

## The Armchair Geographer Remembers “A Good Guy”



Professor Charles R. Gildersleeve, TP (circa 1966)

*The University of Nebraska at Omaha Department of Geography/Geology's Charles "Chuck" Gildersleeve, 69, passed away on Oct. 10 due to complications with surgery.*

Surveyors sometimes refer to a Turning Point (TP), or a fixed object used when determining the elevation of other points. One source refers to “... turning points as “stepping stones” in your level survey ...”. I like to think of Charlie Gildersleeve as one of my turning points for my survey of life.

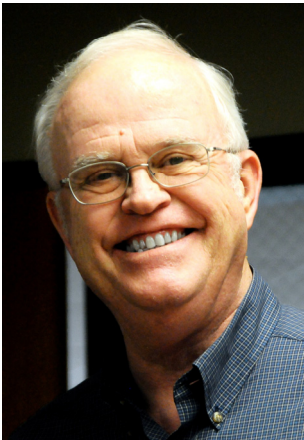
I first met ‘the Sleeve’ as I called him in August of 1977. I had enrolled at UNO as a graduate student after I completed my degree in Connecticut, and flew out to Omaha as a fresh, green, know-it-all 22-year old kid. Since I was applying to graduate school somewhat late, UNO was one of the few who still had graduate teaching assistantships available that essentially paid a small stipend for bare bones living expenses and an occasional beer or pack of smokes – it was a spartan life.

Sometime after meeting the Department Chair at UNO (Phil Vogel), I was introduced to Jeff Peake (current Chair) for who I became a teaching assistant. Jeff’s office mate (at that time, over on the second floor of the old Administration Building) was this funny guy from Iowa with a funny voice and ever-present pipe, Chuck Gildersleeve. I was enrolled in Charlie’s graduate Quantitative Geography course that fall, and it may have been the hardest Geo course I ever took! I barely salvaged a B in the course, after much sweat and tears; many years later I spoke with Chuck about the course and my struggles and I was surprised he knew. I cannot recall his exact words, but essentially he said something to the effect that if he had thought I was drowning, he would have thrown me a hook (he must have been into fishing at this point) but he wanted to see if I could “swim on your own, because that’s what life is like”. As a young grad student, I was amazed to learn about ‘Friday beer seminars’, where the faculty, staff, and students came together at one of the local taverns to commence licking our wounds from the past week. Charlie was most usually always there with some great stories; the thing about Chuck

was that he could talk about ANYTHING – sports, music, TV, movies, travel – and you never felt he was talking down at you, but with you. In those days, we both had an interest in watching Dolly Parton when she would appear on TV – according to Sleeve, he just liked to learn from Johnny Carson on how to interview and handle people, but personally I was just interested in Dolly.

I got to know Chuck pretty well after I was appointed Staff Cartographer in 1980 (a full time position) and we played softball for the department team for one summer. At some point during another ‘beer seminar’, Charlie introduced me to my wife ... of course, his intent was for her to date someone else, but we got talking and got to know each other and history happened. At any rate, Charlie was responsible for our match up, and of course I always thanked him (or blamed him) every time I saw him. A year or two later I moved to St. Louis with UNO graduate degree fresh in hand to work for the Defense Mapping Agency, where I toiled for about 8 years or so.

In the late 1980s I started reading about this new thing called GIS at the Defense Mapping library. Of course, at DMA we were doing digital data, we just didn’t call it GIS. Toward 1989-90, after calling Charlie and Jeff Peake, I decided to take a chance on coming back to Omaha to see if I could get into this new GIS field. Marv Barton, UNO Staff Cartographer, had just acquired an ESRI license, and he allowed me to come up and poke around with the basics. In the meantime, I was able to secure an adjunct position covering some of the introductory courses for UNO and did some odd job cartography contracting between the Geography-Geology Department and the Corps of Engineers. Sometime in September or October, Jeff Peake and Charlie told me Lancaster County Engineering was going to hire some people for their new GIS, and I was fortunate enough to secure a position breaking GIS ground for Lancaster County.



Professor Charlie Gildersleeve, February 2009.

(Photos provided by D. Michael Peterson, UNO Department of Geography-Geology)

I still maintained my adjunct status and on occasion my path would cross with Charlie who was always happy and delighted to see me. What amazed me was that he must have had several thousands of students over the course of his career and he would always know who I was and details about what I was involved in, asking me about the wife, my kids, my work. I began to adapt his terminology when asked if I was teaching a course; I

would always say “I am *offering* ...” Sometime in the year 2008, I had an occasion to visit UNO to turn in grades one weekend at the end of a semester, and of course Charlie was there as well as Jeff . This was some 31 years later from our initial meeting! In the midst of grading papers, preparing lectures, and doing what professors do, he burst out of his office singing “Mrs. Robinson” (ala Simon and Garfunkel) in that gravelly voiced way to my wife who had happened to come along. Breaking down in laughter, I was able to hug him and tell him how much he meant to me and as we left, I was happy and glad to see my mentor, my Turning Point and stepping stone, and looked forward to our next meeting.