ABSTRACT

As Kenzer (2001) has noted, “unlike practitioners in other academic fields, when it comes to the intellectual history of our discipline, geographers love to dabble.” However, examining this dabbling has normally been restricted to examining the contributions of faculty in Ph.D.-granting departments. Indeed, our discipline’s history is rich, but written accounts are incomplete, for the voices of geographers serving in undergraduate programs at colleges and universities of little prestige have for the most part been silent. These programs are housed in institutions that are home to the vast majority of academic geographers, many of whom toil relentlessly in the trenches of academe, teaching large classes of often underprepared undergraduates, mentoring promising students, performing considerable institutional committee work, and engaging in research. They are the backbone of American geography. Leon Yacher is one of them, and this is his story. Hopefully, this piece will spark others to write about mentors and colleagues, creating a more complete history of the geographic discipline.

Key Words: history of geography, mentoring, undergraduate education

INTRODUCTION

It was the Summer of 2011, and I found myself engaging in fieldwork in southern Mexico. Pleasantly surprised with my Blackberry’s reception along the Usumacinta River meandering along the edge of Chiapas, I noticed an e-mail had arrived from an esteemed colleague at the University of Oregon, Susan Hardwick. She asked me to speak at the National Conference on Geographic Education in a special session devoted to Leon Yacher of Southern Connecticut State University, a recipient of the Distinguished Mentor Award. So it was for that reason I found myself in Portland a few weeks later talking before an
audience that included Past Presidents of the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE), Association of American Geographers (AAG), and Gamma Theta Upsilon (GTU).

Yacher was in many ways an unusual candidate for the award. His scholarship often addressed matters that others normally left unexplored, and he had engaged in fieldwork in many countries at a level that was matched by only a few academic geographers. Moreover, unlike all but a fifth of those honored as Distinguished Mentors before him, he was not on the faculty of a Geography doctoral program. He spent nearly his entire academic career in a relatively ordinary public higher education institution devoted principally to undergraduate studies — the type of academic institution that is home to the majority of American Geography programs, and also the type of institution that has been home to all but two Gamma Theta Upsilon presidents of the past 50 years. It is striking that prior to 2011, of the 66 NCGE Distinguished Mentor Awardees, 54 were affiliated with doctoral programs, 8 served as faculty in departments that awarded master’s degrees, and only 4 served in programs solely devoted to undergraduate studies. Clearly, faculty in doctoral programs are disproportionately represented on the list of those awarded with distinction by the NCGE and AAG, for of the 494 American geography programs recognized by the American Association of Geographers (2016), only 61 actually offer a geography Ph.D.; an additional 18 collaborate with other disciplines in the award of doctorates in related fields, and just 48 Ph.D. programs reported doctoral dissertations having been completed. In essence, 85% of geography programs do not award the doctorate, and it is the programs that are largely devoted to undergraduate studies that house the majority of academic geographers. Leon Yacher in many ways has exemplified the majority of geographers in higher education, and like him, their stories should also be told. Fortunately, as Kenzer (2001) has noted, “Unlike practitioners in other academic fields, when it comes to the intellectual history of our discipline, geographers love to dabble.” However, examining this dabbling has normally been restricted to examining the contributions of faculty in Ph.D.-granting departments. Certainly, our discipline’s history is rich; but written accounts are incomplete, for along with a marked absence of attention directed toward women in geography (DeVivo 2016b), the voice of geographers serving in colleges and universities of little prestige has for the most part been silent. Selected Ph.D. programs are investigated in books devoted to explorations of our discipline’s past (DeVivo 2015; Johnston & Sidaway 2016; Martin 2005); but with the exception of widely scattered unpublished departmental histories, the history of undergraduate programs in geography, and their faculty, is largely unexamined.

Of late, undergraduate programs have drawn considerable interest among those in our discipline’s leadership, for these are the training grounds for many in our field. In 2016, an undergraduate teaching award was established in memory of Harm de Blij, and in a recent article in the AAG Newsletter, the association’s president, Sarah Bednarz, commented, “I believe we need to pay careful attention to undergraduate education in geography to strengthen our research base and to make the case to students, their parents, administrators, and others that geography is a worthwhile investment, financially and intellectually” (Bednarz 2015).

It is important to realize that 67% of the 494 geography programs in the United States listed by the American Association of Geographers are exclusively devoted to undergraduate education, whereas only 18% award the doctorate and another 15% award master’s degrees (American Association of Geographers 2016). Much of the geographic discipline’s history remains missing, given that two thirds of undergraduate programs are unaffiliated with graduate programs,
and the stories of professors filling these vital roles remain to be told.

Certainly, this neglected part of the history of geography needs to be addressed for a sound understanding of our discipline’s past. Hopefully, this piece will spark others to film and write about colleagues and mentors who should not only be recognized for their efforts and achievements, but also for the purpose of creating a more complete history of the geographic discipline. This can be done today with a minimum of expense, and one way is through recording oral histories, which can be made available rather easily on the internet (DeVivo 2016a).

Inspired by Geographers on Film, the Conversation with a Geographer series was founded in 2011 at Grand Rapids Community College (2015) with the intention of not only contributing to our discipline’s history, but also to examine the roles played by various mentors and leaders. These interviews have been incorporated in classroom instruction at the college, and they have proven to be pedagogically useful. Leon Yacher’s interview (DeVivo 2013) is among those that has fostered self-reflection and inspired undergraduates to pursue their dreams. One aspiring geographer in my class commented, Leon Yacher is fascinating! One of my favorite geographers you’ve introduced so far. His endless fascination with all things geographic makes him endlessly fascinating. In so many ways his story of becoming a geographer reminds me so much of myself. I could only hope to ever be so eloquent.

The Yacher interview is among those that reveal much about the value of geography and the character of geographers. Another student remarked,

Although Yacher himself is a very interesting man, what struck me the most about him is that he is very humble. He has published many different papers and is a huge success in his field and in academia in general, but he says that he is unsure of his success. He says it, meaning his success, is up to other people to decide. And when others give him feedback, it gives him a better understanding of himself. For nearly the rest of his interview, Yacher praised other renowned geographers and cartographers, stating all that he has gained from them in education and knowledge. It is amazing to me that such a successful man still humbles himself before others and their work, taking in all that he can to improve himself. What a wonderful characteristic to have in one’s personality.

Certainly, humility is an attractive, but all too often, uncommon attribute among many in academic environments. In the case of Leon, his scholarship, though stellar, often was not known. It is striking that six years ago, immediately after my presentation in Portland, Gamma Theta Upsilon Past President Howard Johnson commented, “I’ve known him for years. I shared rooms with him at conferences. I had no idea he had done all this. … What humility!” Indeed, it is worth noting that the haughty are not good leaders in academe, whereas those marked by inspiration, integrity, selflessness, scholarship, and proaction tend to make the most significant impacts (DeVivo 2015); Leon Yacher is among those in academe today marked by these traits. Although he and I did not meet until 1983, what follows is my account of his role as an academic geographer over the course of more than 40 years.

“GEOGRAPHY? WHAT THE HELL IS THAT ALL ABOUT?”

In 1983, I walked into the Geography Department at Southern Connecticut State University in New Haven. I had completed military service with the Marines and the Navy and had spent time at sea as a Merchant Marine Officer. Through an act of the Connecticut legislature, my status as a veteran
during a particular time of conflict enabled me to pursue studies at a public university tuition-free, and this meant G.I. Bill benefits would only need to be used for living expenses. Realizing that it was a good idea for me to hold an academic degree of some sort, I picked up a catalog of the institution, thumbed through it, and noticed an entry under “Geography.”

“What the hell is that all about?” I asked myself, and then I looked at the course descriptions. Examining the relationships between people and the environment seemed like a perfect fit for me. I was going to be a geographer. The department included a half-dozen faculty, among them Geoffrey Martin and Martin Glassner, both notable scholars: One, Martin, was the leading authority in the history of geographic thought and the other, Glassner, was a non-governmental officer to the United Nations and expert in land-locked states and the law of the sea. Another fellow, a young assistant professor not yet with tenure, rounded out the more serious faculty. He too had made a solid contribution to geographical scholarship through research and publication. Yet, his role in the department also included a disproportionate share of student advising, institutional committee work, and community service. His name was Leon Yacher.

In a climate of institutional political unrest, marked by strong personalities that at times were driven more by self-interest than the interests of the institution, department, or students, Leon worked tirelessly to elevate the status of the geographic discipline. Spending many hours each week as the department’s representative on a number of institutional committees, ranging from setting the curriculum to determining library acquisitions, Leon worked diligently behind the scenes to enhance Geography at Southern. Students were impressed that Leon was interviewed on television and the radio about the purpose of geography, as well as by the science editor of the New Haven Register — and that he wrote opinion pieces in various newspapers and offered lectures and workshops at public schools throughout Connecticut. They were also impressed by his scholarship, noting that the maps produced in a political geography textbook used in a course offered at Southern were drafted by him (DeBlij & Glassner 1981). Leon’s role as a mentor was significant. He assisted students in gaining assistantships and fellowships for graduate studies at several different institutions. Some went on to work for government agencies in transportation, planning, mapping, and the intelligence community, while others acquired positions as K-12 teachers and academic geographers in higher education. A few of us that studied at Southern, but at different times, would rendezvous at annual meetings of the NCGE and the AAG, led by Leon on field trips to examine ordinary landscapes. Boston’s Chinatown, San Antonio’s barrios, and Lexington’s urban form, for example, were explored, discussed, and enjoyed. Unfortunately, the untimely death in 2002 of one of our colleagues, Mark Keeney, reduced our numbers. Some of us went on to participate in conferences abroad, where we engaged in similar forays on our own, maintaining frequent contact with Leon, who himself travelled frequently enough engaging in geographical study to warrant not only one, but two supplements to his passport for a collection of visa stamps that was expanding. Leon’s fieldwork abroad held depth and breadth, for he made it a point to spend ample time in out-of-the way places and converse with local residents. This was noted by students. After viewing his Conversation with a Geographer interview, a number of them commented on Leon’s desire to become familiar with a place by going off the beaten path and talking with the residents of a city. One commented: “I think that it is very fascinating that Yacher makes it a priority to talk to a local of each city and ask them...
what it is like to live there. Doing that is the best way to get to know a city and know the true aspects and details that are hiding behinds its name.”

Leon’s stellar fieldwork was also recognized by colleagues in the discipline. At the 2006 National Conference on Geographic Education, I recall Harm de Blij speaking to a group of geographers in a session on the value of Leon’s fieldwork in Central Asia, as it was a rare contribution that lent deep insight into an understanding of the region. The elder scholar, whose record of trekking across the globe was rarely, if ever, matched, also lamented that among geographers this kind of fieldwork had far too often become a thing of the past; his praise of Leon was noteworthy.

AN IMMIGRANT FROM THE ANDES IN A CONNECTICUT DELI

What sparks the passion for this kind of fieldwork among geographers is a matter of conjecture, and where it began with Leon is open to speculation as well. Born in Peru to Rumanian Jewish immigrants, Leon learned at an early age about the challenges of growing up as a member of a minority population, and his talent in soccer served him in good stead as he gained respect on the ball field as the only non-Mestizo and non-Catholic player in his downtown Lima neighborhood. His father, a peddler, traded in animal skins for several years, and Leon would frequently join him on his journeys into the Andean hinterland, as he engaged in the purchase of cattle hides from slaughterhouses scattered along a loosely connected network of trails and roads. Fitting as many as possible in a DeSoto pickup, some of the cowhide would be sold to a number of factories in Lima; but most was sold to be made into handbags for Bata, an Italian company that manufactured shoes and fashion accessories.

In 1964, a month after his mother had left Peru to reside in the U.S., Leon left Lima in what was intended to be a short vacation to see the World’s Fair in New York. Instead, he found himself remaining in America as a young immigrant teenager. Throughout his high school years in western Connecticut, he studied a general education curriculum, played basketball with future professional athletes, and ventured into New York City, not realizing at the time he was actually exploring its urban geography. This was a period marked by the Vietnam War and racial unrest, and Leon, having experienced minority status growing up in Peru, developed closely-knit friendships with African-Americans who at times exhibited their frustrations about poverty and civil rights through rioting and violence (DeVivo 2013).

Also while in high school, Leon took on minimum wage part time work at a five and ten store, as well as in a dental lab making false teeth. Neither of these fields interested him as viable career options, and when he talked with his guidance counselor, she recommended he become a plumber because he had long arms. Leon, not inclined to devote his life to unclogging toilets and fixing sinks, decided to continue his education at Norwalk Community College. He also took a job in a deli serving many residents of the region, including the rich and famous that lived in Connecticut’s more affluent suburbs. Leon prepared sandwiches for Walter Cronkite and Dan Rather, and at one point, he delivered a large order to the Chambers Brothers, a soul group known for their 1968 hit, “Time Has Come Today.” In any event, although he was on the verge of mastering the recipe for the perfect blend of pastrami, chopped liver, and onion on rye, following completion of an associate’s degree, Leon ventured west to Albuquerque and found himself captivated by the teaching of Alec Murphy’s father.

RICHARD MURPHY, NEW MEXICO, AND SYRACUSE

Richard Murphy who played a major role in the development of the University of New Mexico Department of Geography engaged in research devoted to the geography of national forests, landform mapping (Murphy
1968), and geographic education, and he served as Leon Yacher’s mentor. Murphy was largely responsible for creating an independent Geography Department and developing the graduate program. Today, the department recognizes his contributions by hosting the Richard Murphy Memorial Lecture.

It was under the guidance of Murphy that Leon chose Geography as a career. At one point, fascinated by the study of landforms, Leon wrote to a former faculty member who had specialized in geomorphology, for he was seeking references on pediments for a term paper that he was writing. Yi-Fu Tuan kindly wrote back to Leon with a number of his works and indicated to him that he was no longer engaging in that type of research. Yet later, when Leon picked up a copy of *Topophilia*, he was mesmerized by Tuan’s (1974) new research focus, and he directed his attention away from the study of landforms.\(^\text{10}\) Nonetheless, soon thereafter, Leon completed one of the few Geography master’s theses at New Mexico at the time (1974), and he accepted a fellowship for doctoral work at Syracuse University, where he conducted substantial research devoted to marriage migration in colonial Michoacán (1977).\(^\text{11}\) Much of this work later was incorporated in a historical geographical study published by his advisor at Syracuse, David Robinson (1989).

Regardless, Leon learned much at Syracuse, and after serving in a temporary appointment at SUNY-Oswego, he pursued a permanent faculty position. He was offered two positions: one in California and one in Connecticut. He chose to take an appointment at Southern Connecticut, which charged him with developing the cartography program in a newly autonomous geography department.

**TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN CARTOGRAPHY AT SOUTHERN CONNECTICUT**

At Southern, students considered Leon quite a taskmaster. This was still during an era of pen-and-ink cartography, and because the CIA and USGS allowed only 1/40" of an inch of error, Leon would allow only a 1/40" of an inch of error in the drafting of maps. Courses were highly comprehensive. I recall the introductory cartography course requiring advanced readings in the history of cartography by Woodward (1975), analysis of a variety of aerial photographs, and five-page papers for each of the ten maps produced. Students would congregate in the cartography lab, working on their maps, carefully – ever so carefully – etching ink on to Mylar, satisfied with their work, only to see Leon walk by, glance and note a number of errors, which would then compel several of us to discard the pieces of work we had just completed, and begin again. Yet, the students that took Leon’s highly demanding cartography courses found themselves employable, and many achieved high levels of success in applied geography, especially with government agencies that Leon had developed a network of close and reliable contacts, ready to take on Southern’s geography majors that received Leon’s endorsement. Students realized this, and they also became impressed with Leon’s (1981) article in the *Journal of Geography* devoted to interpreting a remote sensing image of New Haven, for they saw its relevance to their own prospective careers.\(^\text{12}\)

The cartography lab served as a de facto forum, and much of the reason was because of Leon’s approachability. Students wandered in to talk, to listen, to learn, to work on their maps, or perhaps simply to eat pizza and drink soft drinks that Leon had graciously provided.

Students found Leon’s massive array of hand-drawn maps in DeBlij & Glassner’s (1981) *Systematic Political Geography* textbook impressive. Especially striking was a new polar projection depicting a more realistic view of the geopolitical world during the Cold War, which showed the U.S. and her participant treaty organizations, such as NATO and SEATO, in contrast to the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. Unlike the Mercator projection, which distorted the size of the USSR and had been employed by the Pentagon in efforts to gain funding
from Congress, Yacher’s polar projection essentially displayed the Warsaw Pact countries surrounded by U.S. alliances. This prompted many discussions on how maps have been employed to manipulate the presentation of information. Especially in cartography, Leon demonstrated that sound map design facilitated interpretation, a skill that enhances the employability of geography graduates.

In essence, with Leon’s mentorship and inspiration, students found themselves well-prepared to begin careers as geographers, cartographers, and planners, as well as go on to graduate school. It is important to note that the students at Southern tended to work not just part-time, but full-time in order to complete their studies. This, of course, created problems for many who had difficulty achieving academic progress. It is fair to say that Leon worked diligently, without compromising academic standards, to assist students across a broad socio-economic spectrum in achieving degrees and becoming employed in the field.

RESEARCH IN THE HISTORY OF GEOGRAPHY

Leon’s passion for cartography (and proximity to Massachusetts) led him to pursue research in the life and thought of Erwin Raisz. Although Raisz had died, Leon was able to conduct interviews with his son to learn about the famous cartographer’s life and thought. Raisz had an enormous talent for crafting maps, and his landforms map of the United States was to a large extent based on his own fieldwork. Leon’s research revealed that at Harvard, custodians refused to erase his maps on the blackboard because they were works of art. Raisz was indeed gifted. He flew in airplanes looking out the window and drafting maps at the same time. Leon was convinced that this was a story that had to be told, for Raisz was certainly the father of American cartography. Even Arthur Robinson was compelled to use Raisz’s cartography textbook before he wrote one himself.

Geoffrey Martin, the dean of scholarship in the history of geographic thought, commented on the importance Leon’s (1982) publication on Raisz had on the history of American geographic thought. Martin frequently shared accounts of the history of geography with his colleagues and students. Some of this was published and some of this was reserved for his magnum opus, which was only recently published (2015). Martin left himself open for extended talks about not only material he had discovered while engaging in archival research, such as the matter of Ellsworth Huntington’s non-dissertation Ph.D. “dissertation,” but also his interviews with contemporaries about problems plaguing geography and the demise of individual departments, such as the ones at Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Michigan. To those of us who cared to listen, we learned much as Martin revealed to us in private conversations about the shaping of academic geography in America. For sure, through frequent dialogues, as well his publications, Geoffrey Martin influenced Leon (and others, including me) in carrying out research devoted to the history of geography. With his interest in geographic thought piqued, Leon went on to conduct research in the lives of geographers Raimondi, Tamayo, Rubio, Romero, and Pittier – luminaries in Latin America, but virtually unknown in the United States.

This research has been a valuable contribution to the discipline. Kent Mathewson astutely commented that a Eurocentric or Euro-North American perspective has colored a misperception of Latin American geography, and he asserted, “Yacher demonstrates that geography’s most fundamentally understood and best appreciated attribute – that it is the science of discovery--can be exercised within its own precincts. Here Yacher has performed an act of discovery, or at least, recovery, of … Latin American geography’s foundational figures” (Yacher 2004, xi-xii).

In essence, Leon has sought to explain the history of our discipline in Latin America, and also extend recognition to the heretofore-unknown leaders that established geography as an important field of study in the region.
This is a formidable task, but one that must be done to correct misconceptions and errors, and provide an accurate record of the discipline in a region where geography has played a significant role. One student, deeply impressed with his research, remarked: “Researching Pittier took him to 55 different archives in more than 15 countries, chasing detail and finding things that were different than previously reported. He speaks about him with such amazement and passion; you can really tell he enjoyed this project immensely.”

It should be noted that Leon conducted this research while advising large numbers of students, teaching heavy course loads, leading field trips, and serving as an officer in a number of geographical organizations. Moreover, he helped others who were not his own students in academe and government in the U.S. and abroad with their own research, often offering valuable guidance.

**GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH ACROSS THE GLOBE**

In essence, through his work on the Hungarian-born father of American cartography and the Latin American luminaries, Leon contributed much to the history of geographic thought. Yet, his research spanned several different fields and clearly showed a high level of eclectic interests. For example, in Connecticut, he examined the historical geography of New Haven’s African-American community as well as more recent changes in the state’s ethnic geography (Yacher 2009). Collaborating with colleagues over the course of more than 20 years in biogeographical research, initially funded by the National Geographic Society, Leon found himself trekking across some of the same routes he had traveled with his father in the Andes years ago. This fieldwork resulted in the discovery of new species of the *Jaltomata* plant, numerous reports of which were published in the journal of the Missouri Botanical Garden and the journal of the New York Botanical Garden, as well as several other journals in two languages in two countries (Mione, Leiva, & Yacher 2000; 2004; 2005; 2007; 2008; 2013; 2015; Mione, Leiva, Yacher & Cameron 2011; Leiva, Mione & Yacher 2007a; 2007b; 2008; 2010; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2015a; 2015b; Leiva, Mione, Yacher & Silvestre 2010). Leon also conducted research with a colleague in ornithology devoted to one of the rarest birds in the world, which occupied the cloud forests of the Peruvian Andes (Smith & Yacher 2008).

Leon continued to expand his research horizons following award of a Fulbright fellowship to the Kyrgyz Republic in 2003, and he became one of only a few geographers that developed regional expertise in Central Asia, and the only one to have consistently engaged in fieldwork throughout the region for more than a decade. His work, for example, on the phenomenal growth experienced by Astana, Kazakhstan is at this time one of the few pieces of research published in English on urbanization in Central Asia, as Leon has engaged in a quest to unravel the mystery of the current urban morphology and character that typifies the region’s formerly Soviet cities (Yacher 2011). This can be especially challenging in a region where deceit is often a way of life; for example, in Turkmenistan, government leaders have endorsed changes in school curricula, a rewriting of history, and new traditions that foster isolationism and denude intellectual growth (Stone 2008). Richard Stone (2008), a staff writer for *Science*, asked Leon to elaborate on the problem and discuss its implications for an article on the impact of a new water resource management scheme proposed by the Turkmen government; he did so, and his comments became a very important part of the publication, as they demonstrated the value of laborious geographical fieldwork to the entire scientific community.

This sort of fieldwork and qualitative research has also resulted in some profound insight concerning journalism in post-Soviet-era societies. With Joseph Manzella (2005), he worked to trace the transition of Kyrgyzstan’s media from a purely government-
controlled enterprise to one that will hopefully take on the task of being a “watchdog.” Leon’s public lectures on the subject also have attracted large crowds and received favorable reviews. Incidentally, his later work with Manzella (2010) on the impacts of the Chavez government’s quest to neutralize the press also resulted from substantive fieldwork in Venezuela and Cuba.\(^\text{13}\)

In any event, Leon also has found time to engage in fieldwork in regions that have remained virtually unexplored by geographers for decades (Figure 1). For example, a few years ago, I was conducting research in Fiji, and Leon, coincidentally, happened to be exploring a number of Pacific Islands himself.\(^\text{14}\) Our unplanned crossing of paths resulted in a collaboration in fieldwork, and we discussed some of the characteristics that were similar and different on the islands. Leon had been in the Solomon Islands for some time. The Solomons were a place of notable strategic importance during the Second World War, but have largely been ignored by scholars since. No scholarly works in geography have been written on the Solomons in English since the 1950s, and Leon’s fieldwork offered deep insight into the cultural landscape of the islands.

Leon created photo essays of parts of the world, which proved to be valuable as well. These are the types of things that he assembled for publication in the American Geographical Society’s periodical, *Focus*. Unlike the typical scholarly article that relied much on previously conducted research in a literature review, Leon’s (2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2008; 2009b; 2010) photo essays of Palau, Senegal, Venezuela, Panama, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan were original pieces derived solely from geographical fieldwork and supported by illustrations in the form of photographs. The intention was to provide glimpses of ordinary landscapes in faraway places with strange sounding names that would appeal to both academic geographers and a readership beyond the academic geographical community.

![Figure 1. Leon Yacher conducting fieldwork among the Himba in Namibia’s Kaokoland.](image)
REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

As I reflect upon these matters, I ponder my own research in the history of geography vis-à-vis leadership in the discipline, and I look at the research conducted by Leon Yacher as being reminiscent of the things that were done in an earlier era when it was only through direct field observation that geographical knowledge could be attained about the faces that made up many faraway places. As I consider luminaries that served our discipline, I think of those that did not have a strong following of graduate students behind them. The notable Central Asia scholar that wrote for American Geographical Society publications, Owen Lattimore, was one of them. Mark Jefferson at the Normal School in Ypsilanti, who contributed much to geographical research, served geographical societies in a number of capacities, taught heavy teaching loads, and mentored students that later went on to pursue graduate studies and careers in geography, was another. Like Leon, he fueled a passion in students about geographical study in an institution principally dedicated to its teaching mission.

Here, it is relevant to remark on the cultural shift in American higher education that has occurred over the last three decades. The increased expectations in scholarship that characterize most public institutions have not gone unnoticed in those colleges and universities that were for many years exclusively devoted to teaching. In the 1970s and 1980s, research and publication were often not only unnecessary, but also discouraged. This was the case at Southern until the beginning of the 21st century. It was unusual for any member of the faculty to list one publication, let alone several, since heavy teaching loads made it very difficult for professors to conduct scholarly research. In reference to his colleagues at Southern and peer institutions across the U.S., Leon’s record is praiseworthy, and it demonstrates his leadership skills in urging others to engage in academic research. 

Leon encouraged faculty at Southern and elsewhere to demonstrate evidence of academic scholarship. A desire to elevate others to higher levels, little tolerance for mediocrity, and the pursuit of excellence characterize transformational leaders, along with a willingness to ask difficult questions as well as a willingness to confront difficult situations and difficult people in times of conflict (DeVivo 2015). These too are traits that have characterized Leon. In essence, Leon Yacher has practiced transformational leadership not only in his role as department chairman, advisor, and professor, but also in his many duties while serving geographical societies such as the AAG, NESTVAL, and GTU.

Sometimes we ponder our lives as academic geographers and wonder about the impacts we’ve made; but as one reflects upon Leon Yacher, it is easily seen that he served as an ambassador for the discipline in many ways for more than three decades and worked tirelessly as a mentor far beyond the classroom. What is especially striking is that Leon accomplished all of these things and more, for he engaged in not only effective teaching and mentoring, but also solid scholarship, without the benefit of being affiliated with a large graduate program. Spending nearly his entire academic career at a largely undergraduate institution that offered little support in terms of secretarial assistance and research funding, and demanding much in terms of teaching, scholarship, and community service, one must wonder how effective Leon would have been if he had been part of a graduate program.

Indeed, this same question can be raised in reference to other academic geographers that have devoted their entire careers to practicing their craft in predominantly undergraduate programs. This is the type of institution that is home to the majority of academic geography departments in the United States, and this is the type of institution that has served as the home to the majority of GTU Presidents for more than eight decades.

Maybe this work can be the first glimpse of a GTU Past President’s life and thought
published in the *Geographical Bulletin*. The stories of several others should be written about as well, and together these can make up a series in this journal, which will become significant contributions to the history of geography. For sure, there is a need to chronicle the careers of academic geographers whose home is in programs exclusively devoted to the education of undergraduates. Regardless, let this account of Leon Yacher be the first of several to come.

NOTES

1. Leon Yacher was awarded the A.A. from Norwalk Community College, B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of New Mexico, and the Ph.D. from Syracuse University.


3. Martin's (1968) work on Mark Jefferson, who spearheaded the geography program at the normal school in Ypsilanti decades ago when only a handful of Ph.D. programs were in existence, is an exception.

4. Donald Zeigler of Old Dominion University, a Past President of Gamma Theta Upsilon, received the first award.


6. Created by the late Wes Dow, our discipline's oral historian, *par excellence*, *Geographers on Film* included filmed interviews of more than 300 geographers (Martin 2013).

7. Leon also served as the director of the graduate program in Urban Studies, supervised master's theses, and helped to hire faculty, a number of whom he continues to mentor. He also designed a new curriculum in liberal studies, which became one of the most popular majors on Southern's campus. It's little wonder he received a number of honors and awards from Southern Connecticut State University, as well as societies devoted to academic geography.


9. Although Leon's stay in the U.S. has continued to the present day, he frequently returned to the country of his birth, developing an academic interest in this part of South America, as well as Latin America in general. His (1987; 1989) publications on demography in the country of his birth offered much insight concerning regional migration patterns, and collaborative fieldwork in biogeography (e.g., Mione, Leiva, G., & Yacher 2000; 2005) resulted in the discovery of new plants in the Andes.

10. Incidentally, it was Leon who steered me to *Topophilia* as an undergraduate, which intrigued me to no end, and later I also wrote to Tuan asking for references to which he also responded. It is interesting that merely a brief response from a luminary that at the time had amassed a hundred and twenty some odd publications meant so much, and still does to this day.

11. Leon presented papers on the subject at regional meetings of the Association of American Geographers, which were


13. Leon also interviewed the editor-in-chief of Cuba’s official government newspaper.

14. More recent collaborative fieldwork has occurred in southern Africa, where Leon also has engaged in the photography of both natural and cultural landscapes (and, as seen in Figure 1, has been photographed interviewing indigenous people as well).

15. Yacher’s scholarship to date has been evidenced by the publication of a book, a monograph, and more than fifty articles and chapters in books; he has also presented numerous papers at academic conferences across the globe.

16. Bass (1985) asserted that a transformational leader “motivates us to do more than we originally expected to do” (20). Transformational leadership is considered a superior form of leadership behavior (DeVivo 2015).

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