

My Father's Geography

By Stephen Munroe

October 15, 2006

My father, John Munroe, was born in his parents' home on Market Street in Wilmington. He spent all of his childhood and most of his adult years in Delaware, leaving only on short trips or to commute to Philadelphia for graduate school.

However, as a young boy, still in elementary school, he developed an intense interest in geography, maps and the larger world. Stamp collecting was one great passion and by the age of 10 or 11 he was corresponding with shipping companies and following shipping schedules in and out of eastern ports.

This interest in geography and maps merged comfortably with his studies of history and literature and the maturing of his scholarly interests. It was some years later, after he had met my mother, Dorothy, married and started his family that his youthful interests reached fruition.

As a child I remember taking walks with my father around Newark, or driving with him and others through the neighborhoods and countryside. My father often seemed to know who lived in each house or the history of each crossroad we passed through. My sister and I, and later my brother Michael, too, climbed on the cannons at Cooch's Bridge, always favorite outing, or watched the mill race and mill wheel grind flour at Dayett Mill.

But by the time Dad was 37 years old he had never traveled, even for a day, west of the Mississippi River. That changed when he was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship for the purpose of allowing an American historian to see and get to know America. In the fall of 1951 my father, and my mother, sister and I, were to travel across the United States stopping in distant places. It was, perhaps, the greatest adventure of his life, and it was one of the finest of mine.

My parents, with token assistance from their five-year-old son, packed up all their belongings either for storage or into a new used Buick sedan, so tightly packed that there was no legroom at all in back. Together we set off on a 10 month, 25,000 mile journey. In my recollections, this was a wonderful odyssey: first out to the Midwest, then down to Texas, Mexico, the Southwest and finally Santa Monica, CA. Here we stopped several months, while my father met fellow historians at UCLA, Santa Barbara and Stanford. From Southern California we traveled up the coast through Oregon to Seattle, where we paused for another 6 weeks. Finally we spent one or two months in Madison, WI, before heading home.

Traveling with my father was exciting for my sister and me. We saw Indians and ancient ruins, visited caves, caverns, canyons and mountains, great lakes and a new ocean. My father was the tour guide and my mother the tour leader—life on the road was perfect. When we returned to Delaware we were each transformed. My father had tested his knowledge of history and geography in practical ways, my mother had successfully orchestrated and directed a transcontinental trip and, at six, I felt worldly wise.

In later years my father continued to explore his interest in geography and history in many ways. Dad was happy in his travels and in meeting people but also happy at home and with his family.

His love of geography and history gave him a strong sense of being connected to people and places. As a good teacher and storyteller, loving father, grandfather and husband he was always able to communicate this sense of connection and his love for people and places, near and far.