

A Fanciful Signpost History

by
Merritt Helfferich

In 1973, Dr. Keith Mather, an Australian geophysicist and Director of the Geophysical Institute, conferred with Geophysical Institute Advisory Board member Rear Admiral Paul A. Smith, deciding that it was important to indicate to confused visitors, new graduate students, and the directionally handicapped just where in the world we were (and still are except for continental drift.)

The City of Fairbanks had long before provided an end-of-the-trail Alaska Highway milepost to show travelers the distances they had traveled, but there was a much larger world to consider.

Dr. Mather had attracted a large number of incomprehensible "Strine-speaking" graduate students to the Geophysical Institute from Australia and, to some of us, it seemed important to indicate in which direction they would find their home on graduation. In addition, it was important to indicate where in this sub-arctic community one would look for the North Pole and, if one was oriented by occident toward the southern hemisphere, the South Pole should be included as well. The North Pole we are talking about is the "spin pole" of the earth's axis rather than the other poles such as the "Magnetic Pole," the "Pole of Inaccessibility," or the "Geomagnetic Pole," which difference few other than the geophysicists care about anyway. Once deciding to indicate these important locations it also seemed prudent politically and socially to indicate the directions to the birthplace or origin of the several other foreign and resident researchers and to other important locations such as the holy source of funding, Washington, DC.

Once set on these acknowledgements the direction list grew and grew and eventually Dr. Mather directed Mr. James Parry, Supervisor of the Geophysical Institute Machine Shop, to produce directional signs to a total of 44 world locations. Admiral Smith carefully calculated the great circle azimuths and distances in kilometers (no old English distance units for this post) to each of the locations. Jim Parry

then designed a vertical spiral mounting pattern for the signs to allow them not to be grouped on top of each other.

Once the signs and the signpost were joined appropriately and their mounting base installed on the mall, Dr. Mather was concerned that the job should be technically correct. He enlisted the Institute surveyor to provide a known azimuth for the sign to be correctly installed. It would not do at all for someone to set off on a journey for Melbourne, Pitcairn Island, Summit Lake, or Thule and be headed in the wrong direction.

The sign as erected was a thing of beauty and a destination location for many people. Visitors, school children, confused graduate students, and lost wanderers would seek it out for amusement, relocation, and, unfortunately, climbing. We soon found out that the pressure of a leaning adult or climbing child would break off the 48-inch long signs and Jim Parry and machinist Bill Baranauskas were kept busy reconnecting these signs to their creation.

Now we celebrate the reinstallation of this useful and interesting kilometer post at the dedication of the West Ridge Plaza. This geophysical and engineering artifact will again attract and guide adventurers, graduate students, and the lost and confused to their homes or destinations.



Installed in 1973, the Milepost Sign was intended to symbolize the global reach of the Geophysical Institute's research program. Recently refurbished, the sign was re-installed on March 18, 2008.

Photo credits: Sabra McCracken, Jeff Pederson (GI), and Dale Pomraning (GI)

West Ridge Plaza Dedication
Milepost Sign, Seating Area and the Circumpolar Learning Habitats

Monday, May 19, 2008
1:00 – 2:00 PM

PROGRAM

Welcome - Jake Poole, Associate Vice Chancellor,
University Advancement

From Parking to Park – An Overview of the West Ridge Plaza Project - Deborah Horner, University Planner, Office of the Provost

The Milepost Sign – Yesterday and Today
Roger Smith, Director/Professor, Geophysical Institute
Merritt Helfferich, CEO, Innovation Consulting, Inc.,
Associate Director (ret.), Geophysical Institute

The West Ridge Circumpolar Learning Habitats
Robert Wheeler, Professor, Forestry Specialist,
Cooperative Extension Service

Alaska Arbor Day - Ritchie Musick, Founding Member
and Treasurer, Fairbanks Arbor Day Committee

Donor Recognition and Tree Planting
Jack B. Townshend, Special Projects Coordinator,
U.S. Geological Survey
Håkan Schüberg, Forester, Jämtland County Council,
Institute of Rural Development, Bispgården, Sweden
Geophysical Institute Associates Endowment Fund
School of Natural Resources and Agricultural Sciences
Endowment Fund

Refreshments at the Milepost Seating Area

Become a West Ridge Plaza Supporter – Continue the momentum by making a donation at:
www.uaf.edu/giving - specify the West Ridge Plaza Project