



## IN MEMORIAM

Douglas R. Powell  
Lecturer in Geography  
UC Berkeley  
1920 – 2006

Doug Powell was a master teacher of classes held in the field as well as in the classroom. For two generations of University of California, Berkeley, geographers, and for students in five other California colleges, Powell's courses were conversion experiences to new ways of thinking and learning. The goal of Powell's field courses was what he called "landscape appreciation"— the skill of careful on- site investigation of human activities as well as physical features, and equally careful discernment of the spatial relationships between those elements. "The mark of a true geographer," he said in a departmental oral history, "is that wherever you are, you are observing and trying to explain what you are seeing."

In his signature California field course, Geography 180, Powell's bloodcurdling yell of "Ye- ohhhh" woke students in their tents and sleeping bags, summoned them to the campfire for meals, and got them assembled at their vehicles to start the next leg of the journey. His "Listen up!" announced an intellectual engagement with the next new site at hand. Although Powell used traditional style readings and textbooks for his courses, his true classroom was the state of California, which he inordinately loved. His one- day and three- day field trips brought students to the northern California coast, the Sacramento- San Joaquin Delta region, the Sierra Nevada, and Death Valley. However, the final five- day field trip was always to the areas that were his favorites: the Owens Valley with its water and ranching histories, and then to the White Mountains with their bristlecone pines.

Powell was born on November 4, 1920, in Stockton, California. He was the son of the late physician Dewey R. Powell and Norma Noteware Powell. Through their family's connections Doug and his brother traveled widely as boys and young men. Doug took several mountain camping trips, two of them with a friend's "Uncle John," John Steinbeck. Powell graduated from Stockton High School, and like both of his parents he attended the University of California, Berkeley, where he studied political science, intending to go to law school. At his mother's death, he transferred to the College of the Pacific (now the University of the Pacific) in Stockton, where he graduated with a degree in political science in 1941. That same fall he returned to study at Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law, but World War II intervened. While waiting to enlist in the army, he sat in on Geography 1, the freshman introduction to physical geography taught by Professor John Kesseli, and, as Powell put it, that experience made him "instantly addicted to geography."

Powell served in the U.S. Army from 1942 to 1946, doing special training in ski and mountaineering warfare, as well as in German language and culture, before joining the 44th Infantry Division. He fought 240 consecutive days of combat across France and Germany. "To survive in combat," he later said, "you had to become a geographer," always sensitive to the details of terrain and relative positions. He left the service as a captain with a Silver Star, Bronze Medal, and a Distinguished Unit Citation. The war had a deep impact on Powell, who, like many veterans, refused for years to speak of his darker memories.

After the war Powell returned to geography at Berkeley. His study included three months as a field assistant to Carl Sauer in northern Mexico, but Powell worked primarily with Kesseli, who encouraged him to study California's White Mountains. Powell interrupted his graduate studies for a stint teaching geology at Deep Springs College in California full-time from 1950 to 1952. For the next ten years he described himself as a "self-employed farmer and miner," but he also devoted extensive time to mountaineering expeditions throughout the American and Canadian West. He returned again to Berkeley's Department of Geography to complete his master's degree in 1963. His thesis was entitled "The Physical Geography of the White Mountains, California- Nevada."

From 1967 until 1989, Doug Powell taught the California field course for the Department of Geography at least once every year. He inherited the course from Kesseli (1895-1980) and Professor James Parsons (1915-1997), who had taken only one-day trips. Powell not only added longer trips but also on-site interviews with local experts. Although he looked like someone who would be ill at ease in an office chair, Powell very successfully taught on-campus courses about California, Alaska, and the Sierra Nevada, and (like Kesseli) the freshman introduction to physical geography. Powell's infectious enthusiasm, his astonishing recall of facts, figures, and chance conversations, and his deep concern for students as individuals made him a much-loved instructor. His lecture courses were invariably large, even when he taught at his favored time of 8 A.M. For a great many Berkeley undergraduates, a Doug Powell course led to a major in geography. In 1976, Powell was awarded the campus Distinguished Teaching Award.

Powell's courses combined geology, geomorphology, water resources, ecology, and cultural landscape history. His excellent site photography aided his classroom lectures, and thanks to the Department of Geography's Geo-Images Project, his color photographs were among the first made available on the World Wide Web. Powell was also a masterful storyteller, weaving his carefully planned anecdotes to conclude, often humorously, with a carefully staged final phrase that also held the main teaching point. In lectures and around campfires, he had great stories to tell. In addition to camping with John Steinbeck, Powell had met Wyatt Earp; he had watched Jesse Owens win four gold medals at the Berlin Olympics, and then he and his brother had gotten to know Owens on their return voyage to the U.S.; working for a dendrochronology expert, Powell had helped find the White Mountains' oldest living bristlecone pine, the oldest living tree on earth; from the White Mountains, he had watched aboveground nuclear testing at the Nevada Test Site.

Powell taught actively as a visiting lecturer at other colleges and universities. In the mid-1980s, he returned to Deep Springs College to teach courses on the geology and ecology of the White-Inyo Range and the Owens Valley. For UC Berkeley Extension, Powell taught ten different courses — most often his courses in Alaska, California land use, and California water history. At the University of California, Riverside, he offered classes in the natural history of the Owens Valley Region, and the wildlife and ecology of the eastern Sierra. His reluctant retirement from UC Berkeley at age 70 did not end his active teaching life. From 1990 to 2000, he was a lecturer in the Department of Geography at Sonoma State University, where he added world resources and water resources classes to his repertoire. During that decade he additionally taught at the College of Alameda and San Francisco State University.

Doug Powell was an expert snow surveyor, snow hydrologist, and stream flow forecaster; his work significantly improved the reliability and accuracy of California's snow survey system. His interests in snow surveying, like so much else in his life, had begun when he was a boy; his family knew two early California snow surveyors. From 1956 to 1984, working with the California Cooperative Snow Surveys, every winter Powell would take several four to nine-day ski trips into the high Sierra to take snow measurements and thus help predict the state's water resources for the next year. He presented many papers, workshops, and technical reports on snow measurement and hydrology. He was an executive committee member of the Western Snow Conference, and he was an active member of many other professional and academic groups. From 1974 to 1978, he served on the advisory council to the City of Los Angeles on the impact of groundwater pumping in the Owens Valley. Between 1976 and 1979, he conducted surveys and established snow surveying programs in Afghanistan and Chile, the latter under the auspices of the United Nations Development Program. For four years in the mid-1980s, he was an instructor in the Avalanche School at Mammoth Mountain in the Sierra Nevada.

Doug Powell continued to teach until age 80, and even then he was uncomfortable with the idea of being retired. By then, two staff members of the Berkeley geography department had revived Powell's field course, and in the fall semesters of 2000 and 2001, Doug accompanied the students on the classic Owens Valley and White Mountains trip, affording yet another generation of Berkeley students the opportunity of appreciating those landscapes with their master interpreter.

After a long illness, Powell died in Berkeley on January 23, 2006, at age 86. He is survived by his sister, Eleanor Godfrey of DeKalb, Illinois, and his brother, Dr. James Powell of Rancho Mirage, California. Doug Powell left an important and unique legacy combining the roles of mountaineer, snow surveyor, classroom lecturer, and consummate field instructor.

Paul Groth  
G. Donald Bain  
Daniel Plumlee  
Richard Walker