

OBITUARIES

Professor J. Lewis (Lew) Robinson

Professor Lew Robinson, founding head of Geography at UBC, passed away at the age of 90 on July 19, 2008.

After short stints teaching Geography to US Army Engineers, Meteorology at Clark University and Cartography at Leicester (MA) Junior College, J. Lewis Robinson began his formal career as a professional geographer with the Government of Canada when he was employed by the Northwest Territories Administration of the Department of Mines and Resources in 1943. He was well-prepared for this assignment as his PhD thesis, completed at Syracuse University the year before, was a regional geography of the Canadian Eastern Arctic.

Lew came to UBC from Ottawa in September 1946. His mandate was to organize and expand the Geography program in the department of Geology and Geography, which he did with such success that Geography was established as an independent division in 1953 and a separate department in 1959. Lew was appointed divisional chair and was the first head of Geography, a position he held until 1968. He then served as acting head for a year from 1974.

He was widely acknowledged as an exceptional teacher and undergraduate advisor. He received the UBC Master Teacher Award in 1977 and the Distinguished Teaching Award for Canada from the National Council for Geographic Education in 1982. He was awarded honorary degrees by his alma mater, the University of Western Ontario (the citation noted that he was the first student from Western Canada to become a professional geographer) and UBC, and also received the Centennial Medal and Silver Jubilee Medal from the Government of Canada, the Massey Medal of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and the CAG Award for Service to the Profession of Geography.

There were two principal foci to Lew's research and teaching: the regional geography of Canada and the discipline of Geography in Canada. Among his books and monographs the following were perhaps the best known: *The Canadian Arctic* (an Information Bulletin of the Geographical Branch, 1952); *Resources of the*

Canadian Shield (Methuen, 1969); *British Columbia: A hundred years of geographical change* (with W. Hardwick, Talon Books, 1973); and *Concepts and Themes in the Regional Geography of Canada* (Talon Books, 1983). He also published well over a dozen book chapters, half a dozen articles in *The Canadian Geographer*, a similar number in *The Geographical Review*, many more in *The Canadian Geographical Journal*, and a handful in each of *The Journal of Geography*, *The Operational Geographer*, and *The Professional Geographer*, as well as several wall maps and dozens of encyclopedia entries.

Lew's devotion to the interests of undergraduate students was legendary. In 1977 he donated part of his Master Teacher Award to a Geography Scholarship Fund established by a graduate earlier in the decade in recognition of Lew's contributions as a teacher. The first award was a single one of \$100, and for several years the award continued at this level on the basis of annual donations. Subsequently endowed and generously contributed to by alumni over the years, the initiative has blossomed and this year the department of Geography made six awards of more than \$1,000 each to its best undergraduate students from the return on endowment. Lew was also immensely active in sustaining contact with Geography alumni and for many years after his retirement in 1984 played an instrumental part in producing the Geogramme newsletter.

Beyond the department, Lew took an active interest in UBC Athletics and served on the no-longer-existent UBC Athletics Council. He was also a mainstay of the department's Friday afternoon hockey games, and an important member of the Old Birds Hockey Team (he hung up his skates, reluctantly, at age 77). Beyond the campus Lew was also involved in deaf education and sports development in Canada, and was president of the Western Institute for the Deaf.

Above all but his own kin, Lew valued the Geography department and its members. He believed in the idea of the department as a community and he and his wife Jo, who survives him, worked hard through the years of his headship and into the 1970s to foster a sense of the department as family.

As a high school track star, Lew set Ontario sprint records and wrote a short story for his hometown newspaper based on this experience. The last words of his obituary, published in several newspapers, offer an eloquent testament to his full life and his many achievements: "Geographer, mapmaker, explorer, writer, teacher, mentor, husband, father and friend – the kindest man we ever knew, the boy who ran so fast – you taught us kindness, generosity and

usefulness. We will miss you. You gave us the world and more. Thank you.”

Fittingly and generously, Jo Robinson and the Robinson children Jo-Anne, David and Patricia (with their families) have initiated a scholarship for support of graduate students in the department. It will be known as the J. Lewis Robinson Memorial Scholarship.

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