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Remembrances of Bill Vickers: Early and Late Career Activities

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Bill Vickers and I began communicating in 1970 when he was a first-year graduate student at the University of Florida–Gainesville. My late wife Sibby and I had visited the Secoya in 1968 and were developing a proposal for sustained research with the Canelos Quichua and Achuar Jivaroans of Amazonian Ecuador. Our communications continued throughout his life. He and his wife Gigi (Edite), were, for Sibby and me, dear friends, and cherished colleagues. Through the years Bill and I turned to each other repeatedly for insights and to share information not only about the local-level Amazonian cultural systems in which we were deeply involved but also about Ecuador as a nation-state undergoing massive transformations in the global economy. Here I want to note a few features of his early and late career experiences and contributions, leaving it to others in this forum for SALSA–*Tipiti* to fill in the middle years, as they have admirably done.

Bill's early years in Ecuador as a Peace Corps volunteer (PCV) brought him in sustained contact with the Indigenous Andean Salasaca people who lived (and live) just east of Ambato in central Ecuador. I do not know if he engaged with them as a PCV or simply became friends with them, but his initial intent was to do doctoral ethnographic research with them. When the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) was founded in the early 1970s by Arq. Hernán Crespo Toral, we all had to report to him and to request permission to work in specific field locations. Just before Bill began his proposal another graduate student from Cornell University, Scott Robinson, had petitioned the INAH for permission to work with the Salasaca and had been denied. The denial was based on Scott's premature presentation to the Salasacan elders, where they did not accept the proposal. Accordingly, Crespo Toral denied Bill access to the Salasaca so that he could not even contact the elders for permission. Instead, he directed Bill to work with a "polychrome" culture in Amazonia. The result was a lifelong and highly productive set of cutting-edge research projects with Secoya and Siona people. The research included multiple contexts and events where Bill successfully worked with the people to aid in their adaptation to a radically changing biosphere while carefully documenting their adaptive responses and their remarkable internal cultural integrity.

When I undertook the editing of two major books on Ecuador, *Cultural Transformations and Ethnicity in Modern Ecuador* (1981), and then *Millennial Ecuador* (2003), one of the first persons to whom I turned was Bill, and he also submitted one of the first article manuscripts. In addition, Bill made a running commentary during the development of both volumes.

Jumping to 2010, representatives of the Foley Hoag law firm in Boston approached me about working with Mike Cepek on the development of an extended position paper on the contemporary peoples living on the border of Colombia, including the Afro-Ecuadorians, the Awá indigenous peoples of western Ecuador, and the Cofán, Siona-Secoya, Amazonian Quichua, and mestizo migrants of eastern Ecuador. As we worked it became very apparent that we badly needed the participation of Bill Vickers. We approached Foley Hoag about this, and Bill was added to the endeavor. What a relief this turned out to be. Bill "took hold" of some of the complexities that Mike and I could not handle in Amazonia, did a superb job with the Siona-Secoya, and filled in the materials on the Amazonian Quichua and mestizos. He also provided superior documentation with his excellent and highly organized slide collection.

I approached the law firm for permission to publish information on that report in this tribute, and was approved to make this statement: "Bill Vickers worked with Norm Whitten and Mike Cepek in 2010–2011 on a report entitled 'Tropical Forest Cultural Ecology and

Social Adaptation in the Ecuadorian Border Region with Colombia’ that was submitted to the International Court of Justice in The Hague on behalf of the Government of Ecuador. Their work—a fine example of advocacy anthropology—educated the Court about the vulnerability of the communities that reside in the border region and helped bring about a very favorable settlement from Colombia in 2013 which terminated its longstanding aerial spraying of herbicides along the Colombian-Ecuadorian border.”

The fifty-eight (single-spaced) page, well-illustrated document constituted not only an erudite monograph but a highly readable and persuasive argument. Mike and I agree that working with Bill on this project constitutes one of the highlights of our intellectual lives.

At a time of great polarization between those espousing anthropology as “science” and those who reject “science” for special forms of “humanities,” Bill’s work stands out as balanced, sane, and demonstrates his ability, and hence the inherent strength in anthropology, of being scientific in its data gathering and appropriately interpretive in its presentation. In other words, he nicely overcame false dichotomies to offer the world of letters great insights based on meticulous research into the lives of a vibrant Amazonian people.

In the field with the Secoya (Photo: Edite Vickers)

