

P.O. Box 81082
Fairbanks, Alaska 99708

July 8, 1986

Dr. Juan G. Roederer, Director
Geophysical Institute
University of Alaska
Fairbanks, Alaska 99775

Dear Juan:

You may care to have a copy of this memo to Mr. Geiman, perhaps for retention in the Geophysical Institute library. Apart from the story about how the International Signpost came into being, the Appendix contains the essential data that would be needed if the signpost were damaged and needed to be repaired.

With regards,

Sincerely,


Keith Mather

KBM/afs

Attachments

P.O. Box 81082
Fairbanks, Alaska 99708

MEMORANDUM

July 8, 1986

TO: Mr. Robert H. Geiman
FROM: Keith B. Mather *KBM* —
SUBJECT: The International Signpost—some information for your
archives

The International Signpost that stands on the Mall of the West Ridge has a bit of a story behind it—nothing dramatic but perhaps worth making a matter of record. I am sending to you herewith an account of what happened, in case you would like to have it.

This is one of the several further items promised to you, concerning the Geophysical Institute.

KBM/afs

Attachment: Narrative plus Appendix

The International Signpost on the Mall,
West Ridge, University of Alaska, Fairbanks

by
Keith B. Mather

June, 1986

There is a gentle little story behind this—a story known only to the late Admiral Paul A. Smith, a long-time member of the Advisory Board of the Geophysical Institute, Mrs. Anna F. Shilling and me. Paul has died. Perhaps the story should be told, while it can be.

It all began—or at least began seriously, so my travel notes record—at a luncheon with Paul Smith at the Cosmos Club on 21st Street, N.W., in Washington, D.C. (You should know that many things began there at the Cosmos, when I was a guest of Admiral Paul. Ideas got tossed around and we talked of the Institute, the University, the future.) That luncheon was on Wednesday, November 29, 1972. The possibilities of a signpost were discussed, albeit somewhat casually.... "something to think about." The following Saturday, December 2, I was again at the Cosmos with Paul and Sylvia Smith, also Dr. John C. Reed and wife Jane (John was director of the Arctic Institute of North America and had been the first chairman of the Institute's Advisory Committee) and another couple, Verne and Shirley Fryklund (Dr. Fryklund was a geologist with the Advanced Research Projects Agency, ARPA). The idea came up again. Everyone seemed to like the notion of a signpost.

As background to this: The C. T. Elvey Building was finished and had been occupied in May, 1970. Since then, I had been toying with the thought of something—some symbol—that would betoken the Institute's international connections and also be a decorative feature on the Mall. A signpost was one option, though there were others that I might

then have preferred.* To begin with, I had been hesitant because so many local signposts that cities erect are poor things—provincial in concept, often dilapidated and taudry as they stand. But after endorsement from the ad hoc 'Cosmos Committee', the thought became more appealing. We talked about it some more. Paul said "O.K. if you want a different signpost, then do it differently....something interesting as well as photogenic."

So there the matter rested for a while.

What developed was a double spiral of colored name-plates, one in brown beginning with the North Pole, the other in blue, beginning with the South Pole. (I'm not sure of this, but I think I was a bit influenced at that time by the idea of the double helix in DNA.) Each spiral was to cycle down from the top, with a place name about every 30° , the two spirals (brown and blue) intertwining, and the total angle of each being 630° (one and three-quarter cycles).

Paul Smith liked the design and we started corresponding about place names that might be included. But it wasn't until April that I really became serious....and the Cosmos Club figured in this yet again. I was in Washington for meetings. At a dinner party on Saturday evening, April 21, one of the guests was old Admiral Knox, then about 80. He and Paul had both held rank in the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey (USC&GS, later merged into what is now the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, NOAA). The combination of two eminent surveyors scrutinizing my sketches and beginning to suggest names of exotic places proved overwhelming, if not coercive. We decided to build the signpost.

* One of the others that I rather favored was a large sundial, say 15-20 feet in diameter, but it seemed likely to be too costly to construct at that time. There were questions about snow accumulation on it too. Two people, in particular, were interested in the sundial as a work of art and an impressive monument on the West Ridge—Dr. David Stone and Dr. Wayne Myers. (The idea has not been forgotten.) Another possibility, was an orrery. This was certainly beyond our resources at the time, though a novel thought.

Another factor was entering that changed the pace of events. I thought that, if we were going ahead with the signpost, we might as well have it finished before the next major meeting on campus. This was to be the 24th Alaska Science Conference (theme — Climate of the Arctic), jointly sponsored by the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Meteorological Society with part funding from the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Science Foundation. There would be many national and international visitors....Dr. H. Guyford Stever, director of NSF, among them....not to mention the inimitable Admiral Paul A. Smith. Best, I thought, to offer visitors and their cameras something to intrigue them. But the conference was to be in August, 15th to 17th. So time was short.

Much exchange of names and data took place during the spring and summer months. Paul undertook to provide me with all the azimuths (degrees) and distances (kilometers) for places of interest that we might consider putting on the post. Though retired from the USC&GS, he was a consultant to the RAND Corporation in Washington, had access to its computer and set up a program to give me all the information. (Incidentally, Paul used the RAND's program called JOSS. This stood for Johnniac Open Shop System, but I used to call it his 'Joss house'. One needs to know this to understand some of the cryptic remarks in the correspondence which I will attach herewith—see Appendix.)

The problem with the signpost, after we had agreed upon the basic design, was to find suitable places at approximately every 30° (plus or minus 5° or so—or the closest we could get) to fill in the two spirals. There is no great difficulty with the northern hemisphere, thanks to all the land masses, but the southern hemisphere is largely ocean. We drew on places in South America, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Antarctica but we had to resort—not without amused satisfaction—to remote spots such as Ascension

Island in the South Atlantic and Tahiti and Pitcairn Island in the South Pacific. Well, we confided to each other, these would contribute the exotica! By the way, there was never any serious attempt to tie the names to where Institute visitors or faculty had come from, though this has sometimes been rumored.

The final settlement was not made until mid July, 1973, when I was at Woods Hole* for the long (and hot and humid) summer conference, Defense of the Fleet, funded by the Navy but organized by the National Research Council's Committee on Undersea Warfare....all classified. Ann Shilling, appropriately cleared as Secret, was there with me, typing the material that I wrote (neither of us have ever seen it since because it got classified by the Navy)....but we were also on the 'phone almost every evening to Paul Smith in Washington, fixing the final names, getting back from him the azimuths and distances and relaying information to Fairbanks. Also, once the names and azimuths were fixed, I had to lay out the vertical spacing of the brackets on the post, and other details.

Ultimately it was all done and the full plan was sent to Mr. James Parry, then head of the Machine Shop at the Geophysical Institute. He supervised the machining

* This footnote is irrelevant to the Signpost though it perhaps illustrates the manner in which connections are made and matters develop: I had not visited Woods Hole prior to this meeting but I had heard a lot about it because of Dr. William von Arx who wrote the book "An Introduction to Physical Oceanography" (published 1962) which I found stimulating. Because of his book, I invited W. v. Arx to join the Advisory Committee, which he did. (His first participation at Fairbanks is recorded in the Annual Report of 1963-64, pp. 88-89.) From him, I learned much about the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution....and his association with M.I.T. Largely because of this, I was disposed to accept the Navy's invitation to join the Woods Hole conference in 1973. At this conference, I met Dr. Hugh Bradner of the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, University of California, La Jolla. Dr. Bradner accepted an appointment to the Advisory Committee in August, 1974. He is now (1986) chairman of the Advisory Board. (The Committee was renamed the Board in 1976.) Such are the connections!

and construction and had the names painted—the browns and blues.* (See Appendix for details.) Mr. Merritt Helfferich laid out the true north-south bearing before we set the post in its concrete pad.

Dr. K. M. (Peter) Rae, who knew what Paul and I were plotting, was wholly supportive. On the morning that concrete was to be poured, I checked with him for confirmation. He had a word with Bill Wood (president) and called back. Go ahead. Decisions were relatively simple in 1973, when a few people knew what they wanted to do.

Thus, the International Signpost on the West Ridge, erected in August, 1973, in time for the Alaska Science Conference.

Postscript: Today, some 13 years later, the red post needs repainting....but it will be like painting a porcupine!

KBM/afs

Attachment — Appendix

* The bottom of the 'blues' was Ottawa. I had sent Ottawa. Neil Davis caught the error and got that plate repainted before it created a border incident.

