Whether they are aware of it or not, I suspect that what has motivated the insti-
gators of this special issue of the Geographical Review is no slight nervousness over
the intellectual respectability of fieldwork within the geographical discipline. Well
might they worry, at least in the short term, for the quantifiable facts are hardly
comforting. But I must insist on taking the long view—indeed, an exceedingly long
view—in reporting that the prognosis is not all that bleak.

I base my argument on the uniqueness of the human creature. Homo sapiens is
a mammal, but of a most special sort, being the only species with the capability of
uttering fully developed languages. And the human brain that can engage in verbal
wizardry can also devise an endless series of devices to separate us farther from the
remainder of the animal kingdom. Unlike other creatures, which are inextricably
tied to the here and now, to their immediate surroundings, human beings can trans-
port themselves anywhere and anywhen mentally; and in physical terms they can
sequester themselves within artificial or even “virtual” settings, shut off from the
outer world.

This duality of our existence, dwelling as we do in our own mental and material
cocoons but also ultimately linked, like all other organisms, to the actualities of our
planet, is what lies behind the current plight of the advocate of geographical field-
work. At the moment, it is the fashionableness of the cerebral and the mechanical
that puts the field-worker on the defensive. Eventually, however, we have no choice
but to maintain awareness of our environs even as we invent new ways to rise above
and beyond them, no choice but to accept that neither life nor scholarship can be
satisfactory unless we reconcile the human superstructure in our legacy with the
generic mammalian substructure.

Well, then, just what is the status of fieldwork within the ranks of professional
geographers today? How does it rate as a topic for serious cogitation, research, or
pedagogy? The sad and simple answer is: Pretty much fallen off the screen. For a
once-vaunted venture to spiral into such a lowly estate is a radical departure from
days of yore. During the first centuries of the Modern Age, the heroic phase of West-
ern “discovery” of the world, the explorer-geographer enjoyed—personally and professionally—something approaching veneration. And it was automatically assumed that methodical field observation and recording of every sort of terrestrial and social phenomenon were central to his [sic] mission; and the general public, in step with the intelligentsia, eagerly lapped up the reports. Thus, with the professionalization of the discipline by the late nineteenth century, expertise in field methods was taken for granted.

During the early twentieth century, no self-respecting degree-granting program in geography at an American college could have imagined not offering the relevant courses. Indeed, at some of the more prestigious schools entering graduate students were required to participate in a rigorous field-camp experience for a week or two. At the very least there was a mandatory course in field methods, such as the one I shared with twenty-odd aspiring scholars at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1945–1946. But I must confess that, although we certainly enjoyed the scenery, fresh air, and camaraderie, the actual methodological benefits of learning how to plot rural land use were minimal. How many of us ever had occasion to use plane tabling in our subsequent careers?

Rather more productive, I believe, was the “Orientation Seminar” for incoming graduate students at Pennsylvania State University in the mid-1960s, one that required the various student teams to tackle and solve a set of original research problems (almost all outdoors) in central Pennsylvania by a given date. Although the experience was exhausting, it was also exhilarating, and it did inculcate a central truth: that each field problem calls for its own special approach. The demise of this grueling, but rewarding, rite of passage can be blamed on the sheer wear and tear suffered by faculty as well as the rapidly changing zeitgeist of that traumatic decade.

But the notion of the geographer as an adept field-worker had not entirely lost its luster by the 1950s and 1960s. One of the twenty-six chapters in American Geography: Inventory and Prospect (James and Jones 1954), a volume that once enjoyed virtual scriptural status, is entitled “Field Techniques”; and, as late as 1968, as the initial number in its Technical Papers series, the Association of American Geographers (AAG) published a sixty-nine-page manual on Field Training in Geography.

The situation had changed profoundly by the 1990s, though not nearly as much as in such neighboring disciplines as anthropology, sociology, and ecology. As far as I am aware, none of the leading American schools of geography currently requires training in field methods of its aspirants for higher degrees, and only a handful offer relevant courses at any level. Recent surveys of the field, such as Geography in America (Gaile and Willmott 1989), uniformly ignore the topic of fieldwork. If there is a current manual on the topic, it has escaped my attention. You will not find it identified among the fifty Specialty and Affinity Groups affiliated with the AAG. As of 1998, a mere sixty-nine persons, precisely 1 percent of the association’s membership, declared Field Methods as a topical proficiency (as against 1,203 with a passion for GIS), rendering it forty-eighth among the fifty-five options on the questionnaire (AAG 1999, 21). And rare indeed is the annual meeting of the AAG that devotes even
a single session to such matters. Moral: Don’t risk the perils, discomforts, and confusions of actually confronting places and peoples when someone or something has already performed the dirty work for you.

Why this rather abrupt sea change in the collective sensibilities of the practitioners of one of humankind’s most venerable modes of inquiry? The basic explanation is the ever-greater availability and sophistication of surrogate means for apprehending physical and social realities, the arrival of “virtual” ways of sensing the world. In a fundamental sense, the process began millennia ago, when hominids first acquired language and the capability of talking about real or imagined things beyond their immediate ken. It progressed farther with the appearance of artistic representations of landscapes and other objects of interest and the advent of the written word. Priceless and indispensable as all such media may be, they do interpose a screen, a filter, between the actual thing and the reader or gazer.

How much easier it is to accept the word or vision of our delegated expert rather than muck about in messy situations! For geographers, the map has been the prime device for grasping the nature of all earthly items. Although, if pressed, we must acknowledge the cartographer’s fallibility and the fact that her handiwork simplifies, editorializes, and inevitably distorts whatever is being plotted, we cannot help behaving as though these two-dimensional objects are faithful simulacra of something or other on the earth’s surface. No urgent reason impels us to check matters out in the field. Similarly, over the past two centuries, we have accepted without serious qualms the surrogate depiction of social reality rendered by the census taker. Again, granting godlike omniscience in those official tables, why bother going from door to door again? We can also credit the availability of photography—especially other people’s photography—for providing another good excuse to avoid leaving the comfort of library and study.

But all these media—the written and printed word, artistic drawings, maps, census data, and ground photography—have long managed to coexist with a reasonably robust tradition of geographical fieldwork. The coup de grâce was delivered by the recent triumph of our new information technologies. The ever-keener detail and range of features now at our beck and call from aerial photography and the more advanced varieties of remote sensing seem to eliminate all but the most self-indulgent need for muddy boots. Most crucial of all have been the veritably miraculous capabilities of current computer technologies for representing and manipulating the real world—or alternative versions thereof. Mesmerized by the flashing lines, colors, and patterns on the screen, our urge to sample the genuine outdoors seems to atrophy. The world out there seems somehow duller, less real, than what we relish in our darkened, windowless cubicles.

The popularity of sexy new technologies is not the entire explanation. The energetic zealots who proclaimed the so-called quantitative revolution in the social sciences in the 1960s and 1970s gave fieldwork the shortest of short shrifts. In fact, certain eminent geographers, who shall remain nameless, took pride in their ability to avoid anything as demeaning as visual contact with the great outdoors. On the
other hand, the more recent “spatial turn” in the social sciences, along with the
ascendancy of “critical” geography, finds its devotees neutral, silent, or mildly per-
missive concerning the role of fieldwork in their scholarship.

But if we can characterize the present moment as the nadir of the long career of
fieldwork, to write its obituary would be premature. Old instincts and traditions die
hard. Although many other professional organizations, such as those for geologists,
architects, and urbanologists, do schedule field trips during their annual or regional
get-togethers, no other group indulges in the practice so wholeheartedly and ex-
travagantly as the geographical. Indeed, a national or international conference of
geographers would be unthinkable without a rich menu of excursions of one kind
or another. And, of course, a fascination with places, in all their physical plenitude,
is scarcely our professional monopoly. It would take a lengthy essay to do justice to
the work of other landscape lovers, whether credentialized academics or inspired
amateurs.

The point of this discussion is that the field experience, however much its vogue
may fluctuate, is something virtually all human beings crave in varying degrees, while
reaching a higher-than-average pitch among the majority of geographers. There is an
instructive parallel here between the history of the legitimate stage and that of geo-
graphical fieldwork. In the former, lamentations about the fate of the “fabulous in-
valid” have been sounded throughout the twentieth century. In recent years the rapid
demise of live theater seemed inevitable, given the crushing competition of televi-
sion, film, videocassettes, the Internet, and other such amusements. But the remark-
able actuality is that—in the United States, at least—we have never before had so many
theatrical companies, professional and amateur, as we do now, so many plays and
musicals being written and produced, so many receptive audiences. Evidently many
millions of us still hunger for the immediacy, unpredictability, and transcendent per-
sonal electricity that only live performance can generate. It is a yearning much like
that curiosity about the infinitely varied and changing landscapes about us which we
cannot totally suppress. Note also the perennial popularity of field trips among pu-
pils in elementary and secondary schools, those opportunities to escape incarcera-
tion within classroom cages.

After these rather cosmic speculations, let me get down to earth, so to speak.
What follows are a few practical guidelines and observations. If the specific examples
cited hereafter derive largely from my own experience, the explanation is obvious.
From experience come the cases I can speak of most authoritatively.

The actual ways we conduct fieldwork are endlessly varied but fit into three gen-
eral categories. The first consists of those jobs in which a field-worker is presented
with a fixed agenda and modus operandi by an employer or supervisor. Thus he or
she must restrict curiosity to the prescribed items and collect the desired informa-
tion according to a predetermined formula. This is the system followed by tax as-
sessors, real estate appraisers, takers of traffic censuses, persons scouting optimum
locations for supermarkets or settings for moviemaking, and those tireless drudges
who, over several decades, collected all those sketches and notes on individual struc-
tured that went into the creation of the splendid Sanborn insurance atlases. Or the fieldwork may be exclusively in the form of interviews, as exemplified by the elaborate, pretested questionnaire administered over weeklong periods in 1,001 communities to generate the wherewithal for the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cassidy 1985–1996).

![Figure 1](image)

**Fig. 1**—The dapper young author assessing the military aspects of the Odenwald terrain for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Operation Groundhog, July 1946.

My encounter with such procedures began in the summer of 1946, when I was employed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to photograph and write notes on the military attributes of terrain in a portion of the American Zone of Occupation in Germany (Figure 1). Although I was given discretion as to exactly what to snap and how, the objectives were quite clear. I enjoyed less leeway in gathering material
on potential sites for factories and warehouses along the Chesapeake & Ohio right-
of-way when I worked for that railroad in the 1950s.

The second mode of fieldwork is less easy to specify, consisting as it does in
devising original field methods, or adapting preexisting ones, in efforts to solve unique
research questions. Obviously the researcher should exploit every available means
for attacking the problem, including documentary data, statistical and map analy-
sis, and, as necessary, field observations and interviews. The field methods may be
relatively standardized, as, for example, in the study of plant succession, the evolu-
tion of stream channels, or the recording of localized speech patterns. But, as often
happens, when the needed information is not forthcoming from maps, published
words, census tables, or other sources and there is no prepackaged field methodol-
ogy to fall back on, one must find novel ways to dig it out.

The advanced forms of remote sensing may help in some cases but be abso-
lutely useless in others. Scholars investigating the historical geography of log build-
ings have had no alternative but to examine corner notching at close range. Among
other phenomena that are not decipherable even with the cleverest of electronic
gadgets is the display of the national flag and the American eagle in this country. In
order to get at the interesting regional differentials in such manifestations of na-
tionalistic sentiment, I was obliged to cruise along many hundreds of miles of high-
way (Zelinski 1988a, 204-208). Similarly, it took much experimentation and pretesting
before I concocted an adequate data form for charting the regionalisms in Georgia's
settlement landscape as of the early 1950s for my doctoral dissertation. I went through
the same sweet agony in working up a proper checklist for documenting the unique-
ness of the Pennsylvania Town, the peculiarities of which are mostly not legible on
maps or air photos (Zelinski 1977). It did not take me long to realize the impossibil-
ity of creating standard manuals for exploratory geographical fieldwork—unlike their
availability for air-photo interpretation, GIS, or statistical methods.

The last of our three types of fieldwork is the most difficult to pin down yet
arguably the most intriguing. Its elusiveness stems from its really not being “work”
at all but rather the casual, unstructured sensing of our surroundings or simply an ad
hoc, impulsive exercise in getting one’s bearings. This approach to apprehending an
environment most readily comes into play when we encounter an alien place for the
very first time. The customary anesthesia with which we douse ourselves in dealing
with the familiar workaday world loses its potency; new vistas suddenly challenge us.
The inquisitive visitor—and it may be anyone, not just the card-carrying geographer—
sees things the locals have come to take for granted or may never have discerned. The
intruder deploys not only vision but all the many other senses. We soak in the strange
new soundscapes, the exotic smellscapes; we sense temperatures, humidity, breezes,
and vibrations as well as qualities of light and shadow; we sample whatever is safely
tastable and touchable. Such episodes can be downright animalian.

I daresay that a lifetime of preoccupation with a foreign area among my col-
leagues may have begun with just such a jolt to the sensorium. In how many in-
stances I cannot guess, because so few of us ever confess to the genesis of our
curiosities, that magic moment of conception, and such narratives seldom figure in the standard scholarly document. But such sensitivity to alteration need not involve a journey to faraway locales. Our regular action spaces, the quotidian, can furnish plenty of raw material for contemplation, for such environs are forever in a state of transition.

If I have any injunction to deliver, it is to counsel alertness to the landscape changes that constantly beset us. Watch for them in your daily rounds, but be especially receptive while wandering farther afield in your own country. What I have been describing, then, is fieldwork that is altogether informal, sometimes hovering on the margins of consciousness, a sensibility ecumenically attuned to all innovations in the sensed environment, to every manner of loss, gain, and the unexpected, dedicated to absorbing a dynamic world without a set agenda. It is an exercise that can occupy all your waking hours (and, in my peculiar case, if not everyone’s, even dreams).

If I may resort to the autobiographical approach again, the impetus for my formal work on welcoming signs in the United States came about from an incorrigible addiction to reading all manner of signs and noticing, during casual drives some years ago, the rather abrupt appearance of a novel genre thereof (Zelinsky 1988b). In like fashion, I stumbled upon the appetizing topic of ethnic restaurants (Zelinsky 1985) and the worldwide phenomenon of sister cities (Zelinsky 1991). The advent of some startling personal names on the shingles hanging outside medical offices in small towns inspired me to begin an ongoing study of the geography of foreign-born physicians in this country.

But my crowning example dates back to a fortnight in July 1965. Just who arranged this picaresque expedition—or why—I can no longer recall, but somehow it came to pass that Peirce Lewis, John Fraser Hart, Donald Meinig, and I spent two weeks in a single vehicle roaming the highways and byways of the Middle Atlantic region with no predetermined itinerary, all the while looking intently, quizzing each other, arguing, and then discussing matters well into the night. The region in question was essentially terra incognita for at least two of the travelers. The only immediate outcome of this eminently enjoyable adventure was a series of excursions for some years thereafter through the same general territory wherein a band of graduate students shepherded by Dr. Lewis underwent a truly eye- and mind-opening experience. But the consequences have been much larger for the general world of scholarship. Donald Meinig has told me more than once that the inspiration for his monumental tetralogy on *The Shaping of America* was ignited during that casual junket of ours.

And so I end, as I began, with a declaration of the inseparability of our two natures: the sensitivity toward our inherited environs that we share with all other sensate beings, and the peculiarly human talent for imagining and creating alternate existences. We can favor one over the other in life and work, but we can never divorce the two. If we are tempted to privilege the abstract and the artificial, as has become so much the vogue of late, be reminded of Antæus, the mythical giant who
retained his strength only when he was able to touch the earth. It is inevitable that, amid the cyclical swings of academic fashion, an inspired voyeurism will someday regain its rightful place as one of the necessary means for knowing the world.

Note

1. An exception to this would be the last two or three years of AAG meetings, in which sessions on "qualitative methods" and "fieldwork" have been in some evidence.

References


