

Remembering Jim



I first became aware of the name James J. Parsons (1915-1997) long before I had the immense satisfaction of meeting him and then, towards the end of his life, getting to know him on a more personal level. Jim's work as a geographer of Latin America surfaced initially during my years as an undergraduate student at the University of Glasgow (1969-1973) and afterwards during my graduate schooling at the University of Alberta (1973-1979). I associate him first, and always, as a member of the Berkeley School, whose contributions to our understanding of land and life in Latin America I first read about in issues of *Ibero-Americana*. Those distinctive pale-blue covers of that pioneering forum envelop not only the results of diligent research but also a humanistic way of looking at the world that shaped my thinking, and influences it still.

Not until 1983 did I actually go to Berkeley, where "Mr. Parsons" welcomed me warmly, our relationship blossoming during Fall 1985, when I

spent three months at Berkeley as a Visiting Scholar. I sat in on Jim's graduate seminar, which included a memorable field trip to Northern California that saw the two of us try to sleep side-by-side in the back of a metal-hooded pick-up truck. The drumming of incessant rain kept us awake most of the night, so we talked a lot. Morning, however, saw Jim rise as sprightly as ever, and he contrived to have a photograph taken of me, uncommon surname and all, on Lovell Street in Covelo. After that first trip together our paths crossed often-in 1992, for

instance, after the AAG meeting in San Diego, Betty, Jim, and I drove up to Berkeley via Yosemite National Park, and after the AAG meeting in San Francisco a couple of years later, Jim and I took the coast road up to Gualala to attend Bill Denevan's retirement gathering. Jim was at his inimitable best "on the road," in which eventful mode even Jack Kerouac might have picked up a trick or two. Things happened when Jim was around. For every story he gathered, he sowed the seeds of a dozen more.

The intervals between seeing each other were enlivened by a flow of treasured correspondence. Like so many others, I have kept every letter that Jim wrote to me, for he was an accomplished master of a now-dying art. Jim encouraged me, he inspired me, and he supported me by writing on my behalf to numerous granting agencies. He served me as the best mentor any geographer could have. His essence as a human being, in my eyes, was to stress humility and generosity of spirit, just as his essence as a scholar was always to balance commitment with flexibility. But Jim's greatest asset of all was his **[end p. 179]** insatiable curiosity of intellect, a burning desire ever to learn as much as to teach about the people and places, not forgetting plants, animals, and assorted inanimate yet (for him) animating phenomena, he so dearly loved. The world, for him, was truly a spectacle of wonder, whether the form it took was a flower, a giant redwood, a smoking volcano, or the view from an airplane window seat, high above the earth's surface on a clear blue day.

When, in 1996, a year before his death, Jim was in attendance on the occasion of my receiving the *Carl O. Sauer Award* from the Conference of Latin Americanist Geographers, Jim's presence meant a lot to me. I can see him in the banquet hall still, happy for me and, dare I say it, as proud of me as I was of him. Some words of William Blake, invoked that unforgettable evening in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, serve as fitting an epitaph as any:

WHAT is the Price of Experience?

DO men Buy it for a Song? Or Wisdom for a Dance in the Street?

No, it is brought with the price of all that a man hath,

His house, his wife, his children.

Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none may come to buy,

And in the wither'd field where the farmer ploughs for bread in vain.

It is an easy thing to triumph in the summer's sun,

And in the vintage, and to sing on the waggon

loaded with corn.

It is an easy thing to talk of patience to the afflicted,

To speak the laws of prudence to the houseless wanderer,

To listen to the hungry raven's cry in wintry season,

When the red blood is fill'd with wine

And with the marrow of lambs.

It is an easy thing to laugh at wrathful elements

To hear the dog howl at the wintry door,

The ox in the slaughterhouse moan;

To see a god in every wind and a blessing in every blast;

To hear the sounds of love in the thunderstorm

That destroys our enemy's house;

To rejoice in the blight that covers his fields,

And the sickness that cuts off his children,

While our dives and vines

Sing and laugh around our door,

And our children bring fruit and flowers.

Then the groan and the dolor are quite forgotten,

And the slave grinding at the mill,

And the captive in chains and the poor in prison,

And the soldier in the field when the shatter'd bone

Hath laid him moaning among the happier dead.

It is an easy thing to rejoice in the tents of prosperity.

Thus could I sing and thus rejoice;

But it is not so with me.....

And neither is it so, I believe, with the heart and soul of the man who was James J. Parsons.

W. George Lovell

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