

Memorial to Robert M. Norris (1921–2012)

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In his own words, Professor Robert M. Norris “shuffled away” quite peacefully at home with his wife, daughter, and son-in-law at his side, on 31 August 2012.

Bob was a second-generation Californian, born in Los Angeles in 1921 when it was smaller than San Diego or San Jose are today. His early education was in the Los Angeles public schools. In the depths of the Great Depression, his family moved to the mostly rural San Fernando Valley in 1939, and that fall he entered UCLA (the University of California, Los Angeles) as a chemistry major. Providentially between semesters on winter break in 1940, Bob and a high school friend went on a field trip led by Professor Robert W. Webb to the pegmatite quarries in San Diego County and thence to the Salton basin. This was a life-changing experience, so that once back at UCLA, Bob wasted little time in changing his major to geology.

By 1942 the draft was about to convert Bob into a soldier, so he enlisted in a naval officers training program instead and was instructed to stay at UCLA until he had earned his degree, which he was awarded in October 1943. After being commissioned ensign in the U.S. Naval Reserve in April 1944, he served in the Pacific Amphibious Fleet until June 1946. His naval duty in the Pacific was aboard a small, but sea-going landing craft ultimately involved in the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Before he was discharged, Bob had some duty in Okinawa, Taiwan, and mainland China. He left naval service at a Lt. (jg) grade and remained in the U.S. Naval Reserve until 1953.

Like many of his former UCLA classmates, Bob returned to UCLA for a master’s degree, mapping an area south of Lompoc, California, under the supervision of M.N. Bramlette. Another fortuitous event occurred when department chairman James Gilluly stopped Bob in the hallway and offered him a teaching assistantship. Although teaching had never entered his mind, experience as a TA, which included occasional substitute lecturing for Professor U.S. Grant IV, settled the question.

Conversations with Grant and Webb made it clear that a Ph.D. degree was necessary for a position at a four-year college, and Grant suggested the Scripps Research Institute where the field of marine geology was just getting started. To hedge his bets a bit, Bob completed course work for a junior college teaching credential before going off to La Jolla, California, to work under the supervision of Francis P. Shepard. Bob’s Ph.D. degree was awarded in June 1951 and shortly thereafter, Bob had interviews at Santa Barbara College, the precursor to the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Although he was chosen among his competitors (Jack McGill and Warren Hamilton) for a new position, the university administration at Berkeley refused to authorize his appointment at that time because the postwar enrollment bulge had



passed. Fortunately, Francis Shepard had just been awarded a large American Petroleum Institute grant to study recent sedimentation on the Gulf Coast at two locations: the Mississippi delta and the barrier islands and shallow bays near Rockport, Texas. Shepard needed two party chiefs and Bob was chosen for the Rockport area and led two field teams, one in the summer of 1951 and the other in the winter of 1952. Bob and his new wife, Ginny, had a honeymoon of sorts in Texas during the winter season.

During spring 1952, Webb, having transferred from UCLA to UCSB, went on sabbatical leave to Washington, D.C. Norris replaced him as a member of a two-man geology section in the Department of Physical Science, the other member being Charles Douglas Woodhouse. Once the geology "section" became the Department of Geology, Bob became its first chairman, serving from 1960 to 1964.

During his long UCSB career, Bob taught the introductory physical geology course, geomorphology, geology of California, and the spring field mapping class in Tick Canyon. The Robert M. Norris Prize in Field Geology honors his teaching efforts in that course. He also organized and taught the first University of California course in marine geology outside of Scripps. This course led his student, Bob Ballard, discoverer of the *Titanic*, to a career in marine exploration.

A very lengthy list of UCSB students will best remember Bob for being a frequent and enthusiastic leader of department field trips, later codified as Geology 18, to the mountains and deserts of southern California. Those 4–5-day fall and spring sojourns were real adventures, especially those to the eastern Mojave Desert where, after climbing and experiencing the "singing dunes" of Kelso, the group would repair to "The Bunny Club," a unique desert cabin that Bob and his brother built among giant boulders in the Granite Mountains. On occasion, Bob and Bob Webb used these trips to detour to old abandoned cars, from which they collected parts and pieces for their joint hobby of car restoration.

From 1970 to 1975, Bob was director of the Santa Cruz Island Field Station when that entire island, except its eastern end, became part of the University of California's Natural Reserve System. He and his brother, Ken Norris, professor of natural sciences at UC Santa Cruz, founded the Granite Mountains Natural Reserve in the Mojave Desert.

In 1981, Bob received the Neil Miner Award from the National Association of Geology Teachers for "exceptional stimulation of interest in the geologic sciences," the highest award conferred by that organization. Also in 1981 he was the recipient of the Robert Wallace Webb Award, which is presented occasionally by the Far Western Section of the American Geological Institute for sustained excellence of Earth sciences teaching and sustained exceptional service to the Earth science teaching profession. Bob was a member of the Geological Society of America, the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, SEPM (Society for Sedimentary Geology), the Society of Sigma Xi, Phi Delta Kappa, the American Geographical Society (fellow), and especially an avid member of and participant in the activities of the National Association of Geology Teachers.

His research centered on Quaternary geology, Quaternary shelf sedimentation, and geomorphology, especially sand dunes and shoreline erosion problems. He was a Fulbright scholar while on sabbatical at the New Zealand Oceanographic Institute and led three cruises that investigated Holocene shelf sedimentation. He was also a member of the International Geophysical Year "Downwind Expedition" off the west coast of South America (1957–1958), including Easter Island. He and Bob Webb co-authored *Geology of California*, the first comprehensive attempt to compile the complex geology of that state as a coherent whole, a daunting task in the days before the unifying paradigm of plate tectonics. More recently, Bob authored *The Geology and Landscape of Santa Barbara County and Its Offshore Islands*.

Bob is survived by his wife, Ginny, sons Jim and Don, daughter-in-law Christine, daughter Betsy, son-in-law Bob, and two grandchildren Ariel and Aaron. He lived a long, full, and good life. He was a man of great dignity and heart who will be long remembered by his family, many friends, and a multitude of students.

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