

Hubert G. H. Wilhelm

Born in Germany in the early 1930's, Hubertus G. H. Wilhelm finished high school as an exchange student in Illinois in 1950. Living with a farm family and having many of the typical farm duty responsibilities he learned much about agricultural life on the Midwestern prairie. He sometimes recounts an important lesson on the township and range or 'rectangular survey' while driving as a teen along a roadway following that survey system and failing to negotiate one of the right angles and stretching a fence and scuffing up a vehicle. He would mention that there are a number of ways to learn geography.

Returning to the U.S. in 1954 Wilhelm studied under the renowned cultural geographer, Dr. Fred Kniffen and received his Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. Dr. Wilhelm joined the Department of Geography at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio in 1963.

With a dissertation research background focusing on German settlement in Texas hill country, Dr. Wilhelm was poised to look closely at the landscape settlement patterns of the Ohio country. Visiting 88 courthouses across the Buckeye State, he scoured over the records of the 1850 census, tallying the origins of Ohioans living in the state at that time. Township by township, enlisting the support of his wife and youngsters, trudged through the census schedules counting the numbers of New Englanders, Middle Atlantic migrant and southerners who came into Ohio. He tallied the numbers born in each European county that immigrated by 1850. He counted the number born in each state and mapped the settlement patterns of early Ohioans.

Not satisfied only with census data, he then visited cemeteries and studied grave markers to obtain the ground truth supporting his investigations. He studied folkways and religious affiliations of the migrant and immigrant groups. He drove the county and township byways of Ohio studying the land use patterns, architectural styles and the layout of farmsteads and orientation of farm buildings. He observed the varying patterns between different culture groups as well as the differing patterns in parts of the state surveyed by the township and range system versus those using the indiscriminate or metes and bounds survey. He visited the small communities and studied the town layouts noting those with the New England town commons versus those with the Pennsylvania diamond square or the southern Shelbyville square. He studied the pioneer routes to Ohio, land divisions, geology and glaciation and the environments that settlers found when they arrived.

Dr. Wilhelm compared differences in log construction, timber framing, and other building patterns by different culture groups. He looked at the house types, roof styles, crop production, churches, and place names. Wilhelm then went to New England and Pennsylvania and down into Virginia to explore and study the same topics there and to gather evidence and support for his research. He studied the same topics on visits to various European countries. Verification of research by ground truth is an imperative in geographical studies. No remote claims without evidence for this geographer.

Dr. Wilhelm's research has given Ohioans a strong framework from which to view Ohio's landscape and settlement patterns. He compiled his research and taught us how to read the landscape. Passing by his classroom during a lecture one was brought to a halt and caused to investigate the commotion emanating out into the



hallways. With unbridled enthusiasm and exuberance and a somewhat elevated tone of voice Wilhelm was going on about owl holes and outhouses, illustrating how, if one knew how to look, one could read the natural and cultural history of a passing farmstead or landform, or rural intersection.

Dr. Wilhelm always stressed the importance of understanding a sense of place. He taught how to recognize the stories of a place and the value of interpreting and telling those stories about who we are and where we came from. He underscored the importance of understanding of our history and origins and emphasized that it was imperative to understand where we came from if we hoped to have some idea where we are headed. Wilhelm was the kind of teacher we wish all instructors would strive to be. His passion for his subject matter was contagious. He had the fire in his belly for both the quest for knowledge as well as the zeal to teach it. It appeared to be so much fun it didn't seem like work.

In his 30 plus years at Ohio University Dr. Wilhelm developed a core curriculum in landscape studies, including "Settlement Geography", "Landscape and Culture", "Rural vernacular Architecture", and "Seminar in Historical Geography". His regional concentration was Anglo-America, and he developed and taught three principle courses: "U.S. and Canada", "Appalachia", and "Ohio".

He continued to teach for more than 30 years at Ohio University, where he is considered the father of the Department of Geography. In addition, he was twice honored as a University Professor for his teaching excellence while at the same time conducting research and writing on North America's built landscape, especially the diffusion of folk buildings (houses and barns), migration and ethnic settlement patterns. Dr. Wilhelm notes that his most time-consuming work was the 1982 statistical survey of the origin of Ohio's migrants and immigrants in 1850 on which he often credits the "willing" help of family members.

His most recent publications include *Barns of the Midwest*, a cooperative editorial effort with Allen G. Noble, and two chapters in the two volume work, *The National Road*, edited by Karl Raitz. Dr. Wilhelm's continued enthusiasm and emphasis on material culture - ethnic landscapes, barns, and other forms of vernacular architecture - have inspired many to follow in his footsteps. He wrote an important chapter on "Settlement and Selected Landscape Imprints in the Ohio Valley" in *Always a River: The Ohio River and the American Experience*, edited by Robert L. Reid. He produced a series of videos and study guides on Ohio settlement: *The Barnbuilders: Pennsylvania Settlers in Ohio*; *Log Cabins and Castles: Virginia Settlers in Ohio*; and *Saltboxes and Schools: The New England Landscape in Ohio*.

Dr. Wilhelm has supervised graduate research for many students who went on to have illustrative careers. His interest in material culture has spawned a long-time membership of PAS: Association for the Preservation of Artifacts and Landscapes, and Dr. Wilhelm is recognized as one of today's foremost experts on Ohio's cultural and agricultural landscape.

Nearly every Ohioan is fond of the barns that dot the Ohio landscape. Most would like them to remain. The work of Hubert Wilhelm is a strong foundation upon which to build an increasing knowledge base and appreciation of these vessels of Ohio's agricultural harvest and the depth of knowledge and information about Ohio's natural, cultural and architectural history which they hold within their very construction. Those that remain become more valuable every day. We are grateful for the work that has been done to help us recognize these treasures that are Ohio's barns.

Tom O'Grady

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