BOB SAYRE RETIRES

Bob Sayre retired this spring after 53 years at Iowa. A symposium being planned in his honor for next spring will invite scholars to speak on all four of his major areas of research interest: American autobiography, Native American literature, Thoreau, and the prairie landscape. Sidonie Smith, Hertha Wong, and William Howarth have confirmed that they will take part.

A Wesleyan graduate and Yale PhD (1962), Bob came to Iowa after teaching for two years at the University of Illinois and for two more as a Fulbright Scholar in Sweden. While at Iowa, he taught in our Montpellier exchange in 1984 and at the University of Copenhagen in 1988-89.

Underlying his research, he says, has always been an urge “to try to find important subjects that had been ignored,” which is why he turned to autobiography in the early 1960s, when “everyone else was writing on the novel.” The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James (Princeton, 1964) was the first published study of American autobiography.

A few years later, Bob listened to Allen Ginsberg, here for a reading, tell of an anti-war rally in New York at which two Sioux speakers had been laughed at by a crowd that treated them as movie Indians. The irony, to Bob and others in the peace movement, was that “the Vietnam war was in many ways like another Indian war, with body counts, search and destroy missions, fortified hamlets (stockades), and other stunning similarities.” This started him wondering about autobiographies of Native Americans, and so to reading Black Elk Speaks. His essay on Black Elk in College English in 1971 led him to begin our course in American Indian Literature (one of the first in the country) and to his second book, Thoreau and the American Indians (Princeton, 1977), which was aided by a Guggenheim. He also assisted Hyemeyohsts (Chuck) Storm with Seven Arrows, which was published by Harper & Row in 1972 and initiated its series in American Indian writing. During the “farm crisis” of the 1980s, when there was a cry to increase tourism in Iowa, Bob wrote an op-ed piece in the Des Moines Register pointing out that no one had written an Iowa guidebook since the WPA Guide of the 1930s. The U of I Foundation then helped him get a small grant from the Maytag Family Foundation, with which he conceived, edited, and wrote part of Take This Exit (Iowa State, 1989), a collection of essays on the Iowa vernacular landscape. A sequel, Take the Next Exit, is planned for 2000.

Another project has been a book about his father, Harrison Sayre, who in 1928 founded My Weekly Reader. “It’s an incredibly difficult book to do,” Bob says, “because I keep being shocked by how alike him I am while trying to be unlike, but when I once asked him about founding the Weekly Reader he said that as a publisher he was always looking for ‘unmet needs,’ and I think I inherited some of that desire.”

Outside the classroom and study, Bob has worked on historic preservation, recreational trails, and prairie restoration. “I keep looking for ways to do in this poor, abandoned state of Iowa, where everyone says there is nothing to do. That’s our greatest unmet need today: a landscape we can love and love by playing in it... with wooded ski trails, wild open prairies, and clean swim-able rivers.

Bob is also Chair of the Advisory Board of the Aldo Leopold Center, at Iowa State, which makes grants of over $2 million a year to promote less chemically dependent, more sustainable agriculture.

His latest book, To Recover a Continent: New Prospects of the American Prairie, is coming out next year from the University of Wisconsin Press, which also published his recent anthology of American autobiography, American Lives. It contains papers from the symposium he directed in September 1996 in connection with the Museum of Art’s “Plain Pictures” exhibit. “Basically, he says, “it’s a look at the relationships between landscape aesthetics and the history, agriculture, and politics of the Middle West.”
John Gerber’s 90th Birthday

On Sunday, February 1, in the Gerber Lounge, many members of the department and of the community gathered to celebrate the 90th birthday of John Gerber who was our Chair from 1961-76. There was food and drink, a string quartet, and speeches of appreciation.

During his years as department head, John was instrumental in the founding of programs in comparative literature, linguistics, women’s studies, and African-American studies, as well as the International Writing Program, Translation Workshop, Windhover Press, and The Iowa Review. He’s the man who brought the MMLA to Iowa and who finally brought the English faculty, previously in ten different campus buildings, together under one roof.

Among the speakers that afternoon were Professors Miriam Gilbert, Carol de St. Victor, and Carl Klaus; three of the four Chairs who have succeeded Gerber, John Raeburn, Ed Folsom, and Dee Morris (Jix Lloyd-Jones, as chance would have it, was vacationing on the Caribbean); and from beyond the department, Sam Becker, a past provost, and a past president, Willard (“Sandy”) Boyd, both of whom had worked for years with John. John Harper served throughout the afternoon as a gracious and witty MC.

One of the more vivid memories of the many recounted was Carol de St. Victor’s. She had come to Iowa in the mid-sixties having just been let go by a college in New Jersey, during her first year there, because of having become pregnant. Now she was at Iowa, in her first year here, and pregnant again. She went in to “confess” to Gerber, and was understandably wary of doing so. But John thought just half a second before asking, “What would you like me to do?” “Give me a week off around its birth,” Carol replied.

Fundraising

Given that story, it won’t surprise you to learn that the party for Professor Gerber culminated with the announcement of a John Gerber Chair in English. An early mailing to former dissertation students and faculty colleagues of his has raised a third of the sum necessary. We encourage your support in this important goal. As you may read elsewhere in this letter, our program in 19th and 20th Century American Literature and Culture ranks 18th in the nation. A new Gerber Chair would solidify our standing, which could not be more appropriate since Gerber was for so long a leader in this very field.

Further Fundraising

With continuing decreases in state and federal support of higher education at a time when the need for financial flexibility has never been greater, our department must turn to private support to help make the difference between merely adequate educational offerings and those that maintain the higher standards for which Iowa has always been known.

In 1997 and again in 1998, the department has and will be contacting portions of our alumni body (there are more than 10,000 of you now, and we may not be able to afford to write to everyone!) to seek support for a number of departmental initiatives, all of which are possible only with private gifts. Those initiatives include:

1) Renovation of the Honors Suite (305 EPB), so that our Emeritus Professors (who use the suite as a mailroom, coffee room, and lounge) can interact more productively with our Honors students, many of whom benefit greatly from the mentoring and informal counsel that our experienced elders can provide. Even modest gifts of $50 or $100 can help pay for furnishings, a shared computer terminal, relevant journals and magazines and other amenities.

2) A Sherman Paul Award to be given annually to aid the research of students in American Literature and Culture, thus honoring one of our most distinguished professors, who died in May 1995. To create three meaningful awards each year, we must raise $25,000—think of that in terms of 50 gifts of $500 each, and it seems attainable (and worthy of Sherman’s memory).

3) Research and Travel Awards for MFA students in Nonfiction. Students in this popular degree program must complete 48 hours of graduate work and write a thesis. Nonfiction is a broad term, and each project requires special knowledge, some investigation, fact-finding, and study. A fund from which awards of a few hundred to a thousand dollars might be granted would significantly enhance the prospects of this new program and its students.

We are hopeful that one or more of these initiatives will capture both your imagination and your checkbook; see the form on the back page of this newsletter to make your contribution. Thank you.

WEBSITE

Do we have a website? Of course we have a website! Check out our departmental website, <http://www.uiowa.edu/-english/newhomepage/index.html>, from which you could click on to “Reading Matters,” our weekly newsletter, and follow that and much more of our day-to-day activities. You can link to the homepages of many of our faculty and even more students. You can read course descriptions and read some of what appears in The Iowa Review. There is more of course, for that is the way of websites. Come join in.
Undergraduate Rankings

The Gorman Report has released its ratings of Undergraduate Programs in English. We come in at number 20, above Texas-Austin, Virginia, Minnesota, Vanderbilt, Swarthmore, Dartmouth, Santa Barbara, and a string of other excellent institutions. The first ten programs are predictable (Yale, Berkeley, Harvard, Chicago, Stanford, Cornell, Princeton, Columbia, Hopkins, Penn). The close horse race is in the next ten: separated by only 0.15 points (on a scale of 5 to 0) are Brown, Indiana, Michigan, Irvine, Northwestern, Wisconsin-Madison, Rutgers, North Carolina, and Iowa.

Congratulations to Brooks Landon, Miriam Gilbert, and Teresa Mangum, our most recent undergraduate directors, and to all the others who labor hard and creatively to make our program one of the best in the country.

Jobs

What does one do with an English major, or with a graduate degree in English if one does not then teach? With the current job situation in colleges and universities being what it is, we need to know more about the kinds of work you have found. Both our undergraduate majors and our graduate students are hungry for ideas. Success stories, plant suggestions and we hope to create a file. If you have found interesting work that you could report, please write us and we will collect your stories. Email would be welcome, <david-hamilton@uiowa.edu>.

Graduate Rankings

The new US News and World Report ratings of PhD programs brings good news too. In English, Iowa ranks 26th, in a tie with NYU and California at Davis. Berkeley leads the pack and Michigan leads the Big Ten, coming in at 14th. We stand at the middle of the Big Ten, with only four tenths of a point separating us from Northwestern, Illinois, Wisconsin and Indiana. In our strongest specialty area, 19th and 20th Century American Literature and Culture, we are tied with Indiana, Illinois, and the University of Washington at 18th. While not sensational ratings these are worthy ones; we are in the thick of things. Nearly sixty universities were rated.

Iowa's greatest strength, of course, is in the creative arts. The Writers' Workshop was rated No. 1, with Johns Hopkins, Houston, Columbia, Virginia, and Michigan following. The Fine Arts MFA at Iowa ranks 6th, with another first going to its department of printmaking.

Distinguished Visiting Lecturer

Ed Folsom was invited by the University of Peking this year to give a series of lectures on Walt Whitman, American poetry, and American culture. The first complete Chinese translation by a single translator of Whitman's Leaves of Grass was published just three years ago in Beijing, and there is currently a significant amount of interest in Whitman in China. Ed was a guest at the University of Peking for ten days, during which he gave lectures, seminars, consulted with students, and, rumor has it, enjoyed the feasting.

Archival Treasures

While working on the second volume of the history of our department, John Harper located interesting material, including the following:

- When EPB was designed back in 1963-4, the University Architect's office distributed exterior sketches which showed the building almost exactly as it stands today. The only difference was that it was turned around 180 degrees on the site, so that 84 office windows looked out onto the railroad tracks and only a major stairway faced the river. The Department had to argue with the architects and the administration for several months to turn it around.

- When Baldwin Maxwell retired as department head in 1961, after 33 years in charge, there were NO women on the faculty. None had been hired during his tenure. Therefore, it didn't strike anyone as especially odd to submit a long-range plan which recommended that "twenty men be added to our permanent staff in the next 5 biennia." (As it turned out, nine of the twenty new men hired were women).

- The Rhetoric program was originally housed in a two-story wooden barracks, immediately east of EPB. On May 8, 1970, over 200 students were arrested in campus riots, and the following night the Rhetoric building was burned to the ground. The administration asked the residents of EPB to take in the 90 displaced staff members from Rhetoric, assuring all parties that this was a "temporary" state of emergency and that new space would be provided for Rhetoric within a year.

Honors

Huston Diehl's Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England has been selected for inclusion in Choice magazine's list of Outstanding Academic Books for 1997.

Brook Landon's Science Fiction After I900: From the Steam Man to the Stars has been named to Locus magazine's prestigious Non-Fiction Recommended Reading List Books for 1997.

Further Recent Honors for Members of our Department:

Miriam Gilbert, winner of the Michael Brody Award for University Faculty Leadership and Service.

Ed Folsom, named the F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Professor of English.

Kevin Kopelson and Eduardo Cadava, who joined Kathleen Difley and Jon Wilcox as University Faculty Scholars.

Professor Kopelson has also been awarded a Camargo Foundation Residency in Cassis, France for work on his next book, “Finishing Proust.”

Rob Latham, winner of the James N. Murray Award for exceptional teaching, 1997.

Margaret Bass, winner of the James N. Murray Award for exceptional teaching, 1998. Our department has now provided the winner for two years running for this fiercely competitive, university-wide award for an assistant professor.

Teresa Mangum, winner of a Rockefeller Fellowship at the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Judith Pascoe won a 1998-99 NEH Fellowship and a 1998-99 AHI Travel Grant to support her far-flung research.

Phil Round won the Andrew Oliver Research Fellowship at the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Graduate Student Honors

Michael Tavel Clarke, Zofia Lesinska, and Julie Schmid have been awarded Ballard and Seashore Dissertationships for 1998-99; their dissertation advisors are Ed Folsom, Ruedi Kuenzli, and Dee Morris.

Last year, Loretta Collins, Sharon Kennedy-Nolle, and Kate Moncrief also won Seashore Dissertation Fellowships and Heidi Johnson a Dean’s Merit Fellowship.

Mary Lou Emery, Kathleen Difley, Huston Diehl, and Florence Boos have been directing their work.

Laura Dubek, Carol Luhan, and Michele Morano, all TAs in the General Education in Literature program, have won Outstanding Teaching Awards in 1998 from the University’s Council on Teaching.

Walt Whitman on CD-ROM

A major research tool has been created by Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price (of William & Mary), who have edited “Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews.” This CD-ROM contains New York University’s scholarly edition of The Complete Works of Walt Whitman plus a large selection of manuscripts from The Library of Congress’s Feinberg and Thomas B. Harned Collections and The New York Library’s Oscar Lion and Berg collections.

The CD also includes facsimiles of the editions of Leaves of Grass published during Whitman’s lifetime and “Two Rivallets,” “Drum Taps,” and “Sequel to Drum Taps,” over 100 images of Whitman, a recording of Whitman’s voice, and contemporary reviews of his work.

The contents are full-text searchable with extensive hyper-linking and cross-referencing. It will be a crucial addition to all serious libraries as well as a groundbreaking aid for 19th-century Americanists and Whitman scholars.

Regarding Gardens

A Sunday Chicago Tribune compared Carl Klaus’s Vegetable Love, a journal of a growing season, to Thoreau’s Walden. Next to Carl’s decidedly stern but benign portrait and a reproduction of the book’s cover is an indication of the vegetable incarnation which he wishes, in his next life, to assume.

Accolades for MFA Students in Nonfiction

Teri Bostian’s “The Last Tomboys,” has won the 1997 Flyway Award for Nonfiction. The Flyways are national awards for poetry, fiction, and nonfiction sponsored by Iowa State University. This year’s nonfiction judge was Mary Swander.

Elmar Leuth’s “Houses,” won the 1997 Annie Dillard Award for Nonfiction. The Annie Dillard Award is sponsored by The Bellingham Review, affiliated with Western Washington University. The award comes with a $500 prize and publication in the review. The judge was Bret Lott.

There must be some connection between successes such as these and the further success of some of our MFA in Nonfiction students on the job market. This year appointments have been offered to our graduates by The University of Maine at Farmington, Plymouth State College (New Hampshire), Ohio State University and Grinnell College.
Re:Visionary Matters:

Jeff Porter’s video, “The Men Who Dance the Giglio,” won “best of show” at the UCLA Film and Folklore Association festival. This half-hour documentary is based on Claire Sponsler’s research on the Brooklyn St. Paulinus festival. It features footage of the performance, interviews with participants and community members, and archival photos, all aimed at exploring ethnicity and cultural tradition in contemporary America. Jeff was invited to attend the showing in Los Angeles and to talk informally about the film after its screening.

“Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern” premiered at the Bijou in February. This remarkable documentary, which has won awards from Sundance to Sydney, was made by Jeanne Jordan, a University of Iowa English graduate. The Bijou calendar describes the work as “an awesome personal film that gently speaks to the fragile fate of rural communities in the United States. With absorbing character development, adept photography, and disarming humor, the film plots the mounting struggle of filmmaker Jeanne Jordan’s family farm in Iowa, which survived the dustbowl, the depression, and two world wars before facing bankruptcy when a new regional bank does not extend the consideration that had come from local banks in the past. Far from self-pitying, this film is a tribute to the courage families derive from togetherness.” A discussion sponsored by the Iowa Humanities Board and Icon followed the screening.

Hiring

David Wittenberg (PhD Johns Hopkins) has accepted an offer of an assistant professorship in English and Comparative Literature and has come this fall from Berkeley, where he has been teaching in the Cal-Berkeley Rhetoric Department.

In the previous two years we made six other excellent appointments: Eduardo Cadava, Corey Creekmur, Ashley Dawson, Eric Gidal, Sara Levine, and Laura Rigal. Professors Cadava and Rigal have joined us as tenured Associate Professors. Creekmur, Dawson, Gidal, and Levine have all joined us as Assistant Professors.

New Faculty: Bluford Adams and Rob Lathem

New Faculty: Sara Levine, Laura Rigal, Eduardo Cadava and Corey Creekmur. Not pictured: Ashley Dawson

New Faculty: Eric Gidal
Please add to our information with your news and updates:


Anne Clark Bartlett (DePaul University). *Male Authors, Female Readers: Representation and Subjectivity in Middle English Devotional Literature*. Cornell UP. 1995.


Gregory Eiselein (Kansas State University). *Literature Humanitarian Reform in the Civil War Era*. Indiana UP. 1996.


__________, co-ed. of *Approaches to Margaret Atwood’s Handmaid’s Tale and Other Writings*. MLA. 1997.


James McKeen (Mount St. Mary’s College). *Tree of Heaven [poems]*. U of Iowa P. 1995.


Dina Shugar (University of Rhode Island). "We May Not Be Together Always": Creating Community in Feminist-Separatist Discourse. U of Nebraska P. in press.


In addition, a number of Iowa PhDs from the 1970s and now well along in their careers and are continuing to publish books in the 1990s. Some examples:


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