

Milton L. Barnett

January 16, 1916 — June 17, 1994

On a pleasant summer afternoon in mid-August, close to a hundred people gathered near the Old Mill at Upper Enfield, Robert Treman State Park, to celebrate the life of Milton L. Barnett. In words and music, the celebration reflected the many facets of Milt's life and enabled a sharing of the man as he saw himself and as others saw him.

Born in New York City in 1916, Milt described his grade school and high school education as standard American. When very young, he was introduced by his mother to a variety of books on Asia, and by the time he was a teenager, he knew that he was going to study Chinese language. However, his entry into Asian studies took a very circuitous route. Early in his undergraduate life, uncertain of the merits of further academic training, he dropped out of college and later joined the Army. Volunteering for language training in Chinese, in 1943 the Army Specialized Training Program sent him to Cornell. Here he first met Knight Biggerstaff and Lauriston Sharp, two Cornell faculty members who would become lifelong friends and colleagues and would have a marked influence on Milt's professional career.

After a year of language training at Cornell, Milt was sent to Ft. Riley, Kansas, to be trained in horsemanship and small weapons for China. But the war ended before he could put this training into practice and, with Lauri Sharp's encouragement, he returned to Cornell to complete his undergraduate and graduate studies in anthropology (A.B. degree 1947, Ph.D. degree 1952). While at Cornell, he undertook fieldwork with the resettlement of the Hopi Indians among the Mohave in the Southwest and began a long-term interest in the lives of Native American peoples. However, his thesis research continued his commitment to Chinese where he undertook a study of the pattern of alcoholism among the Chinese in Boston, New York, Atlanta, and Phoenix.

In 1950, even before completing his Ph.D. degree, Milt was hired as an Instructor in Anthropology at Wisconsin. His years on the Wisconsin faculty established his reputation earlier-on as an outstanding teacher and advisor of students. This reputation was built upon a pedagogical style of using stories and personal experience to make conceptual and theoretical arguments and engage students in new ways of thinking about particular issues and ideas. This style also built upon a view of scholarly activity that combined theory and practical work. But for Milt, it was fieldwork that provided the excitement.

Milt's first overseas assignment was in 1953 as a member of an interdisciplinary team working on the solution of community development problems in Venezuela. Closer to home, he maintained his contact with the Hopi

and Mohave, and he and his students studied the Ojibway and Chippewa in Wisconsin. His interest with Native American issues continued during later years at Cornell where he played a critical role in the development of the American Indian Studies Program.

It was not until 1960 that Milt made his first trip to Asia. He went to Indonesia for six months to investigate the feasibility of establishing a training center for community development. Although he recommended against such a center, in his own words he “fell in love with Java”. This was not, of course, his first love (China), but it was nonetheless deep and abiding.

Not long after this trip, Milt accepted the offer of Arthur Mosher, President of the Agricultural Development Council (ADC), to join the field staff in Asia. The ADC, in which Milt served for over a decade, was created in 1953 to counterbalance the support given to the “hard sciences” by the Rockefeller Foundation’s overseas programs. His first assignment was in the Philippines where he served from 1962 to 1966 as advisor to the Philippine government on community development while simultaneously teaching at the University of the Philippines. He then moved to Malaysia where he served as advisor to Prime Minister Tun Razak on rural development and was involved in teaching and research at the University of Malaya. In recognition of his services, Milt was honored with the Government’s Panglima Setia Mahkota Award, an award normally reserved for Malaysian citizens.

Characteristically, however, Milt had serious reservations about his role as an expatriate advisor. On the one hand, he felt that anthropologists had an obligation to interpret the broad shifts that were coming to characterize life in Asia and to help buffer the impact of change on peoples who had limited contact with the industrial west. On the other hand, however, he was concerned lest the interpretations be misguided and the advice he offered inappropriate.

In 1973, Milt returned to Cornell for the third and final time, now as a Professor in the Department of Rural Sociology. He was concerned to find on his return to academia that in too many ways the exchanges between students and faculty that had characterized his own student and professional experiences had been transformed into a mode of lecturing which distanced students from faculty. For Milt, these new exchanges excluded the possibility of professors learning from their students and eroded the give and take that enabled special and long-term relationships to develop and sustain professional life. Another important change which Milt often fought was the declining appreciation of fieldwork and social practice and their connection to theory building. As Astri Wright, one of Milt’s students, acknowledges: “Professor Milton L. Barnett(s)...many years in anthropology and

international development enabled him to ceaselessly insist that there were ways to bridge the academic world with the ‘real.’”

Milt Barnett’s sustained commitment to what was a rapidly declining form of exchange between students and faculty and his appreciation of the connection between the practical and the academic were critical aspects of the Department of Rural Sociology’s reputation as a leading arena of development studies in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s. And, it is likely that it is because of these pedagogical and intellectual commitments that Milt attracted a steady stream of graduate students, some would say far too many students. But with Milt, students were the first priority, and there was always time for advice or council on professional or personal matters. In fact, students frequently shared in family events well beyond the confines of Warren Hall or the University. As Charlie Mehl, a graduate student during that period, recalled: “And then there were the nights of smelting, the evenings of collecting maple sap, and the good conversation and companionship.” And, as many of his students and colleagues also came to appreciate, we all received our reading assignments from Milt and talked on and on about a novel, a critical essay or the sharing of a recent trip. As a long-term friend and colleague, Cliff Wharton recalls:

I first met Milt in 1953 when he visited Venezuela as a part of an interdisciplinary team from the University of Wisconsin supported by Nelson Rockefeller for whom I was working. From the beginning I had a lasting impression of Milt as a caring scholar. He was genuinely concerned about people in all walks of life. Whether he was working with Native Americans, selecting ADC fellows to study in the United States, or advising prime ministers and presidents, he was always himself—Milt Barnett, the scholar, the advisor, the colleague, and the friend.

And, as Nancy Peluso says, in capturing what many of our recollections bring to mind: “I will remember with affection: the smile, the twinkle, the raised eyebrow, the adjustment of the pipe; the warmth, the concern, the moral support, the man.”

One need only add that despite the assurance and comfort he gave to others, Milt often saw himself in a different light. As a person whose mind (and office) was not always organized, he wondered why others sought his advice and trusted his judgment; he was sometimes uncertain as to whether he was indeed being helpful; he hoped that at the very least he was doing no harm; he had a deep sense of humility about his role and accomplishments in life.

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