

AMQUA DISTINGUISHED CAREER AWARD 2005 RICHARD BAKER COMMENTS

AMQUA has meant a great deal to me, and I am deeply grateful to receive this award. My first inclination was to get up, say "I'm speechless," and sit down, but I have a lot of explaining to do and some people to thank. I am a modest person, and I look at my career with humility. I look back at the previous winners of this award with the greatest respect—they are giants in their field. I'm just an Iowa country boy--what am I doing in such hallowed company? I believe that I have been a reasonably good teacher, I have had a modest number of NSF grants, published a modest number of papers, some of which I am fairly proud of, and had a modest number of graduate students, many of whom I am proud of. When Brandon Curry nominated me, I thought it was just one friend doing something nice for another. Knowing that that was as far as it would go, I was nevertheless tremendously honored. Now it's more like overwhelmed.

Like some earlier awardees, I developed a strong interest in nature and natural history as a boy. I just didn't know what to do with it. Consequently, there was a lot of serendipity and a lack of career planning when I was a student. Yet I ended up working with some of the top people in Quaternary Science. I could not have planned it better. When I finished my BA at Wisconsin, my choice of Minnesota for graduate school was guided entirely by the fact that my girlfriend, later first wife, lived in Minneapolis. I had liked a glacial geology class, so I asked the late Bob Black if he knew if there was a glacial geologist at Minnesota. He said that there was a man named Herb Wright up there. I'd never heard of him.

That started my long association and warm friendship with a series of mentors at Minnesota. First was Herb, who had to start from scratch. Next was Ed Cushing, who taught me everything I know about palynology. Both were major influences. Third was Bill Watts, whom I regard as the father of plant macrofossil work in North America; my stint at picking seeds as his RA started me on a "fruitful" career--my life's work. He has been an inspiration to me, and were he a U.S. citizen, I have no doubt that he would be up here in my place.

The next step was to decide whom to work with for my PhD. I asked my friend, the late Bob Bright, who in the Rocky Mountain region who would he recommend that I work with for a PhD. The answer was immediate and led me to my next wonderful mentor, Bill Bradley at the University of Colorado. Bill was not a paleoecologist, but I had the training I needed from Minnesota to pursue pollen and plant macrofossil research. The things I learned from Bill Bradley were not paleoecology-related. He taught me a lot--not only how to approach a research project and how to teach, but by example, how I wanted to live my life. Some of you were there the night he received his Distinguished Career Award from the Quaternary Geology and Geomorphology Division of the Geological Society of America, where I saw how beloved this man was to so many. I was pleased to note that the most recent recipient of that award, Gif Miller, also recalled Bill's strong influence on his career. Estella Leopold, then at the USGS in Denver, generously shared her lab and facilities with me, and W.A. Weber at

the Herbarium continued my botanical training with such all-time favorite courses as "Grasses, sedges, and rushes". I had the additional good fortune to be hired as a field assistant by the USGS to work with Gerry Richmond and especially Ken Pierce in Yellowstone Park, which led to my dissertation there.

During the year I spent as a post-doc at Wisconsin, Reid Bryson, previous award winner John Kutzbach, and current award winner Tom Webb tried their best to teach me climatology. Thus I have had an impressive array of mentors early in my career.

What is so attractive to me about working on Quaternary problems is that they can be approached in so many ways. During my long career at the University of Iowa, we formed an active interdisciplinary group of Quaternary workers, the Iowa Quaternary Studies Group. In our case, by combining analyses of pollen, vascular-plant macrofossils, mosses, beetles, small mammals, stable isotopes of carbon and oxygen in speleothems and in alluvium, and fluvial geomorphology, we produced a strong story for several areas. The best part of it is that I have had great fun in both teaching and research; when someone will pay you to have this much fun, that's about as good as it gets. I would have done the work for free; come to think of it, now that I'm retired, I am doing it for free.

This last group I wish to thank includes many students and colleagues at the University of Iowa and elsewhere who also contributed greatly to my career during this period. Students include Kent Van Zant, George Hallberg, Mike Burkart, Peter Jaumann, Julieann Van Nest, Hong Zhu, Sandy Rhodes, Craig Chumbley, Curt Hudak, Hyung Kim, Jim Lucas, Paula Work, Rhawn Denniston, Brenda Nations, Joe Krieg, Penelope Drake, and Laura Strickland. Faculty colleagues include Diana Horton, Holmes Semken, Lon Drake, Don Schwert, Luis Gonzalez, and especially Art Bettis and Jeff Dorale. These students and colleagues, my wives Sonja and Deb, my son and daughters, and my mentors all have contributed in their way to this honor, and I dedicate this award to them.

Several past awardees have ended with advice. Here is mine. Invite people from other disciplines to work with you. If you don't take yourself too seriously, don't let your career be your whole life, and have a good time doing your work, you can still win a Distinguished Career Award. I am deeply grateful to AMQUA for making this the highlight of my professional career.

Richard Baker
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