

In Memoriam

By Larry Gurrola

It was a beautiful Sunday morning when I first walked with Tom. As I left the Old Mission, I saw him in the rose garden, gazing off toward the Riviera, hands shading his eyes. I yelled hello from across the street. As a graduate student in my third year in UCSB's Department of Geological Sciences, my work benefited greatly from Tom's contributions — both via maps and methods — and he had also accompanied me in the field on several occasions to further my research on faults and earthquake hazards. Thanks to his help, I was eventually able to accurately map the Santa Barbara coastal plain, improving on the work he started as a legendary geologic expert a generation before me. I didn't expect him to recognize me that morning at the Mission, but to my surprise, he called me by name, and smiled as I approached.

Geology is the study of the earth's materials. In order to utilize resources, such as petroleum, or to avoid hazards, such as landslides, these materials need to be mapped. Geologists who specialize in mapping are called field geologists, and Tom Dibblee was that field's foremost pioneer.

During that morning's walk on Alameda Padre Serra, he spoke of the field data he had gathered in Santa Barbara in the 1940s, but he was also interested in the data I was collecting. He listened intently while I shared my interpretations with him. We usually agreed on geological issues, but there were a few occasions where we didn't, such as when I discovered an unmapped fault in Goleta. I asked Tom what his thoughts were and, although I was confident in my findings, he disagreed and was reluctant to accept my argument. But later, during one of our many walks, he shared with me that he agreed with my discovery and even told me, "Well done." I always knew he was a man of pride, but that day, he showed me a more important side of himself — that Tom was foremost a man of science searching for the "truth."

*I always knew he was a man of pride, but that day, he showed me a more important side of himself — that Tom was foremost a man of science searching for the "truth."*

Walking with Tom, I slowly realized that I had gained his confidence in my mapping skills, but the most gratifying aspect of our walks was getting to know each other on a personal level and establishing our friendship. Though geology was always a popular topic, our conversations tended to focus more on Tom's stories about growing up in a very different Santa Barbara. He talked about what he learned via his professional career and his beautiful family history. I would also share tales about my life, and what struck me most was that Tom was sincerely interested in me as a person.

As my professional geologic research progressed in Santa Barbara, I would take Tom to my project sites. He had mapped the South Coast simply by observing the ground's surface, and appreciated the benefits of the excavation equipment used on my sites, which allowed us to actually see faults and other geologic structures. Tom enjoyed viewing these the most — he could see how accurately located his mapped "fault line" was in comparison to the actual location. A testament to being a man ahead of his time, Tom was usually right, even without the benefit of only being able to see the surface.

Recently, I visited Tom to tell him that I had a fault exposed and that his mapped location of the fault line was very accurate. He smiled, but it wasn't a very cheerful smile. His health was declining and he had not been in the field for quite some time. He asked if he could visit the trench, and I recall the gleam in his

eyes when I said, “Yes.” I couldn’t refuse him, even though I was anxious because the access to the fault required manipulation of steep, rocky terrain.

I took Tom to the site and, because it was too dangerous to enter the trench, walked him to a spot where he could look safely. After a while, I tried to guide him back to the car, but it was impossible to stop Tom from observing the insides of the ground; he was determined to confirm what he had mapped some 60 years ago. So we walked around the trench and made it to a spot where he could get a better look. I held onto Tom as he leaned over the edge. I sighed with relief when he was finished, and watched as he started off without me. But suddenly my heart was in my throat — Tom lost his footing and fell toward the open trench. To prevent him falling in, all I could do was position myself between him and the deep hole. Luckily, Tom regained his footing but still fell against me, and I started slipping toward the open trench. As I tried to push Tom away from the hole, a gardener saw what was happening and grabbed him. I regained my balance and we walked back to my car. Tom didn’t mention the near fall — he was too busy reveling in the fact that he had accurately mapped the fault six decades ago.

That was Tom’s last visit to the field. When Tom Dibblee passed away, I realized the impact he had on my professional life. But as I reflect on our many walks, site visits, and scientific discussions, I’m happy to say that I had a small impact on his life as well — what an overwhelming feeling.

I already miss Tom very much. I know that when I’m in the field, I’ll always have lasting memories of this exceptional geologist. But I’m most proud to say he was also a wonderful friend.

Larry Gurrola’s maps are now widely accepted as the most accurate continuation of Tom Dibblee’s work.