

THOSE WERE THE DAYS. OR WERE THEY? UBC GEOGRAPHY IN THE EARLY YEARS

The following was written for the Newsletter by Dr J. Lewis Robinson, founding professor of Geography at UBC, on the sixtieth anniversary of his appointment on 1 September 1946

Unlike modern appointments, I was appointed directly by President Norman Mackenzie after he interviewed me in Ottawa where I was a consultant for the Federal Government, Northwest Territories Administration. The same procedure was followed the next year when John Chapman was interviewed at Oxford University in England by President Mackenzie. In 1946 Mackenzie informed the Department of Geology and Geography of my appointment and I was welcomed warmly by Dr. Vladimir Okulitch, geologist and paleontologist, [a world expert on trilobites and later UBC's first Dean of Science] who was temporarily in charge of supervising the Geography course in the joint Department.

This was a different direction for Geography because President Mackenzie informed me that I was the first professional geographer to be appointed and my instructions were to develop a geography program. The next appointments and all that followed during my time in the department were of faculty who had graduate degrees in Geography. But as the joint name indicates, Geography was not new to the joint Department. The University Senate approved courses in geology, mineralogy and geography to be given in the Department of Geology and Mineralogy when the University opened in 1915-1916. A half course listed as "Geography 1: Physical Geography" was given by S.J. Schofield in the fall of 1915. The course, later listed as "Principles of Geography" and then "Physical Geography" is the oldest Geography course given continuously in a Canadian university. In 1920 a new course, Geology 12 "Meteorology and Climatology" was introduced and seems to be the first Climatology course to be given continuously at a Canadian University.

In 1922 the Department's name was changed to the Department of Geology and Geography, and it thus became the first academic unit in a Canadian university to use the name "Geography" in its title. (The claim of the University of Toronto to have the "first" Department of Geography in Canada, founded in 1936, is only half-right!).

In 1925, when the University moved to the Point Grey Campus site, the Department of Geology and Geography was placed in the "temporary" Applied Science Building because R. W. Brock, the Head of the Department was also the Dean of Applied Science. This building, currently the home of Geography, is now 80 plus years old.

Through the 1920's the joint department consisted of four Geology Professors. A Geography course was given in summer sessions and the first faculty member with an academic geography degree to teach one of these was J.B. Appleton, a summer visitor in 1928 from the University of Illinois.

In 1930, a new course, Geography 5, Economic Geography was introduced by J. Friend Day of the Economics and Commerce department. It was a required course for the B. Comm. degree and was an elective in the B.A. program as a Geography course. This course under various titles was administered directly by the Economics Department from 1933 but returned to Geography in 1947 and was taught by Lewis Robinson thereafter. Faculty numbers were reduced during the Depression years of the 1930's and in 1935 only one Geography course, "Principles of Geography" was given.

After Brock's tragic death in an airplane crash in 1935, Gordon Davis was appointed and took over Brock's lectures in the "Principles" course. He also gave a new course "Physiography" (Geology 22), in 1935. Davis expanded the Geography program in 1936, "Meteorology and Climatology" (Geology 12), became Geography 2; a new course "Human and Regional Geography" became Geography 3. Geography returned to importance in Summer Sessions (mainly for lectures) in the late 1930's when three visitors with Geography degrees and faculty appointments in Geography Department elsewhere in USA came to UBC each summer, including Dr. Eric Faigle of Syracuse University, who attracted Lew Robinson and Tom Weir to graduate work in Geography at Syracuse in the early 1940's.

Major progress in Geography came in 1941 when it became possible to graduate with Geography major (9 units only). Five students were the first Geography majors in 1941 and three more students called themselves "minors". Among these was Don Kerr, who much later became Head of the Department of Geography at the University of Toronto. Tragedy struck the Department in 1943 when Gordon Davis died of a heart attack in the field. He had been in charge of the Geography program at UBC for eight years. He was replaced by Mrs. Gwendolen O'Brien, a war refugee living temporarily in Vancouver, who had a Geography degree from the University of London. She was replaced in 1945 by Tom Weir who had an M.A. in Geography from Syracuse University and who was teaching school in Vancouver. In addition, Dr. Vladimir Okulitch, took over other Geography courses. There were eight Geography courses offered in 1945-1946

After Lew Robinson's appointment to develop and expand Geography, UBC offered twelve full-year Geography courses in 1947, with a total undergraduate enrollment of seven hundred and fifty. In 1948 the first two students with Honours degrees in Geography graduated and nine students registered in a Graduate degree program. In 1953 the joint Department was split into two "Divisions" with Lewis Robinson as Chairman (not head) of the Geography division. In 1958 the divisions were split into separate departments, and J. Lewis Robinson became the first head of Geography. In that year there were twelve independent courses with a total enrollment of 1250 students – more undergraduate students than in any other Canadian university. Although in those years Heads of Departments were appointed for life (i.e. without term), Lew Robinson had to resign in 1968 when he had a serious heart attack. With the agreement of the other Geography faculty, and no Search Committee, John Chapman was appointed the second head of the Geography Department.

Note: More information is available in J.L. Robinson, "History of the UBC Department of Geography" in the GIC, 28 pages, and in Robinson. "Geography at the University of B.C.," Yearbook of Pacific Coast Geographers, Vol 53 (1991), pp. 199-216.