

*Half Zantop*

1938-2001

*Geology*

by Timothy Lesle '01

As we drove on the highway from Fresnillo to Zacatecas, Half Zantop turned to me and recited a poem. It was the first stanza to Rainer Rilke's "Der Panther." He carried those words with him for half a century, the verse memorized during his days in grade school. The lines, as he spoke them in German, were invested with a rhythm and quiet intensity that, in the imperfect realm of memory, perfectly complemented the sunlight reflected upon the dry Mexican countryside.

It is one of the most striking memories of any person I have known. There was something about that moment that I value now and appreciated then. Part was the novelty of hearing a professor of geology reciting poetry; but much more importantly it showed me two things. I glimpsed an aspect of Half's life beyond the professional side that most students saw from their desks, an honest look at one of the things that he found important. I saw, as well, his respect for me and his enthusiasm for our conversations. The poem did not break the flow of the conversation, but added to it, punctuating our talk.

My experience, I have no doubt, was unique. However, I believe that it is no way unusual. Certainly Half was possessed of many talents and a broad range of interests, but what makes the event gratifyingly commonplace has to do with his concern for individuals. He regular-

ly sought an understanding with people and often spent the time and made the effort to relate to each of them.

Half Zantop did not care to be referred to simply as "Professor." He often gave his students the choice of calling him "Half" or "Professor Zantop," but it was clear he preferred the former. It was one of the hallmarks of Half's attitude toward students. He chose to forego a strict professor-student barrier and instead worked to

build a feeling of trust and a sense of camaraderie. As students, we never failed to respect him as a stellar geologist and held great affection for him as a teacher. I felt no obligation to be anything but myself with Half, and was comfortable asking him straightforward questions and giving him honest answers.

In Mexico, Half revived the flagging spirits of students tired from eight weeks of traveling and fieldwork as he led what was consistently the most popular segment of the Stretch. I was once asked to offer an explanation of how this happened, how Half was able to energize

his students. I believe there was no great secret to his methods. In some respects, it was the location and culture that stoked our enthusiasm; in other respects, it was the system he instilled in us of observing and evaluating every outcrop without the biases of preconception as well as the sense of accomplishment that capped each day in the field. Impeccably organized, Half was



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able to bring all of this together; but that was not the key. Half Zantop was the key for the very reason that Half was always himself and wore no other mantle.

On the road past Aguascalientes, I asked Half if he could tell me what *Weltanschauung* meant. I had read moments before that it was the name of Albert Einstein's cat, but I supposed that it must have had some greater significance. He eyed me with curiosity for a second and then explained that it was something akin to a personal philosophy, an individual's idea of the world and the way in which any thing might have meaning for that person. *Die Weltanschauung*, he continued, was reached only after careful consideration. He further advised me that if I were to ponder my own *Weltanschauung*, I should also reflect upon *Die Weltschmerz*, the sorrows of the world. The two, he said, might be difficult to separate completely. I asked him if he would describe his own *Weltanschauung*. He smiled and said that it was the sort of thing you could only really discuss with your old college friends after drinking a few beers and having already talked for most of the night.

During our time in Mexico, I wondered how Half felt about his work; it was clear that he enjoyed being there, that the environment and challenges associated with it were stimulating. I asked him one night, after a couple of rounds of tequila and dinner with several students, how he felt about being a geologist and if he was satisfied with his work. He had listened closely as I detailed my interests, opinions, and worries about my future plans, but when I asked that question his voice trailed off as he said, "This geology..." He waved his hands in dismissal. He quickly added: "If I were not teaching, I don't know where I would be." It was a moment that stirred a mixture of satisfaction and inspiration in me. Here was an individual who would not let himself be consumed by a discipline, yet found it engaging, and through it happened upon a

career that sustained him.

In many ways, I found a model in Half. Though I might not have wanted all of the same things that Half had achieved professionally, the extent to which he lived and enjoyed the varied aspects of his life is something I admire. As I learn more about Half from those who knew him, I can tell that he was never so overwhelmed with his work that he neglected the other important parts of his life. In striking the balance between his family and his work, activism and recreation, he lived a life with its own subtle rhythm and quiet intensity. He quite naturally discovered, perhaps without really looking, how to get the best of everything. ■

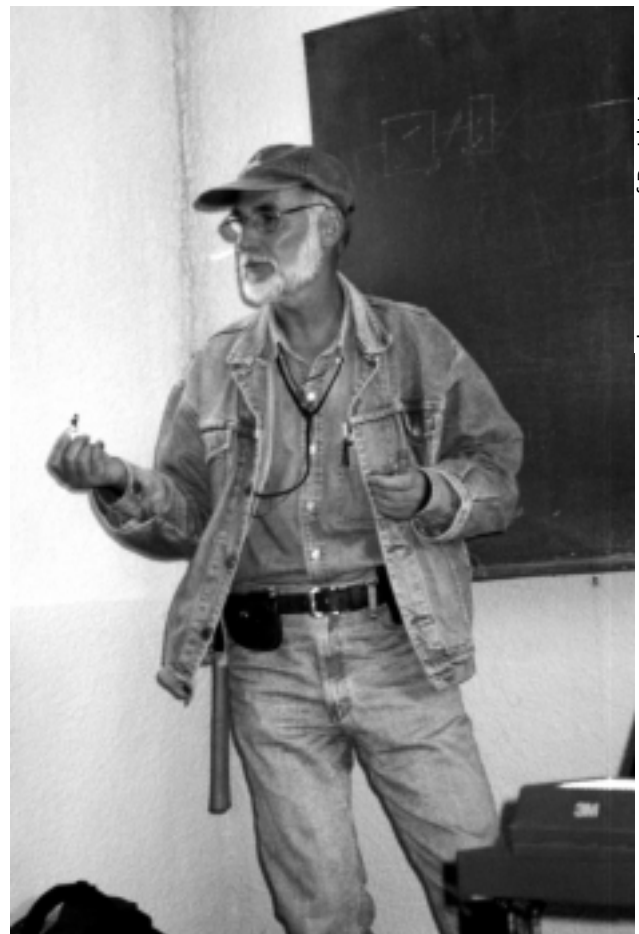


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