**PROFESSOR TURNS CLOWN**

I first encountered the name Charles Boas when I was working on my M.A. degree in 1962 at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. He had just published an article in the journal *Economic Geography*, a comprehensive and perceptive article on the location of the U.S. automobile industry. We all had to read and discuss the article in Dr. Otis P. Starkey’s seminar in economic geography. We learned that the automobile article was based on Dr. Charles’ Boas’s Ph.D. dissertation at the then-mighty Department of Geography at the University of Michigan, and that he was then teaching at nearby Michigan State University. Little did I know then that I would myself be teaching five years later at the up-and-coming Geography Department at Michigan State University.

In 1964, the same year that Dr. Charles Boas published another article on the U.S. automobile industry, establishing himself as an up=and-coming scholar at the up-and-coming Geography Department at Michigan State University, Dr. Boas, Dr. Boas achieved national notoriety. I remember seeing a headline in *Time Magazine,* “Professor Turns Clown.” Of course, I recognized that the person in the article was the very same scholar I had been reading and admiring, Dr. boas. The article explained that he had given up being a professor to join the circus as a clown.

Following that flashy headline, Dr. boas dropped from my concerns. He apparently published no more scholarly articles. No one ever talked about him and there was nothing more in the media or in the profession about him. In 1969 I actually saw his signature on a paper taped to the wall in the audio-visual storage room where he had signed out a projector in 1964. I learned that during the summer of his first year at Michigan State he dressed up as a clown for a few days and got a “pick-up” job as clown for a circus that had come to Lansing, Michigan. The next two summers, he joined the circus as a clown, traveling with the carneys from city to city. He became a professor again in the fall. The next summer, he extended his clowning profession into the fall season, thereby rendering the headlines, “Professor Turns Clown.”

So it turns out that I replaced a clown when I joined the faculty at Michigan State University in 1967.

Again, a long lapse of time intervened during which time no one had followed the Charles Boas story.

In 1980, nine years after I had left Michigan State for a faculty position at the University of Georgia, I was attending a meeting of the National Council for Geographic Education in Pittsburgh just prior to Christmas. This meeting was mainly attended by geography teachers and commonly met over the Christmas break. I had just finished presenting a paper on industrial location when a rather portly gentleman with ample tummy and full white beard approached me, asking if I would kindly send him a copy of my paper, as he was working on a lengthy manuscript on a similar topic. I of course agreed that I would and asked him for a copy of his manuscript-in-progress. I glanced down at his name tag. It was Charles Boas! His affiliation was York University in York Pennsylvania.

He said, let’s go into the lounge and I’ll buy you a drink,” though I seemed to smell alcohol on his breath already. We had a fairly long talk about his life. He was drinking double gin martinis, and I don’t know how many he had, but I recall that I found it remarkable that he didn’t get drunk, though perhaps his speech gradually became a bit more deliberate.

He mused regretfully that he could not continue to be a clown because it was too hard on his wife and daughter to be on the road so much. He had to quit, he said, but added wistfully that that was the happiest time in his life. He told me he had always been a drinking man and being a clown was conducive to drinking. Clowns were supposed to act silly and if he fell down, that was what clowns were supposed to do. A lot of people in the circus drank, he said, and “no one was ever on my case.” “Besides,” he said, “a clown’s outfit being so bulky was a good place to stash a half-pint of gin.” He had been teaching at York University for many years now and as soon as his daughter graduated from college, which he was paying for, perhaps he might join the circus again, though he realized that “the heyday of circuses had come and gone,” he said. He was returning to York, Pennsylvania, tomorrow, as he had gotten only one day off from his Christmas break job of being Santa Claus, which he had been doing now for over ten years. That explained the long white beard.

Finally, we shook hands, each promising to send our respective manuscripts to each other.

Upon my return to Athens, Georgia, I put my paper in the mail to Dr. Charles Boas. A couple of days later, and two days before Christmas, I received a bulky package posted from York, Pennsylvania.

It was not from Charles Boas, but rather from his wife. She wrote:

“I found your business card in Charles’ wallet with a note on the back to send you his Pennsylvania industry manuscript, which is enclosed. Charles died of a heart attack six days ago while being Santa at the York Mall. Since he told me upon his return from Pittsburgh that you were his best friend when you were both at Michigan State, I am also enclosing his name tag that was on his office door at Michigan State. He had so few firnds. I hope it will bring you good memories.”

Even though the facts got garbled somehow, it was indeed a treasured Christmas present, undeserved and unexpected, but warmly cherished on that bittersweet Christmas in 1980.

Merry Christmas Dr. Charles Boas and merry Christmas to all.