Memorial to Jon Clark Cummings
1930-1986

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Jon Clark Cummings died December 18, 1986, in Stanford, California, following a protracted struggle with melanoma. His professional life was devoted to geological education, first at Oregon State University (1958-1964), and then, for over two decades, at California State University, Hayward (1964-1986). At a memorial service led by his younger son, Ian, in Menlo Park on December 23, 1986, family, friends, colleagues, and former students reminisced about Jon’s consuming involvement with the West’s mountains and their natural history; his conscientious, compassionate teaching; the sane balance he maintained between work and personal life; and his remarkably broad knowledge of geology, especially that of California.

Jon was born April 30, 1930, in Saranac Lake, New York, but the family soon moved to Denver, where Jon began his lifelong love affair with the mountain ranges of the Cordillera. He camped, fished, hiked, and skied in them, avidly studying their flora and fauna, their landforms and rocks, in all the seasons. He was gourmet camp cook, notorious for the collection of “labor-saving” gadgets he had managed over the years to squirrel away in his backpack or Subaru.

Jon graduated from East High School in Denver in 1948, and embarked on another influential, long-term relationship, this one with Stanford University. He received B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in geology from Stanford in 1952, 1956, and 1960. While an undergraduate, Jon gained geological experience through summer jobs with the U.S. Smelting, Refining and Mining Company (Lark Mine, Utah) and the Iron Ore Company of Canada (geological exploration in Labrador). Upon graduation, he spent a year evaluating manganese deposits in Arizona and two years with U.S. Army Engineering Intelligence in Tokyo. He returned to Stanford in 1955 and, within 3½ years, had completed the course work and research necessary for the M.S. and Ph.D. degrees. During this exceptionally prolific period, there were more summer jobs—with Bear Creek Mining Company (Lark Mine, Utah) and the Ohio Oil Company—teaching assistantships and research fellowships at Stanford.

Jon’s graduate studies culminated in a Ph.D. dissertation on the geology of an area in the nearby Santa Cruz Mountains; thus began the research program in the central California Coast Ranges that would occupy him for the remainder of his life. This work, much of it financially supported by the U.S. Geological Survey, evolved through sedimentological and paleogeographical studies of the late Cenozoic Santa Clara Formation to examination of slip rate and earthquake recurrence interval on the San Andreas fault (see the selected bibliography below). Jon also became deeply involved in applied research on land-use zoning along the San Andreas fault. As Town Geologist for the San Francisco Peninsula municipalities of Portola Valley (1971-1977) and Woodside (1971-1975), he was prime mover in the pioneering adoption of zoning ordinances incorporating building setback lines for earthquake-fault traces. In 1970, Jon was among the first geologists registered by the California State Board of Registration for Geologists.

Jon’s forte was teaching and department administration. He was promoted from assistant to associate professor of geology while teaching at Oregon State University from 1958 to 1964. He was a
member of the graduate faculty there, and served for five summers as assistant director or co-director of Conferences for College Geology Teachers and the Summer Science Training Programs in Earth Science sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF).

Jon joined the faculty of California State College at Hayward as assistant professor in September 1964, finding himself the only geology instructor on the fledgling campus. His predecessor, Ivan Colburn, had moved on to California State College at Los Angeles, but he left Jon extensive collections and a good complement of basic equipment in the new science building. Jon had earlier confided in Ivan that Hayward "... does seem to offer possibilities of growth and independence from tradition ...." Thus the geology program remained a "one-man show" until my arrival a year later, to handle the "hard-rock" side of things. Following a shaky first year, during which the two of us tried without much success to populate our courses, the program grew rapidly. Jon was promoted to associate professor in 1966 and full professor in 1971. An undergraduate major in earth science was approved in 1968, and by the 1969–1970 academic year, Jon had been appointed chairman of the Department of Earth & Physical Science; this became the Department of Earth Sciences the following year, and Jon remained its chairman until 1976. By 1971, five more people had joined the geology faculty, all recruited by Jon: Leigh Mintz, Sue Hirschfeld, Alexis Moiseyev, Detlef Warnke, and Michael Wood. Growth of the geology curriculum, in both size and reputation, largely took place under Jon's direction; without his influence, the program would not be as balanced, pragmatic, and field-oriented as it is. He was coaxed out of "retirement" for two more terms as chairman of the (now) Department of Geological Sciences, from 1979 to 1985.

Jon taught a wide array of courses, including geomorphology, geologic hazards, petroleum geology, sedimentary petrology, environmental geology, field geology, oceanography, physical geology, and geology of California. The last-named course, which included weekend field trips to favorite places in the Coast Ranges and Sierra Nevada, was perhaps his favorite. Jon's commanding grasp of the geology of the state was exhibited on these trips; he could lecture at great length on seemingly any topic, and frequently did so! Geology of California trips also were memorable for the many hangers-on who managed to get themselves invited, to savor not only Jon's knowledge of the geology but his cooking and the campfire camaraderie. He was a very generous man.

Jon's career in geological education at Hayward included a number of high-water marks: director of NSF Summer Institutes in Earth Science for Secondary School Teachers in 1965 and 1966; recipient of a California State Colleges Distinguished Teaching Award for 1967–1968; president of the Far Western Section of the National Association of Geology Teachers for 1969–1970; chairman of the local committee for the 66th Annual Meeting of the Cordilleran Section of the Geological Society of America, held at California State University, Hayward in 1970, visiting professor at the University of East Anglia, England, in 1973–1974; and supervisor of the research programs in geology of six M.S. degree recipients.

Jon was a Fellow of the Geological Society of America and a member of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists, National Association of Geology Teachers, Sigma Xi, and Peninsula Geological Society.

Jon is survived by his wife, Alice Godfrey Cummings, sons Mark and Ian, and daughter Amy Cummings Veader. An older daughter, Lucy, born of his first marriage to Celia Gray, passed away in 1967. Alice and Jon were able to share their passion for the out-of-doors almost to the end of Jon's life; I was privileged to be included on one of their last hikes together, in the Lakes Basin area of the northern Sierra Nevada in July 1986.

Jon waged an unrelenting battle against cancer; meanwhile, he kept up his teaching obligations and forged ever stronger, ever warmer friendships. In doing so, he set an example in courage that may represent his greatest legacy.
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF J. C. CUMMINGS


1979 (with Hirschfeld, S. E.) Patterns of surface deformation and response of structures due to creep within the Hayward fault zone, Hayward, CA [abs.]: Geological Society of America Abstracts with Programs, v. 11, no. 7, p. 444.
