

Remembering Herb Wright

by Bobbi Megard

First Encounters

My husband, Bob, and I first encountered Herb in the Chuska Mountains in the summer of 1960. Since we had never met the man, the only direction we had was to look for a blue Plymouth station wagon on the crest of the escarpment outside of Toadalena, New Mexico. Well, we did find Herb and his son, Dick. They had already established a cozy camp and we began to set up a makeshift laboratory in order to analyze water samples taken from Deadman and Whiskey Lakes, while Herb and Dick set about taking cores of sediments in the lake bottom. The Plymouth served us well on trips to get water for camp, but not without considerable angst since it didn't have a working gas gauge so there was always an extra can of gas along – just in case!

The two field seasons we spent in the Chuska Mountains were fascinating since our neighbors were Navajo families who had moved their herds to higher ground for the summer. Their hogans and summer houses provided families with respite from the desert heat and gave us the opportunity to observe the creation and ultimate purchases of the famed Two Grey Hills rugs. Herb came back to camp one day crowing about having bought his rug “off the loom”.

Our next encounter with Professor Wright was in 1963. Bob and I had completed graduate studies at Indiana University where Bob had been a student under Dr. David Frey, a well-known limnologist. One day, Dr. Frey greeted Bob in his office with this: “How'd you like to go to Iran?” Bob's response, “When does the next camel leave?” So arrangements to join Herb in Iran under the auspices of the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago began. In March, Bob and I flew to London to pick up a brand new Land Rover, coring pipes and aluminum foil and began the drive to Teheran. We picked up a botanist in Holland and drove to Greece where we met Herb to do some coring as part of the University of Minnesota's Messenia Project before heading farther east. Next stop was to be Teheran to deliver a letter of credit and obtain a special permit to allow work in western Iran and the Zagros Mountains. This was a period of conflict between Iraq and Iran with military maneuvers in the vicinity of Lake Zeribar where we were expecting to do our research.

Clandestine Operations

After establishing a base in Kermanshah, we headed for Lake Zeribar driving through the small village of Marivan, where we encountered some soldiers with fixed bayonets guarding a roadblock. They ordered us to stop. Herb said, “Keep going, Bob!” We drove around the roadblock and set up camp on the shore of the lake. All through the night we heard trucks driving back and forth along the road looking for our camp. Next morning, hearing gunshots, I stuck my head out of the tent to hear “Hi, you all. Where're you from.” This time it was a couple of U.S. Army Green Berets out hunting wild boar and, thankfully, not the Iranian military. Herb smoothed feathers by having tea with the Iranian colonel who in turn watched over the camp during our stay.

The trip back from Iran took us through Greece where our Land Rover elicited much curiosity. The cores in the pipes were wrapped in Persian rugs. The custom officers thought we were carrying rockets. When we informed them they were cores of lake sediments and plant samples, the customs inspector sealed everything and gave us two days to get out of the country. He insisted on sending a customs official with us.

As a result, some of these activities and Herb's informal agreements with the Office of Naval Research providing flotation devices and other materials resulted in our being checked out by the FBI upon our return to Minnesota.

A direct quote from Bob Megard. “Layers of pollen grains and other micro-fossils preserved in the lake sediments have provided a continuous record of climate change in the Middle East during the last 20,000 years.” Climate change was very much on Herb’s mind during his research trips in the Fertile Crescent.

The Quiet Life On Hythe Street

For the past 48 years, Herb and his family have been our neighbors on Hythe Street in St. Anthony Park near the U of M St. Paul Campus. Herb’s wife, Rhea, told us about the house across the street which was for sale. We moved from Minneapolis in 1967 and have been part of the “Hythe Street Regulars” which included the late Kemper Kirkpatrick, Dick and Finette Magnuson, Kim and Ann Munholland, John and Judy Howe and all the children.

Our little group met often for dinner parties, holiday celebrations, musical evenings and general camaraderie. Most of us were far away from our families so the Easter gatherings meant firing up the samovar for tea, enjoying good food after a hunt for eggs, and celebrating the vernal equinox. Gardening activities also brought us together. Herb was proud of his “garden” of avocado seedlings in various stages of maturity – alas, no fruit, but lots of greenery. These last years involved Herb, Vania, and Andy taking daily walks inspecting the neighborhood gardens. Often Herb and Vania took a detour to our veranda for a margarita and a chat.

Throughout the years, Hythe Street neighbors attended the Minneapolis symphony orchestra, St. Paul Chamber, and Music in the Park. Herb and Rhea even hosted a recorder group at their home.

Finally, with apologies to Dr. Suess – “Oh the places you’ll go, the people you’ll meet and the things you can think!”

Herb Wright lives on in our memories today.