

THE JOURNEY OF AN APPLIED GEOGRAPHER

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For the past 28 years I have studied retail in American cities, selected new store sites, forecasted sales revenues, and developed strategies for discount and traditional department stores at Target Corporation, The May Department Stores Company, and Federated Department Stores, Inc. Although I have worked mostly outside of academia, my life's work has been based on a solid foundation of undergraduate liberal arts courses and experiences, graduate work in geography and supporting disciplines, and U.S. Air Force training. I have also had excellent on-the-job training as a college professor, market analyst, staff recruiter and coach, and corporate department head. Each step has been a progression in my education as an applied geographer. My journey has been one of career transitions; unusual mentors, colleagues, and staff; a strong foundation of geographical concepts and tools; and changing retail applications in a field laboratory of U.S. department stores, places, metropolitan areas, and regions. Career transitions have fostered personal adjustments, and best of all, my continuing education.

My family set the stage and guided early steps of my journey. I grew up in south Minneapolis, the son of a college music professor and junior high English and geography teacher. My parents' friends lived in many places outside Minnesota so our family traveled widely every summer to visit them. My fascination for places, regions, history, and maps began at an early age. My grandfather, a retired missionary in northeast India, also encouraged me to study more remote places using maps, periodicals, current events, books, and frequent trips outside Minnesota. Geography for me was the study of distant places, each with a unique history and character. I had no idea how to activate that early interest into a career.

Without a clear direction toward a future vocation, I attended Bethel University where my father taught, eventually majoring in social studies with a concentration in history. It was there amidst liberal arts courses that I met Prof. Robert Underwood, a geographer who taught two geography courses designed primarily for elementary and secondary education students. Prof.

Bob Underwood was the first mentor who sensed my interest in geography, knew what I needed to do, and advised me to apply to a recognized graduate program. Entering graduate school at the University of Minnesota, I thought I would be training to become a regional specialist, which would complement my undergraduate courses in history, economics, and political science.

During the summer following college graduation, I took courses in cartography, Australia-New Zealand, economic geography, and climatology. With six geography courses under my belt, but little understanding of the nuts and bolts of the discipline, I began the fall term as a teaching assistant for Prof. John Fraser Hart. Later I learned physical geography from Prof. Ward Barrett as one of his teaching assistants, staying a lesson or two ahead of students in my discussion sections. Despite course deficiencies and some insecurity while listening to other graduate students immersed in the discipline for years, I liked what I was experiencing. My earlier goal to become a regional expert soon faded as I recognized my need to learn a discipline. Fellow students and professors patiently helped me to become a geographer.

My Ph.D. advisor and mentor was Prof. Eugene "Cotton" Mather. Among many other things Prof. Mather taught me was the importance of fieldwork and exploration to sharpen my focus and to clarify a topic or problem. Little did I know at that time that I would spend 15-20 percent of my work time from 1980-2005 in the field reviewing sites and studying metropolitan markets. Prof. Mather also emphasized analysis of the "leaders" of any industry. That emphasis led to a dissertation on the western skiing industry. The University of Minnesota and its expectation that its Ph.D. graduates be able to teach physical as well as human geography at the undergraduate level, prepared me for transitions ahead as a college professor.

By the time I entered graduate school the "quantitative revolution" was impacting geography, and at the University of Minnesota new computer and statistic applications were ongoing. Multiple regression modeling, particularly forecasting events that could be mapped proved to be a useful tool. (Note: Multiple regression methodology that I used to predict western ski area attendance, by location, has worked reasonably well years later in predicting retail store revenues using site and situational variables. "Drivers" of store sales similarly reflect "demand" variables such as population and household income that enhance retail sales, and also "supply" variable such as nearby competitors that may help or hinder a new store performance. Corporate executives always seem captivated by sales forecasting models despite the limitations. The use of maps, statistics, and Global Information Systems (GIS) also has been well received by corporate decision makers.)

To add to the responsibilities of graduate school I received an Air Force R.O.T.C. (AFROTC) appointment, which I accepted only days before receiving my orders for active duty in the U.S. Army. The AFROTC training was well spent because it exposed me to the Air Forcer's "command and control" military structure, and it also fostered my own leadership development for the classroom and staff situations to follow. An added benefit was a short active duty assignment at an Air Force weather station in Duluth, Minnesota about the time the Viet Nam War was ending. This short active duty transition enabled me to have on-the-job training and expand upon what I had learned in climatology and physical geography classes. Air Force officers leading the weather station played a role in mentoring me in a few of the finer points of their discipline. I was far outside my comfort zone in a stimulating setting, but learning from another group of experts in an applied discipline. As an applied geographer in training, I had already experienced two stages of undergraduate and graduate education, with the USAF weather forecasting being an additional preparation for my career.

My next major transition was to join the geography faculty at Virginia Tech in the early stages of its new program. This would be my next round of geographic education because I was learning ideas from new colleagues, teaching new courses, attending professional meetings, and seeing an open door for geographic applications. The Virginia Tech experience challenged me to manage my time carefully because I also had a dissertation to complete, a full teaching schedule, and applied research opportunities in the Virginia-West Virginia region. As a young professor, I taught an introductory geography course using Peter Haggett's *Geography: A Modern Synthesis*. This book and course were among my favorites. Haggett's first chapter opens with a geographical assessment of a beach, the physical interface of land, atmosphere, and sea; but also a destination for human interaction and spatial organization. Introducing students to our discipline and its applications to the world around us proved to be one of my most satisfying roles in the university setting.

The resources and opportunities at Virginia Tech enabled me to work on several cross-disciplinary research projects ranging from a West Virginia ski resort feasibility study, and analysis of population growth and environmental constraints in Tidewater, Virginia, and U.S. Forest Service funded research predicting southern Pine Beetle infestations from climatic data. These wide ranging examples of collaborative applied research served regional needs and certainly were challenging. The research was opportunistic because it was based on university funding and outside requests. My overall career, however, lacked a clear research focus, and that contributed to

my fourth major transition from academia to a market research department for a national retailer, Dayton Hudson Corporation (now Target Corporation).

Retail site and market analysis has been an opportunity for applied geographers who love field work; who have a keen interest in the history and future of metropolitan areas; who seek to understand the mosaic of land uses, demographics, and retail structures in a market; and so are able to forecast revenues for new stores based on analog store performance and markets. My fourth transition, with its continued emphasis on applied geography, is still underway. To be paid to travel from market to market across the U.S. seemed like a perfect short-term fit for me to learn a new specialty for several years prior to returning to academia. I also was welcomed into a new network of retail analysts, which met regularly at research conferences to give papers and exchange ideas, even among analysts working for retail competitors. I also had a fine mentor in Larry Carlson, another University of Minnesota graduate, who's teaching and guidance helped me overcome obvious deficiencies as a newcomer to the retail industry.

However, the years passed, and I liked what I was doing, particularly the recruiting, training, and mentoring of new staff. I did not return to a university setting. My academic and research background led to an appointment as Director and later Vice President of Area Research at May Company, a position I held for 18 years. The very tangible results of Area Research, i.e., new stores, reinforced the importance of our applied research, and it enabled me to build and sustain momentum in my career. I was learning on the job at one of the retail industry's leading companies, much as Prof. Mather would have advised years earlier. Although most of the subject matter in retailing and business was unrelated to my earlier coursework, many concepts of urban geography applied to the organization of retail space and spatial analysis nearly always provided the foundation for site recommendations and sales forecasts. Finally, many staff analysts, through contact with geographers and with tools of GIS, were becoming geographers by doing the work we assigned to them. For these and other reasons I continued in the retail business well beyond my expectations, not returning to a college or university position.

Despite some separation from the university community, I am still interested in new approaches and techniques to teach others. The retail corporate setting has been a disciplined and often very requiring atmosphere, and it rarely allows anyone to rest on their laurels. However, there was always more work to be done. The continuing task of adding new stores to a company offered a clear direction and focus, one in which I could practice what I preached by leading a staff, doing applied geography, and teaching a research

discipline to the next wave of retail executives. For some, the output of academic books and publications are the key measures of success, and certainly one could also tally hundreds of pages of reports and recommendations from our internal business publication. However, successful students and staff subordinates have always been my biggest personal reward. They too, sustained my career, surrounded me with new ideas and good questions, and now I look to them to lead the next generation of analysts.

Following the acquisition of The May Department Stores Company by Federated in 2005, I have reflected on what our applied retail research has contributed to the combined May/Federated entity. Research recommendations and sales forecasts, for example, have been critical to the opening of over 200 conventional department stores during my tenure. The geographical analysis we have accomplished focused on retail stores and centers using tools applicable to other topics and problems. While market analysis, feasibility studies, sales forecasts, and the opening of new stores justified our function within a corporation, the greater satisfaction has been working with people in this business and helping to launch their careers. Colleagues, working together, achieving goals, contribution to a cause, making an impact, and having fun have characterized much of my time in private industry. The research setting and its participants have been more important than the subject matter.

As I experience current changes, I am grateful for the education, mentors, colleagues, and work experiences that have helped to shape my career. In the next phase will my style in doing administration, teaching, and research change? Not significantly. Will the key geographical concepts such as site, situation, spatial interaction, and organization continue to be part of the framework for what retail geographers study in the future? Yes. We who call ourselves applied geographers have practiced our discipline and adjusted to transitions in our education, businesses, and research. We can move confidently through the next transition with research experience, content to be explorers of new territory.