

In Memoriam: Geoffrey Smith

The world shrank a bit this past April Fool's day, for real—Geoffrey S. Smith, one of SHAFR's truly larger than life characters, departed this earth, two weeks after his 80th birthday. "All those ideas. All that energy. So much passion," his friend Pamela Ann Cornell wrote. SHAFR's own Chester Pach captured him well: "He was always someone who you wanted at your lunch table or in a group that was having a drink. He made SHAFR meetings so enjoyable." Indeed, "He was a riot," in the words of Andy Johns. Geoff's brilliance and his booming voice were staples of SHAFR—I can still hear him in my head as I write this—and if you were in his crew for dinner you knew you were in for a memorable evening. As I reached out to SHAFR friends while writing this obituary, I heard over and over about such gatherings, and they too are among my most treasured memories. I remember well our 2004 conference in Austin, for example, when perhaps eight of us, including Pach and Catherine Forslund, squashed into someone's car headed to Threadgills—where Janis Joplin got her start—because of course we wanted to be wherever Geoff was going.

Geoffrey S. Smith was born in 1941 in San Francisco and grew up in nearby Hillsborough. He attended the University of California at Santa Barbara for both his bachelor's and PhD, getting his doctorate under Alexander DeConde (1920-2016), a founder of SHAFR, and my advisor as well, some two decades later. In between, Geoff did a stint at UC Berkeley for his master's, participating in the free speech movement there. He arrived at Queens College in Kingston, Ontario, in 1969, and stayed for thirty-seven years, first as Professor of History and later of Kinesiology, after beginning his career at Macalester College in Saint Paul. At Kingston, where one of his favorite courses to teach was "Conspiracy and Dissent," he was beloved by his students and won the university's top teaching award. He was a basketball enthusiast at Queens as well, and his canines, another passion, featured in his Facebook page as denizens of the "Dog Forest." Geoff is survived by his wife, Roberta Hamilton, his children, David, Brian, and Kristin, and several grandchildren.

His first book, published in 1973, was *To Save a Nation: American Extremism, the New Deal and the Coming of World War II*; it was later reissued with a new introduction (New York: Basic Books, 1973; Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992). Other publications included his essay, "Racial Nativism and Origins of Japanese-American Relocation," which appeared in his SHAFR friend Sandra Taylor's co-edited book (with Roger Daniels and H.L. Kitano), *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986, 1991), and a chapter on Babe Didrikson Zaharias in David Anderson's volume, *The Human Tradition in America in 1945* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2003). He also published many reviews, as well as essays in *Diplomatic History*.

As this range of topics underlines, Geoff was always interested in new approaches to our field. On the eve of the millennium, this made him part of an important movement in SHAFR, when a number of our group became acutely

aware that such change was long overdue. At 1999's Council meeting, Marty Sherwin called for efforts to "expand SHAFR's vision and activities, to become more inclusive, and to perhaps internationalize its orientation."¹ How better than making the next meeting itself international? Geoff did so by arranging for our first conference overseas (or at least over a border) in Toronto at Ryerson Polytechnic University the following year, so far the only time the organization has met outside the confines of the United States. By 2001, as Penny von Eschen recalled at 2021's SHAFR conference, SHAFR members like Petra Goedde and herself were giving presentations on the importance of culture and gender, leading to an "avalanche" of such works in ensuing years.

Both outside our borders and within our organization, Geoff was among those who consistently pushed to broaden members' research agendas, an approach that was significant in more ways than one. SHAFR was still largely a men's club in those days (even as the Women's Breakfast and the Committee for Women in SHAFR were emerging), and Geoff did his best to change that, always welcoming the small number of women in our midst as an important mentor and friend. Catherine Forslund recalled his allyship when she was a graduate student in the 1990s. She was giving a paper on Anna Chennault's role in US-China relations when she faced the kind of question someone new to professional conferences might dread, one also laden with gendered undertones: "But how can you show that Chennault *really* had influence?" While Forslund thought about the best way to answer, Geoff stood up and in his unmistakable baritone retorted, "Well, I'm not sure that's what's most important here!" Indeed, this moment reminds us of how Geoff could switch his more typical tenor of a "humorous and light-hearted" colleague to "fierce advocacy," as Pach recalls.

In a more light-hearted moment, as Marc Gallicchio remembers, Geoff questioned a fellow panelist's contention on a late 1980s World War II session that FDR had promised Churchill the U.S. would intervene if Japan threatened Britain's Asian possessions. There was another way to see the evidence, Geoff suggested; the paper put him in mind of his breakfast that morning. "I had ham and eggs. It takes a chicken and a pig to make that breakfast...the chicken was involved, but the pig was committed." FDR may have been hatching something, in other words, but wasn't necessarily going to be bringing home the bacon for Churchill.

Geoff certainly was well versed in traditional diplomatic history, as this story illustrates, but significantly, as Laura Belmonte affirms, "Geoff was such an inspiration for those of us applying gendered analyses to foreign policy when that was controversial in SHAFR circles." At that time, such issues were *avant-garde* for SHAFR—scorned even. Geoff, however, actively promoted topics on gender, sexuality, race, sport—indeed all aspects of culture—within our Society. By going to the panels that explored these topics early on, and by encouraging such exploration of them, he helped push us in new directions. Certainly he encouraged me to visit the topic of gender and sexuality in a special issue of *Diplomatic*

History I edited in 2012, picking up a theme he had addressed in its pages in commentary he wrote back in 1994.

SHAFR Executive Director Amy Sayward well recalls Geoff's welcoming approach: "I remember how he introduced himself and engaged in conversation (purposefully) with a junior, female member of SHAFR rather than simply chatting with his peers and people he already knew. He knew what it meant to be welcoming and hospitable," inspiring her to do the same. Geoff was "such a champion of the younger scholars seeking to broaden the field," Belmonte affirms, and here she is echoed by Peter Hahn: "He was outgoing and generous to younger colleagues like me: he took an interest in my work, encouraged me to persevere, and included me in social outings where important networks and friendships were built."

Among those outings were those to Geoff's island off of Toronto, and I'm kicking myself that I never got to take the boat out there! Forslund was among those who went after the Ryerson conference and remembers it vividly to this day. Such social gatherings, both at SHAFR and at other venues, were a key part of Geoff's magnetism—and of course, these were events from which new relationships and scholarship also emerged. Jim Matray recalls an AHA Convention in Chicago he attended with his family: "one evening, we went to Berghoff's, a famous German restaurant, and at a table were a gaggle of SHAFR folks with Geoff naturally the center of attention—I remember that Anne Foster was there. Geoff immediately sprung from his chair to meet and exchange pleasantries with my wife and two children. He then gave me his card, which introduced him as "Bobby Knight Distinguished Professor of Physical & Health Education and Conflict Resolution at Queen's University." As Pach noted, Geoff "was sometimes a little outrageous, but never dull."

This was only one of the masquerades Geoff would adopt. Hahn recalled another evening when Geoff "led a group to dinner near an OAH meeting...and the restaurant host told us they were booked full. Geoff turned on his charm, convinced the host he was the comedian Steve Martin, tipped him \$50, and got us a large table in the corner, where we had a convivial evening." David Anderson too recalled this episode—Geoff looked so much like the comedian! "We had our meal and left without the server ever being disappointed to learn that she had not had Steve Martin at her table." As so many SHAFR gatherings, Anderson's conversation with Geoff at that gathering led to a scholarly collaboration—in this case the Didrikson article.

In retirement, Geoff continued to pursue his many passions, and SHAFR friends were thrilled to receive copies of his photographs and his paintings, often under his penname of Smithers Jefferson. I loved them. Sayward kept several in the SHAFR office, which came in lovely cards he sent while making donations to the SHAFR Leaders' Fund, another one of the ways Geoff supported our organization. We will all miss Geoff Smith's enthusiasm, his broad-minded approach, and his generosity of spirit, especially to junior scholars. SHAFR is a better organization because of his legacy, and those of us fortunate enough to have experienced his presence know how important it is to broaden our perceptions of what is diplomatic history, and to always warmly welcome new members to our ranks.

—*Katherine A. S. Sibley*
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Note:

1. SHAFR Council minutes, June 26, 1999, <https://shafr.org/events/june-1999>