

# AMQUA Distinguished Career Award for 2006

## Acceptance Remarks

Thompson Webb III

August 18, 2006

Thank you, Peck, for reading from the nomination letter that you and others wrote. Thank you, Julie [Brigham-Grette], for your leadership as AMQUA president. I am honored to receive this award. After studying the Quaternary for the last 2 million years for 40 years, I love having 10 minutes to reflect some on my experience!

Let me start with a poem called “Gratitude to Old Teachers” by Robert Bly, a Minnesotan poet:

When we stride or stroll across the frozen lake  
We place our feet where they have never been.  
We walk upon the unwalked. But we are uneasy.  
Who is down there but our old teachers?

Water that once could take no human weight—  
We were students then—holds our feet,  
And goes on ahead of us for a mile.  
Beneath us the teachers, and around us the stillness.

As a paleoecologist, who has stood on the ice when collecting vital records for my career, what better image to hold at this moment.

At celebrations such as this one, my grandfather, Thompson Webb, would welcome the audience by saying that they had come to “rejoice with those who rejoice.” And I am rejoicing. So thank you for being here to join Dick and me in our moment of recognition.

What I rejoice in is all the ways my career and life in science, academia, and Quaternary studies have allowed me to interact with other scientists who share my interests and passion. These people include mentors and colleagues like Herb Wright, Margaret Davis, John Kutzbach, and Dick Baker—all of whom previously have been honored by this award. Included also are Reid Bryson, Ed Cushing, John Imbrie, Bill Denison and Robert Enders, who were mentors and advisors to me; Alayne Street-Perrott, Brian Huntley, Colin Prentice, Bill Ruddiman, Warren Prell, Matt McGlone, Vera Markgraf, Jim Ritchie, George Jacobson, Pierre Richard, and Cathy Whitlock, who were colleagues; Richard Bradshaw, Steve Jackson, and Bob Thompson, who were postdocs in my lab; and Pat Bartlein and Eric Grimm, who stepped forward at key times in my career to take over, improve, and enhance tasks that I had started like the interpretation and display of data and the assemblage and management of the pollen database for North America. My father, the former director of the University of Wisconsin Press, once told me that if he had had his career to live over again he would have let go of established tasks earlier than he had done so, because you can only grow and take on new challenges when willing to let go of what keeps you busy now. And Bart and Eric, in particular, gave me that

opportunity. I loved seeing how their taking over gave my former projects a whole new life and upgraded them in ways that I would never had the time or insight to do. I appreciated this transformation both for the science that it engendered and for what it inspired in my life and career. I have also continuously experienced this transformation while working with graduate students beginning with Chris Bernabo, including Kathleen Heide, Ruth Laseski, Pat Anderson, Sally Howe, Denise Gaudreau, Jonathan Overpeck, Robert Webb, Alison Smith, and Ben Felzer, and recently involving Jack Williams, Bryan Shuman, Jeff Donnelly, and Paige Newby. What a gift to have colleagues and students with whom I could share the load and then see them take the work beyond my expectations.

To me this award honors the process of sharing and the resulting camaraderie that I so much enjoyed in my research career. Yes, much good science got accomplished, but it was the by-product of the teamwork, organization, and management of shared tasks and credit that international, interdisciplinary projects like CLIMAP, COHMAP, and TEMPO promoted during the 30-plus years of my career. And it was into such interdisciplinary research about past climates and cultures that I entered at Reid Bryson's invitation 40 years ago when I began my graduate training with him at the Center of Climatic Research in my home town of Madison, Wisconsin, in 1966. (I had been a botany major at Swarthmore College.) Fortunately Quaternary research is by nature interdisciplinary, and AMQUA has been the perfect organization at which to present this work. I thank Linc Washburn and Steve Porter, as editors of *Quaternary Research*, for all they did to make it such a leading journal in the field. Many of my key papers are published there.

From the attention above to colleagues and students and to cooperation with them in research, I reveal how much I favored cooperation over competition throughout my career. All of us scientists and academics who are involved in large interdisciplinary research projects—which require the sharing of leadership, work, and credit—face the tension raised by annual job evaluations that require us to promote ourselves and take personal credit for our research. I have enjoyed the challenge posed in holding this tension and like seeing how the multiple sponsorship behind my receiving this award signals to me that my leadership was understood and appreciated. To me nothing is finer than seeing the group project get done and the credit go to students and beginning researchers who can use it to launch their own careers. John Imbrie and Margaret Davis were great mentors in different ways by showing me how to focus credit on others.

Truth, if such can be known in this postmodern world, hides in the points of tension and contradiction. The tension between cooperation and competition—needed elements in science—offers one of those points in academic research. I cannot claim always to have gotten the balance right, but I know the side that I strived to favor.

A corollary to this tension is the problem that arises when one is blessed with excellent students and postdocs whom you mentor and train to do what you do. What happens when they leave and begin to do “your” work on their own? I was always guided by the principle that I wouldn't compete with my former students and postdocs, given my senior status and the implied power relationship. The solution that I liked was that this potential

competitive situation stimulated me to be creative and also to move on in my science and my career. Part of this solution was learning to manage my interactions with students and colleagues to find win-win situations, of which many can arise once one knows to search. I like seeing this award as honoring some of my success in just this type of creativity and leadership.

My final thanks has to go to Raymond Alf, who 44 years ago brought me as a rising ninth grader to look for vertebrate fossils across the badlands of the West. My grandparents, Thompson and Vivian Webb, gave me the gift of taking a 5-week field trip with him and other students. Ray taught at the Webb School of California, which my grandfather headed, and inspired many students with his unequalled enthusiasm for the search and discovery about past life on earth. Because of Ray, several Webb students went on to careers in geology including Dan Fisher, Malcolm McKenna, and my second cousin and AMQUA member, David Webb. This past year I published a memoir in which my grandfather tells of his founding and running the school, which is beginning its 84<sup>th</sup> year. In it he honors Ray and tells of the building of the Raymond Alf Museum at the school. All who studied with Ray remember the excitement and reverence in his voice whenever he would shout out “Laudate Deum,” at the discovery of a significant new fossil. Ray had an infectious sense of wonder in all that rocks and sediments might contain and reveal about the past. I have loved being inspired by that wonder throughout my research and teaching and in having a chance to share in that wonder with so many others.