



ROBERT STUCKENRATH, 1927–1994

Acerbic, abusive, brilliant, brusque, eclectic, exasperating, insightful, irritating, patient, patronizing, gentleman—these are but a few of the terms I have heard applied to Bob Stuckenrath over the 24-year period that I knew him. Their contradictory diversity serves to capture, if not the essence, at least some of his many different facets as a man and scholar.

Bob came from a highly educated background. In another time, some would have said he had “learning” in the genes. His father was a lawyer and many others in his immediate and extended family had extensive college training. In such a milieu, and with his great store of native intelligence, it is not surprising that, from an early age, his own interests were broad and remarkably varied. Humorously, but ruefully, he would note that, except for Latin (which he learned as a law student), the linguistic talents that characterized his family did not extend to him. Indeed, in self-deprecating fashion, he described himself as “p***-poor” in languages. Accurate assessment or not, his career as a student followed many paths—which superficially may have appeared unrelated—as did his later professional life. Yet a pattern can be discerned beneath the seemingly disparate threads. He began his higher education at Swarthmore as a mechanical engineer and, in fact, worked briefly as a junior engineer for the Baldwin-Lima-Hamilton corporation. Shortly thereafter, he transferred to Allegheny College and changed his major to history. His long-abiding interests in the pre-Revolutionary War United States and in contemporary European history took formal shape during this period, and he graduated with a degree in history in 1952.

At this juncture, his education took another turn: perhaps influenced by his barrister father, Bob entered the University of Pennsylvania Law School, where he ultimately earned an LL.B. (later converted to a J.D.). Within the pursuit of his law degree, he not surprisingly enjoyed the historical ele-

ments in title searching—“digging in the past” in a different way, he later called it—and he also became even quicker on his feet, expressing himself nimbly, logically, directly, and not uncommonly, devastatingly. Much of this “spin-off” from his legal education would serve him well and, indeed, distinguish him in his later years.

While at Penn Law School, he met his wife-to-be, Barbara, and through her was introduced to Elizabeth Ralph. Though he briefly served as a law clerk between 1955 and 1957, his legal career would end prematurely when his educational trajectory made its final shift. Uniting his historical interests with his not inconsiderable engineering talents, Bob served as a research assistant, research associate, and then research specialist in the Penn Radiocarbon Lab while completing his M.S. in Archaeology (1963) and his Ph.D. in Anthropology (1969). During his years at Penn, he had the opportunity to study within a milieu of dynamic scholars who included Robert Dyson, Carlton Coon, Loren Eiseley, Henry Fisher, J. Louis Giddings, James Pritchard, Linton Satterthwaite and both Kidders. Indeed, it was A. V. “Alfie” Kidder II who urged Bob to go to Debert, Nova Scotia, in 1963 with Douglas Byers. Widely regarded as a highly significant archaeological site from the time of its discovery, the careful excavation and dating program carried out for this fluted-point locality resulted in the recovery of a full suite of Paleo-Indian lithic artifacts firmly dated to 10,600 BP. Bob would return to Debert in 1964 and 1966, and also participate in a wide variety of other field projects, not just in archaeology but also in what now is usually called geoarchaeology. Following his M.A. project (on fluted-point chronologies in North America), Bob embarked on a study of sea-level changes in Chesapeake Bay. He would subsequently further develop and sustain an interest not only in the actors of antiquity but also in the stage upon which they performed. Indeed, from a very early point in his archaeological career he appreciated and championed a multidisciplinary approach to the systematic study of the human and natural record and their points of intersection. To his pride and credit, he *never* set aside or compromised that multi-field perspective.

During all of his formal academic training and fieldwork at Penn, he progressed in the Radiocarbon Lab from an “apprentice” scrubbing test tubes to a veritable master of his then still somewhat arcane craft. Indeed, his knowledge of all aspects of the dating process was encyclopedic—though he never deluded himself into believing that by being scientific, he actually practiced “science”. For him, radiocarbon dating was no more and no less than a tool. It was not without reason that he referred to himself as Merlin, and when he finally had his own lab dubbed it Merlin’s Lair.

At some point in 1967 or 1968, Betty Meggers and the late Clifford Evans heard Bob present a talk in Pullman, Washington, which ultimately led to Bob’s appointment as Director of the Smithsonian Institution’s Radiocarbon Laboratory, a position he would hold until 1986. Initially based in the basement of the “castle”, then moved to the Radiation Biology Laboratory in Rockville, Maryland in 1970, the Smithsonian Radiocarbon Lab would become one of the leading archaeometric facilities in the world.

It was shortly after the establishment of the Rockville version of Merlin’s den that I first met Bob. At that time, I was pursuing a postdoctoral project at the Smithsonian Institution that included, among other things, an attempt to unravel the evolution of basketry manufacture in prehistoric northern Mexico as reflected in Walt Taylor’s Coahuila collections. With some trepidation, I approached Cliff Evans and Betty Meggers about having some of Taylor’s perishables dated and was subsequently introduced to Bob. Many months and many odoriferous sandals, baskets, bags and even human coprolites later, I had a marvelous series of over 30 dates and, more importantly, had begun to appreciate Bob’s incredible patience, attention to detail, and rigid insistence on the highest quality laboratory methods, from pretreatment through combustion, counting and ultimately the

generation of a “date”. I also quickly appreciated his equally rigorous insistence on the importance of well-defined stratigraphy, firm context and clear and unequivocal association relative to samples sent to him, and his utter contempt for archaeologists or other field workers whose data collection or documentation processes were not up to his standards. On many occasions, when asked about this putatively old site or that apparently anomalous date, or this archaeologist or that geologist, Bob would furrow his brow and bark “garbage in, garbage out!” Since the reliability of any date is only as good as its context, and its context only as good as its excavator, it is small wonder that when Bob weighed excavators on the scales of balance he found many wanting.

He frequently developed lifelong working relationships with those whose work he trusted, and it is not surprising that his circle of closest colleagues included a cadre of scholars well known for careful and meticulous field and lab practices. Interestingly, this group—which included geologists like Hal Borns, paleogeographers like Karl Butzer and archaeologists and geoarchaeologists like Bob Ackerman and Vance Haynes—all had a uniformly high opinion of Bob’s work even when they disagreed with his professional views on certain subjects.

Nowhere was this more personally apparent to me than when he undertook in 1973–1974 the assay of the first of some 50 radiocarbon samples from Meadowcroft Rockshelter. In what was to become a nearly two-decade-long project, Bob produced a 12,000–16,000-yr occupational chronology, the very earliest phases of which have been hotly debated almost *ab initio*. With Meadowcroft critics for whom he had little respect—or, sometimes, more accurately, little patience—he was indeed acerbic, abusive, brusque and caustic. But for others whose disagreements were well reasoned and carefully advanced, he had the greatest personal respect, whatever he might say (or, rarely, publish) in a moment of vexation.

My long experience with Bob during the Meadowcroft years led me (then Chair of Pitt’s Anthropology Department and Director of the Cultural Resource Management Program) to offer Bob a “home” for his lab and a new position when the Smithsonian closed his facility for financial reasons in 1986. Once ensconced and fully operational in Pittsburgh, Bob continued to take on a myriad of archaeological, geological, geoarchaeological and paleoenvironmental dating projects from sites and localities all over the world. He would continue this pattern until and even after his lab was again closed for budgetary reasons in 1992. Indeed, shortly before his death, Bob had acted as a consultant to Exxon on possible damage to archaeological sites caused by the *Valdez* oil spill and, characteristically, brought his usual rigor to bear in that unfortunate situation.

Recounting the dozens of projects with which Bob was engaged throughout his long and productive career reflects the great breadth and depth of his scholarly interests but does not, in my mind, fully underscore his unique qualities as a nonpareil scientist or a man. Unfortunately, I can only touch on some of these.

His insistence on multiple dates (preferably in long stratigraphic series) was evident from his Debert dissertation days and would characterize his dating philosophy to the end. Whether it was Meadowcroft, the Lower Vaal River in South Africa, Baffin Island, coastal Maine or anywhere else, “more” was *always* better—if the excavator could be trusted. His willingness to experiment with new sample materials (from whale blubber to ostrich eggshells) or to refine methods appropriate to more “traditional” dating media like charcoal, paleosols or coprolites is also well documented in his career. In the ostrich egg “case study”, another aspect of his character or personality was revealed when he and Karl Butzer collected a modern eggshell that Bob hoped to compare to archaeological specimens he was about to date. To preserve the shell for transport, they decided to hard-boil it, and while awaiting the results, became sufficiently engrossed in other matters to forget that they had not

punctured the specimen before immersion. Blown back to reality by the exploding egg, they had plenty of time to consider their error while laughingly cleaning up the debris.

This incident reflects another side of Bob and one that many who did not know him well seldom saw—his great humor and wit. Even when he was caustic, he was *elegantly* caustic; and though he may have used humor as a weapon, he did it with dash, flair and inimitable style. Though he was not a misanthrope, I am sure Bob would have gotten on quite well with Jonathan Swift.

Characteristically, at the time of his death, Bob had a number of ongoing projects and obviously hoped to continue both his research and his lifelong “affair” with the outdoors, especially through the venue of fly-fishing. No one—least of all me—can summarize a life, a career and a person like Bob Stuckenrath. He was one of those very rare persons who, once met, was not easily forgotten or readily dismissed. Like his chosen namesake, the Merlin of Arthurian romance, some took him well, others took him badly, but no one took him lightly.

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