

Memorial to Richard Joel Russell 1895—1971

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The death of Boyd Professor Richard Joel Russell on the afternoon of September 17, 1971, terminated the career of one of America's distinguished geologists and geographers, and I lost my closest personal friend of more than 50 years. As an administrator Dr. Russell had served as president of The Geological Society of America, the Association of American Geographers, and the Conference of Deans of Southern Graduate Schools, and as chairman of the Division of Earth Sciences of the National Research Council, 1955—1956, and was elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences in 1959. Dick, as he was known to his associates and friends, served as Acting Director of the School of Geology at Louisiana State University

from 1944 to 1949, when he became dean of the Graduate School. He was founder and director of the Coastal Studies Institute for 17 years, and after retiring as director, he continued as principal investigator, conducting field research and counseling members of the staff until his death.

Despite the time spent in administration, Dr. Russell was known around the world for his original research on desert climates and landforms, the Mississippi and other deltas, and the coasts of the world and beach rock. Dick wrote easily and clearly and had the unusual ability to be able to write and speak for different audiences. He traveled and studied in many countries on all of the continents except Antarctica, and his papers appeared in many foreign journals.

To understand the making of this unusual scientist, one needs to know something of his early history. Fortunately, Dick left extensive biographical data. He was a native son of California, having been born in Hayward on November 16, 1895. His grandfather, Joel Russell, sailed from Bangor, Maine, arriving in San Francisco on January 4, 1850. After two years of mining in northern California, he took up a section of land on San Francisco Bay near Hayward, where Richard's father, Frederick, was born on August 7, 1867. Frederick apparently inherited some of the same pioneering spirit and sailed with his family for Honolulu on a three-masted, 72-ton schooner in early 1899. He was a graduate of Hastings College of Law, and being a natural linguist, learned Cantonese and developed a successful practice with the Chinese in Hawaii. The family returned to Hayward in 1902.

Prior to leaving for Honolulu the family had lived in two different houses in Hayward, and by the time Richard was 16 years old, he had lived in 20 different houses, two in Los Angeles. Richard's family spent summers in different places, usually in the mountains. Thus Dick became accustomed to routine tasks, such as packing books, helping raise the tent, gathering fuel, and other such duties. Over these years there was no single house that he could look to as home.

Richard's early education was more or less a hit-or-miss affair with changing schools, but at the age of nine he learned Gregg shorthand and typing, and after the sixth grade he was enrolled in the Hayward school system, graduating from Hayward High School in 1914. The family had returned to the "Ranch," the original land which had been acquired by his grandfather, and which now bears the name Russell City. The Ranch had cows that Dick milked and horses that he rode with such enthusiasm that had there been rodeos available he would certainly have entered them. The high school was small, but gave a classical education. Dick was captain of the track team and played rugby football, a sport I found him still enthusiastic about when we visited South Africa together in 1963. He developed an early interest in photography and built a small business handling all the commercial work at Hayward's three drugstores.

On completion of high school, Russell had no inclination to go to college even if the family finances had permitted. He spent the ensuing year working in lumberyards. His decision to go to college resulted from a hunting trip in the Santa Lucia Range, where he met a forest ranger who convinced him that college was necessary for that profession. He entered the University of California College of Agriculture in 1915. During the month-long Christmas vacation he worked as a mucker in a lead mine in southern Nevada, and the following summer as a grader in sawmills in northern California.

Geology I was a required course in forestry, and he was given permission to take another geology course and then mineralogy as electives. Then World War I came along and Dick was drafted and rejected because of a crooked left arm which had been broken as a child and reset improperly. However, he managed to enlist in the Naval Reserve and was sent to San Pedro where he earned his ensign's commission. Armistice came after 14 months in San Pedro, and he returned to college, now to start geologic training.

The rumor that Professor John C. Merriam might not remain at California caused Dick to major in vertebrate paleontology, and he was graduated with highest honors in paleontology in 1920. I had entered the University of California as a graduate student in the fall of 1919, and we had courses together under Merriam, Louderback, and Lawson for the following two years. When Merriam left to head the Carnegie Institution, I went to work under J. P. Smith at Stanford, and Dick abandoned paleontology shortly after for petrographic work on the Warner Range under Louderback. We agreed that Louderback was a marvelous teacher, but we were most impressed by Lawson's seminar and tried to live up to his teachings. Dick always had the autographed portrait of "the king" hanging from the wall of his office where he could derive inspiration from it.

Russell accepted a graduate teaching assistantship in geography, and when Professor Holway's wife died in 1921, the impact was so great that Instructor Varney and Russell had to divide Holway's classes between them. With the arrival of Carl Sauer to head geography, Russell was advanced to an associate, and he taught elementary geography to classes of 500 in California Hall and 800 in Wheeler Hall. Sauer was a great influence on him, as were both Albrecht Penck and William Morris Davis.

His teaching appointment delayed the completion of his dissertation, but he was able to spend summers in the Great Basin collecting vertebrates as assistant to Chester Stock, and fossil plants with Ralph Cheney. In addition he spent four summers mapping the Warner Range, where he suffered appendicitis and was nursed by his sister Helen. He completed his dissertation in 1926, and then accepted a position as associate professor at Texas Technological College. There he found his teaching load to be 22 to as much as 27 hours a week. So little time was available for field work that he used his notes to write "Climates of California" and "Dry Climates of the United States," which were very well received.

In 1928 I offered Russell a position to teach structural geology and to develop a Department of Geography at Louisiana State University. Dick was delighted with the opportunity and remained at LSU for the remainder of his career, despite attractive offers from many of the leading universities of this country and Canada. To quote him:

One could join with an old friend to help build a major school. In what other place could one organize the committee structure of a faculty, serve as Chairman of the Committee on Libraries for 25 years, practically design one of the most modern library buildings in the United States, and see a collection grow from about 200,000 to well over a million volumes? And where could one establish a Department of Geography that need not be concerned with bread-and-butter courses, and, in fact, at the time of conferring the first Ph.D., had a record of turning out 11 masters and but one bachelor? . . . One could be a Professor of Geography, yet teach structural geology for 25 years, serve as major professor for doctoral candidates in either Geology or Geography, find generous research support, and enjoy physical facilities.

It takes time for a person trained in field methods of dry, mountainous country to adjust to the low relief, heavy vegetation, and weathering of Louisiana. Russell's first field work in Louisiana was with Fred Kniffen, who studied geography and anthropology at the University of California. He had been added to LSU's faculty in 1929 in the hope that work on the numerous Indian mounds would help date both coastal changes and changes in the course of the Mississippi. Russell's first paper on Louisiana dealt with "Larto Lake, an Old Mississippi River Channel."

In the meantime I had started the Louisiana Geological Survey and was working on the geology of Cameron and Vermilion Parishes, when an important lawsuit at Grand Lake, involving the boundaries of state water bottoms, came up. Russell and I were called on to help as expert witnesses. We engaged a boat from Captain Laurent at Lake Arthur on the Mermentau River, and on the way to Grand Lake we stopped to buy two large catfish. After eating the catfish, we agreed that Laurent was the best cook in the world, and Dick then and there transferred his affections from the Great Basin to coastal Louisiana. Our work in southwest Louisiana resulted in several papers by Russell, who introduced the term "chenier" to geographical literature.

Following Kniffen's appointment came that of Harold N. Fisk, first with the Survey to map the geology of Grant and LaSalle Parishes, then as a member of the LSU faculty. Fisk's work on Quaternary terraces in central Louisiana shed much light on the problems Russell was having in the coastal parishes, and the two joined together for trips up the Mississippi, Ohio, and Tennessee Rivers and along the Atlantic coastal

plain. Examination of the river bluffs which were capped with loess resulted in Russell publishing his conclusions that the loess was not aeolian in origin.

After the experiences in southwest Louisiana, Dick was eager to tackle the physiography of the lower Mississippi Delta. The Mississippi Delta paper was widely circulated, and Russell's reputation as an expert on deltas was established. He was employed as an expert witness in many lawsuits, and the income from them in some years amounted to more than his teaching salary. He was thus able to satisfy his insatiable desire to travel.

Field trips conducted by international congresses were particularly appealing. He went to the International Geographical Congress in Paris in 1931; and we went together to the Geological Congress in Moscow in 1937, with a pre-Congress trip to the Caucasus and a trip afterward to Novaya Zemlya. We left early to visit the coast of Norway and return across Finnish Lapland. Soon after this trip Russell received the Atwood Award for his work in the Mississippi Delta, which financed a similar study of the Rhone Delta in 1938. This was followed by the 1948 Congress, with a trip to Wales, and the Congress of 1952 with trips to the Sahara and the Atlas. Afterward he was invited to give three lectures at the University of Istanbul, with a schedule of field work in Anatolia and an opportunity to study the entire length of the Meander River. The Secretary General of the Geological Congress of 1956 in Rio de Janeiro, Hilgard O'Reilly Sternberg, was one of Russell's doctoral candidates. Russell was cochairman of the geomorphology section and was guest of the Brazilian government on a memorable Amazon expedition. In 1958 he was a member of the council of the Congress of the Association of Sedimentologists held in Switzerland. In 1960 he joined field symposia on alluvial morphology and coastal morphology of the International Geographical Congress. In 1961 he organized a symposium titled "Pacific Island Terraces: Eustatic?" for the Honolulu Pacific Science Congress and served as cochairman of the section on geomorphology at the INQUA Congress in Warsaw. He also presided at the geomorphology section of the Kuala Lumpur meetings of the International Union.

As a member of the Committee on Geophysics and Geography, Department of Defense, and a member of the Committee on Geography, Advisory to the Office of Naval Research, Russell learned that progress in coastal research was lagging seriously in defense programs and was urged by both Army and Navy officers to turn his attention in that direction. At this time, 1949, he was assuming deanship of the Graduate School at LSU, so felt he had to turn down such offers. However, with the assistance of James P. Morgan, a proposal was developed and was submitted to the Geography Branch of the Office of Naval Research for the study of trafficability of Louisiana coastal marshes. This led to the creation of the Coastal Studies Institute.

Initially space was provided for the institute in the School of Geology Building, and the institute started, as the Survey had started, by providing graduate fellowships for students working under Russell's and Morgan's direction. The success of the institute, under the sponsorship of the Office of Naval Research, was immediate, and as it grew it required another building, which the university provided. Field studies were expanded from the Gulf Coast to most of the coasts of the world. Russell ceased to work on floodplains, deltas, and terraces, and took up the study of beach rock, which carried him to most of the remaining tropical coasts that he had not seen before.

Under the financial sponsorship of the National Science Foundation, Russell was sent to Indonesia in 1959 to serve as advisor to the Council for Sciences of Indonesia. Russell, in his travels, always tried to live as the natives of the country lived. He visited more than 100 centers that were conducting research in Java, Sumatra, and Celebes, which resulted in a 74-page report, published in 1960. Most of his recommendations were effected in a very short time.

In addition to Russell's administration and research, he had much editorial experience, being appointed associate editor of *Geologie der Meere und Binnengewässer* in 1939 and of *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie* in 1957. For some years he served as associate editor of the *Monograph Series of the Association of American Geographers*. He also edited a number of guidebooks, such as The Geological Society's *Guides to Southeastern Geology*. Russell's wide travels prompted him, with the assistance of Kniffen, to write *Culture Worlds*. A later edition was published with the assistance of Evelyn Pruitt of the Office of Naval Research.

Russell was elected to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Göttingen in 1959. In 1961 he was awarded the Vega Medal of the Swedish Royal Society of Anthropology and Geography by Queen Louise. He was an honorary member of the Société Belge de Géologie, Paleontologie et Hydrologie, and the Royal Dutch Geographical Society. He also was a Special Fellow of the Belgian-American Foundation and an Honorary Fellow in the German Academy of Sciences. In 1967 he was elected to the Royal Danish Academy of Science and was awarded the U.S. Navy Distinguished Service Award. He was affiliated with the Masonic Order, Phi Sigma Kappa, Gamma Alpha, Theta Tau, Phi Sigma, Sigma Xi, Phi Kappa Phi, and the Cosmos Club. Until forced to stop on doctor's orders, handball had been his main athletic diversion. Starting in the late 1940s, the daily hour of handball gave way to one of straight-rail billiards.

Richard Russell married Mary Dorothy King of Covina, California, in 1924. Their son, Benjamin James, born in Covina in 1926, lives in Hermosa Beach, California. Dorothy died in Baton Rouge in 1936. In 1940 Richard married Josephine Burke of Wabash, Indiana. The children issuing from this marriage are Robert Burke of Foley, Alabama; Charles Douglas of New Orleans; John Walter of Dayton, Ohio; and Thomas William of Montreal, Canada. Russell is also survived by a sister, Helen (Mrs. George W. McCollum), of Oakland, California.

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