for their own sake, and a naive curiosity about the arrangement of things in space, has attracted many workers to geography. So too has the "conservation ethic," a concern for the husbanding and protection of the earth against man's destructive exploitation and despoliation. The engineering of economic and social development in itself, the provision of resources for an expanding world population at rising levels of living, if not a geographical goal, may nevertheless have profound geographical consequences.

Traditionally geography has been committed strongly to direct field observation. This could well be its unique challenge and its opportunity. Nowadays, with new techniques and the proliferation of the printed work, more and more scholars are doing their work in the office or laboratory, well removed from contact with the countryside and the enormously difficult task of analyzing complex reality. Indeed, the provision of trained field workers, sensitive to both culture and environment and willing to get their boots muddy, may

be one of geography's more important contributions to scholarship generally and to area studies in particular.

Scholarly geography is placing more emphasis on problems, concepts, ideas, and techniques today than ever before. Yet the world of scholarship still properly looks to geography for information about places and will doubtless continue to do so. The term "geography" means "writing about the earth," by which the Greeks understood "describing the earth." Good regional description, as much art as science, is likely to be useful to scholars of the future long after the theories and models toward which so much of contemporary social science is geared have been forgotten or have been enshrined as quaint relics of another era. Although the facts the geographer perceives must be examined, labeled, and perhaps measured with care and accuracy, the presentation of these facts involves personal choice, taste, and judgment. The reading of the landscape, the interpretation of scenery, whether for its own sake or for some specific end, involving as it does the intricate interplay of its physical and cultural elements, is in a manner comparable to art or music appreciation, a legitimate subject of humanistic inquiry. A sympathetic review in *Landscape* magazine (P.G.A., 1951:34) put it this way:

For the manner in which the environment is exploited, the attitude toward nature as she manifests herself in that environment, is a cultural trait second to none in importance. The human landscape is the visible sign of that attitude. It is in the interpretation of that landscape that ecology falters, and where human geography comes into its own. Skeptical of "scientific" laws, aware of the enormous diversity among human groups, disdaining no discipline in its effort to understand the manmade environment, it does much to bring together and moderate the various professions which have undertaken to study man and his habitat. More than anything else, perhaps, human geography is a way of looking at man and the world; it is a new word for humanism. If so, we must see to it that...its qualities become generally diffused [among other disciplines], ecology taking over its human concern, its earthier aspects being absorbed by the social sciences.

Such interpretive insight depends on long and intimate familiarity with place, language, and culture. This is the first requisite of the "area specialist," whether in Latin America or elsewhere, but especially so of the geographer.

In recent years quite another direction has come to geography, an abstract and mathematical concern for space and space-distance relations, centering on the search for verification of observation and the search for generalizations and laws through systems analysis, spatial and stimulation models, and the methods, concepts, and approaches of the physical sciences applied to economic and cultural data. William Warntz (1959), perhaps representative of those striving to bring the subject more in line with the more theoretically oriented social sciences, has called for "a macroscopic geography aimed at developing concepts at a more meaningful level of abstraction so as to make possible the understanding of the whole economic system and to provide a conceptual framework into which to put the micro-descriptions." In this macroscopic analysis and especially through the application of gravity and potential models in which earth variables are purposefully disregarded, he has envisioned a step towards "the forging of a theory of human society [that] can be greatly aided by finding regularities in the aggregate." Others complain that this is hardly geography's responsibility. Labeling this doctrine "the new teleology of the equilibrium and functional concepts," Lukermann and Porter (1960:504) conclude that, "if this is the high level of abstraction that geography is searching for--the seventeenth century lies dead ahead."

The lively ferment in contemporary geography cannot but have its effect on Latin American studies. As elsewhere the winds of change blow strongly within geography, yet what Sauer called the subject's "lingering sickness," a consequence in part of its work being too much ruled "not by inquisitiveness but by definitions of its boundaries," cannot be said to have been entirely eradicated. While extricating itself from the quagmire of pedagogy, it runs the risk of splintering today into quantitative economic geography, historical-cultural geography, and physical geography, with limited communication between the segments. It seems likely, however, that geographers working in Latin America may be less affected by this threatening schism than those working in the more developed parts of the world.

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2

By Way of Preface*

From Herodotus to Heyerdahl the far-off and seldom visited lands that have been but little known or understood have been a particular concern of geographers. The public is still apt to think of geography primarily in terms of geographical discovery and exploration, and it is often a bit disillusioned upon learning how seldom geographers actually are concerned with far-away and romantic places and peoples. This, I think, is rather unfortunate. Certainly it was the prospect of satisfying deep-seated curiosities about distant and dimly-known corners of the earth that lured many of us initially into this thing we call Geography, stimulated perhaps by a childhood collection of stamps or rocks or by those wonderful pictures in the *National Geographic*. When we saw there was a chance to make a living at this sort of thing we became professionals. In the beginning we have had a good bit of the unabashed hedonist in us. The trouble seems to be that somewhere along the line we "get religion"; we spend less and less time on the problems and areas that really excite us, the things we really would like to do, and more and more time doing the things that we are asked to do or feel that we should do, usually because they seem to bear on local and contemporary problems for which answers are being demanded. We start taking ourselves too seriously, we seem to tense up, and we begin to merit the charge of the former editor of that excellent magazine of human geography called *Landscape* that professional geographers as a group

*Excerpted (pp. 3-5, 16) from "English Speaking Settlement of the Western Caribbean," *Yearbook of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers*, Vol. 16, pp. 3-16, Oregon State University Press (1954). Only the introduction and conclusion are included here. Presidential Address delivered at the 17th Annual Meeting of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers, Pullman, Washington, June 24, 1954.

ment are not being properly exercised. As we concern ourselves increasingly with enumeration and description, we stop asking "why" and how." What is worse, our descriptions too often lack life and imagination. The dearth of widely-read semi-popular books on geography in America is in embarrassing contrast to the situation in Europe. Nor can all the blame be laid to high publishing cost. Good writing, of course, requires practice as well as imagination and persistence. This may be why newspaper experience has been in the background of so many of our most respected geographers--Ratzel and Reclus, to name two.

In the days when German geography was great, one or more field seasons or *wanderjahre* in an unfamiliar physical and cultural environment in one of the further reaches of the earth was almost a requisite of graduate training. To be thrown into the midst of a totally unfamiliar setting, preferably one that has not been picked over too much by the experts and faced with the task of pulling together observations into a meaningful pattern and interpretation is certainly one of the best tests of geographical competence. I should like to put in a good word for the thesis that to know ourselves and our own culture such a point of reference in other lands, in other cultures and even other times puts us on much firmer grounds. And further, that the time to stake them out is in graduate student days, when enthusiasms and physical endurance are at full strength, before children, house payments, and heavy teaching loads make arm-chair geographers of us by force of circumstances or habit.

At Berkeley, in a certain measure through the influence of Carl Sauer, we have found in Latin America a convenient and relatively inexpensive proving ground for graduate students which has been curiously little exploited by American geographers. It offers not only areas of rich geographical content but enticing problems in systematic geography as well. Moreover, a thesis based on extensive field study in Middle America or the Caribbean frequently has opened the door to a teaching job with course work in Latin American geography, in tropical geography, or in culture history which would have been closed to the candidate whose field experience has been confined to the familiar urbanized industrial North American culture region of the mid-twentieth century with which we are all more or less inevitably identified. And there is yet another reward from foreign field work; it is an almost sure-fire way to gain a competence of sorts in at least one other tongue than English. I well recall that my own decision to initiate theses research in Colombia was based in part on the reassuring realization that, if worst came to worst, I would at least come home with some competence in the Spanish language to show for the considerable expenditure of time

and money involved. In Sweden, in Borneo, in Madagascar, or in Brazil the reward would have been comparable.

Our Canadian colleagues seem to be discovering that the Arctic regions offer another accessible yet new and challenging environment which sharpens and intensifies their focus. I do not think that it is mere chance that some of the best regional writing on North America has been done by foreigners such as Bauling, Bartz, DeGeer, and Schmieder, nor that some of our own members have done such effective interpretations in Europe, in Mexico, in New Zealand, or the Orient. The stimulus of the new landscape, and the unfamiliar culture, cannot but sharpen the perception of the acute observer; it may go a long way toward explaining why so much of our really enduring geographic literature has been by "scientific travelers," from Peter Kalm, Arthur Young, Humboldt, Wallace, and Darwin to the reconnaissances of Sven Hedin, von Richthofen, Pendleton, Sauer, or Robert Cushman Murphy.

Geography, no more than any other academic discipline, can expect to long endure or command respect as a teaching field alone. In America, at least, this does not always seem to have been properly recognized. Do we really lack the curiosity, the ability to pose problems and to write effective prose that the scantiness of our published researches suggests? Professor Trewartha's stinging critique should be required reading for all who are complacent about the contents of the volume entitled *American Geography: Inventory and Prospect*. He writes:

"A discipline involves a special and particular segment of the whole field of knowledge and those who operate under the banner of any discipline have a dual responsibility which involves the creation as well as the imparting of knowledge. Teaching is not enough. It is required of us, also, that we discover new truths and offer new interpretations. This is research, and no discipline can be considered in a healthy state unless its members are both creators and teachers."¹

As Professor Trewartha disconsolately observes, we are in general operating with great success at teaching and administration, at text-book writing, at committee work, and at University "politicking," and in general leading energetic lives eagerly devoted to good works. Yet, as we beat the drums for the undeniably high educa-

¹Glenn Trewartha, "Some Thoughts on the Functions of the Regional Divisions," *The Professional Geographer*, Vol. 5, pp. 35-44 (1953).

tional values of geography to build up budgets and enrollments, our scholarly activities and thus our academic reputations suffer accordingly. If we are to defend our place of honor within the tradition of liberal learning we must pay more attention to the cultivation of the critical and exploratory spirit, concern ourselves more with additions to knowledge and become once more creative thinkers and intellectual pioneers. Such an association as this has a definite responsibility to further the attainment of such goals, to encourage expertness and depth in a field that has become increasingly characterized by shallowness. Only by charting such a course can we hope to attract the superior young students in whose hands we would like to see the fate of geography eventually rest.

But we shall be known by our works and saved by them alone. With this in mind I turn now to a summary of my current field and library research into the Geography of the English-speaking, Protestant Settlements of the Western Caribbean. It is not a problem, nor an area of any particular practical significance at the moment, nor did a desire to demonstrate any particular "field method" motivate my visit to the area. I went there for the old-fashioned reason that it interested and intrigued me and because it was one of those blank spots on the map and in the literature that seems never to have received much attention. What I found whetted my curiosity and has sent me scurrying back to the library for the answers to many questions which can only be found by the collation of field and documentary evidence....

It is in such out-of-the-way corners of the earth that some of the richest nuggets await the cultural geographer. We geographers may have a tendency towards preoccupations with our own familiar culture, landscape, and the urgent problems of the moment. There is an antidote for this, I think, in the tropics, in the arctic, in every foreign land and unfamiliar landscape for those who, to borrow a phrase from John Leighly, would look at the land, the sea and the sky with questioning eyes seeking understanding. It is, I submit, worthwhile and revealing to get off the beaten track, seek out the forgotten, inaccessible peoples and cultures. If one is concerned with perspective in the understanding of cultural processes, and with historical geography, the value of such experience can hardly be exaggerated. And, perhaps most important of all, it is often an exciting adventure, both physically and intellectually, of the very sort that originally endeared geography to so many of us, but which somehow in the course of years, we have failed to take advantage of as we had originally intended.

3

Geography as Exploration and Discovery*

We geographers are an unlikely lot. At times the one common denominator among us seems to be that we call ourselves "geographers," with little consideration as to what that grand word really means. Yet we do have shared values and a common, almost mystic, bond--our curiosity about this planet and the human experience on it--ways of looking at the world that seem to us both unique and worthwhile. Best of all, we are busy doing things that we like to do.

I am among the privileged ones in this fragmented company who find fascination above all in places and people and the interplay between them. In my undergraduate days "geography" never occurred to us, either as a major or a career. As with so many of us, my conversion was due to a chance encounter with a professor who had charisma, wisdom, and a profound "geographical sense." The geography that has most appealed to me has been a kind of historically based "landscape appreciation," and I confess a certain uneasiness with the current compulsion for precision of analysis, the often sterile straining for statistical content and significance.

Geography, so magnificently interdisciplinary, seems an ideal vehicle for the joining of hands of science and humanism, including the taking of moral positions on environmental and spatial issues. This world, after all, is seriously out of balance with regards to production and consumption of food and raw materials, environments are deteriorating, resources and opportunities are unevenly available.

*Excerpted (pp. 1-3, 14-16) from *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 67, pp. 1-25 (1977). Only the introduction and conclusion are included here. Presidential Address delivered at the 72nd Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers, New York, April 13, 1976.

As students of the relations between nature and culture we are asking surprisingly few of the really critical questions. How have things gotten this way? Can we possibly use the planet's resources at this rate without using them up, without fouling our nest beyond reclaim? What kind of a jaycock world is it where annual expenditures for armaments is equal to the entire income of the poorer half of mankind? How long can this and the idiot idea of unending growth, this unquenchable thirst for material goods, be sustained? World population has increased from three to four billion since the A.A.G. met in Dallas just 15 years ago. More people need more food, more energy, more of everything.

Busied elsewhere, we geographers have too largely left to others, and perhaps especially the biologists, the task of exploring the man-nature relationship and facing up to the consequences of the materialistic philosophy with which we have infected so much of the world. Among the more relevant, the most rewarding, of the approaches to our subject, if it is to be a living force, would seem to be the ecological perspective, which is really the long view, from the distant past, into the twentieth century and beyond. It focuses on the earth as the home of man and our responsibilities for the maintenance of its diversity and productivity. We are still an earth science as surely as *geo* is Greek for "earth," yet much of what is being passed off as geography today is simply the study of man, of society, without serious regard for place or time.

The Attractions of Geography

Many of us are in geography because it involves using our eyes, and for the latitude it allows for wonderment at the world around us, for travel and exploration, for knowing in some depth at least one people and environment other than our own. The excitement of distant places, a colorful map, or the sound of certain place names may first have excited our geographical instincts. In my own case I suspect it was those memorable transcontinental auto trips in high school and college days when considerable stretches of even the Lincoln Highway and Route 66 were still gravel and when gasoline was ten cents a gallon, and even less in East Texas. Or it may have been that stamp collection. I still recall those brightly colored Tanganyikas, with their graceful giraffes browsing on the savanna trees, the caribou on that set from Newfoundland, and our own Columbian Exposition commemoratives of 1892. Whatever the original stimuli, it took. One hopes that at least some of our present recruits are still coming into geography through this door.

Having started out as a newspaperman, I still find myself looking at the world in much the same way that I did as a young reporter on the Mendicino County *Redwood Journal*. The linkage between journalism and geography--at least the geography that interests me, based on observation, conservation and digging through the records leading to a story hopefully expressed with clarity and simplicity--is something that is not properly appreciated. Indeed, geography in one sense may be seen as basically a higher form of journalism. Like Bernal Díaz we could well ask if our best hope for immortality might not be that "we wrote the truth and were never dull." We have an unmatched entrée to our supporting public in the naturally given interest of students of all ages in the wonders of the world about us. It would be sad if geography should permit itself to become identified principally as a discipline that can provide techniques and mechanics of control and manipulation for urban, regional, and environmental management. Ours is a major opportunity that transcends mere method. The faculties of description and evaluation are those most in need of cultivation if we are to interpret the relationships of land and life and better illuminate the esthetic qualities of landscapes so that men may live more wisely and happily.

My own focus within geography has come to be the tropical world, especially the American tropics, and, because I live where I do, areas of summer-dry Mediterranean climates. I have come to be impressed, in both life zones, with the significance of vegetation and, in the face of increasing human disturbance, the dynamics of vegetation succession. It is the plant cover, more than anything else, that gives character to the land, to what we see and sense. Vegetation, with its associated wild fauna, is not only a rewarding field for study for its own sake but it also provides an incomparable and sensitive ecologic indicator of the state of the environment, its equilibrium, its productivity, and its potential for supplying human needs, whether for food, industrial raw materials, or simply as wildland to be appreciated and perhaps preserved.

In considering a topic for this occasion, accordingly, I have been strongly drawn to a long held interest, that of the process and consequences of tropical forest destruction, especially the conversion of forest to artificial pasture in Latin America. From here it would have been a short step to the world protein problem, the question of the food producing potential of the earth and especially of the warmer lower latitudes where most of the remaining land reserve lies.

Alternatively, the bicentennial year of the nation seemed to suggest something relating to the American experience, perhaps our