DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
JOHN EDWARD “JACK” SUNDER

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for John Edward “Jack” Sunder, professor emeritus, history, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
JOHN EDWARD “JACK” SUNDER

Dr. John Sunder, professor emeritus of history, was born October 10, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri. His hometown had a profound impact on him, and he was a committed reader of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch for forty years. His childhood stories revolved around two settings. The first was the working-class tavern and restaurant where his aunt and uncle served beer and authentic German food for the neighborhood. Each afternoon, Jack would come home from school, perch on a corner stool, and silently observe the activities. This experience helped him hone two important skills. First, it helped him develop the patience he would later use in systematically tunneling through dozens of archives, and, second, it provided him the observational skills that made him a nationally—and even internationally—known birdwatcher.

The second place was the family’s farm where he retreated on weekends and especially during summers. There, he took all-day hikes, counted bird species, identified trees and bushes, and fell in love with the natural world. Almost everything Jack ever did revolved around nature and originated from his experiences on the farm. Whenever he took on a new research topic, he made certain that it occurred in a new geographical area and that he packed binoculars and hiking boots for the trip.

After graduating from St. Louis public schools, he entered Washington University in St. Louis where he would receive all three of his degrees. While there, he came under the tutelage of the Western historian, Ralph Bieber, whose greatest accomplishment was editing a twelve-volume series of primary documents on the exploration and settlement of the American Southwest. By concentrating on diaries and letters, and especially traders, of explorers, settlers Bieber sought to emphasize the commercial nature of much of the western movement. In this, he would serve as a model for Jack’s own research on the fur trade in the Mountain West.

It was during this time that Jack first began his extensive travels to the Rocky Mountains and surrounding areas. Not only did he track down archives, but he also traced the pathways of various fur traders, off- and on-road. By the time of his death, between his scholarly research and ornithological and botanical expeditions, he had been to most, if not all, corners of the Rocky Mountain West.

Dr. Sunder received his doctorate in 1954 for an intensive study of the career of the fur trader, Bill Sublette. In this 1959 work, Bill Sublette, Mountain Man, Jack extended the study of mountain men beyond the romantic lone-wolf fur trappers and explorers and military figures, to businessmen fur trappers. Sublette had begun as a conventional mountain man. He later developed the rendezvous system and established one of the most prosperous fur trading companies, which firmly placed Sublette and his peers within the Jacksonian period’s emphasis on entrepreneurial capitalism.

After completing his doctorate, Jack served two years in the Army in Seoul, Korea, where he co-edited a base newspaper. Upon his return to the United States in the summer of 1956, he took a position in the Department of History at The University of Texas at Austin, where he would remain for thirty-seven years. Jack joined the famous Walter Prescott Webb and then later William H. Goetzmann in developing one of the preeminent centers for Western history in the nation. Jack integrated Webb’s regional and proto-environmental approach in
his research and teaching. As a graduate instructor, he was a wonderful mentor and an even better editor who carefully and conscientiously improved his students’ works.

Within his first decade in Texas, he completed three well-respected books in addition to Sublette; these were *The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1865* (1965); *Joshua Pilcher, Fur Trader and Indian Agent* (1968); and an edited travel journal from 1839, *Matt Field on the Santa Fe Trail* (1960), all published by the University of Oklahoma Press, leader in the field. Like Sublette, his other two monographs expanded the conventional limits of the field. *The New York Times Book Review* called *The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri* “an indispensable volume,” while the *American Historical Review* praised it for transcending the romanticized version of the fur trade and the mountain man. *Joshua Pilcher* also extended the study of the fur trade by demonstrating how a lowly beaver hatter became a leading fur merchant and eventually Superintendent of Indian Affairs, replacing the heroic William Clark. In the course of his career, Jack published nineteen articles on the fur trade and the West and seventy-six book reviews. His works remain among the most heavily cited in fur trade studies today.

Nevertheless, Jack’s most prized role was that of a skilled teacher. A quiet, unpretentious man, he had a vast knowledge of a wide range of subjects. Students in his lectures on Western history would come out of class with information on such things as Viking exploration, cartography, Chinese trade goods, and paleontology. After his death, a review of his papers revealed scores of letters from former students thanking him for the education and not just in Western history.

Jack’s favorite course was his two-semester upper-division lecture class on the history of the American West, first taught in 1957-58, and then almost yearly until his retirement in 1996. He proudly stated that the “course is entirely innovative and… no other university has a course quite like it.” Other Western history surveys followed Frederick Jackson Turner, both in the concept of the moving frontier line and his declaration of frontier democracy. Jack ignored and even denied the latter and instead undertook a comparative approach to the frontiers of the Old Northwest, the Rocky Mountains, the Hispanic Southwest, Alaska, and Canada. This put him far ahead of his contemporaries who were slow to develop a comparative approach to Western history. He eventually went as far as to deny the word “American” as a descriptor for the inhabitants of the United States, pointing out that Canada and Mexico were equally part of North America. Instead, he argued that “Americans” should be called “USians,” a phrase that never caught on in the United States outside of his classes, but one that has become increasingly popular through his international students in Finland and other Nordic countries.

In 1976, he developed a writing component upper-division seminar on North American Indian history. This was the only history course, besides his Western history class, to deal with Native Americans and, according to Jack, one of the few in the University, outside the Department of Anthropology, to study Native Americans at all. As in his Western history class, Jack ignored national boundaries in the scope of the course and attracted students from departments all over campus.

Jack’s greatest love was birding. He was an original member of the American Birding Association and a longtime member of the Travis County Audubon Society. He birded on four different continents but loved Travis County and the High Island on the Gulf the most, and especially the Audubon Christmas Counts. He was a Life Member of the Sierra Club and contributed regularly to Nature Conservancy and the Austin Humane Society. He swam at least a mile every other day at the various Austin YMCAs for close to thirty years. After his retirement, he sublimated his research skills into genealogy, tracing his family back to the Champagne province of France in the 1700s.

John Sunder died on April 3, 2011, at St. David’s Hospital in Austin. He left no family, but he did leave many, many friends and admirers from all areas of his life. His papers are at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Mark C. Smith (chair), Erika Bsumek, and Jeffrey Meikle.

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