

Donald J. Orth (1925–2019)

BY I. M. NICK

On October 30, 2019, former ANS President and internationally respected toponymist, Don Orth, passed away quietly in his home in Falls Church, Virginia. Don was born on July 21, 1925. He spent his childhood and young adulthood working on his parents' dairy farm in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin (Randall 2000). That life radically changed in early December 1941 when the Japanese launched their attack on Pearl Harbor (*Washington Post* 2019). A year later, at the age of 17, Don joined the United States Navy. That decision would change the course of his life. Two years after signing up, the 19-year-old sailor would become one of nearly 200,000 naval personnel in Operation Neptune. This naval mission was a part of the momentous military strike where the Allied Forces landed on the shores of Normandy to liberate Nazi-occupied Europe (Ford 2014). Today, that offensive is commonly known as “D-Day.”

After the War, Don was one of millions of young military veterans who took advantage of a newly enacted piece of legislation. Called the “Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944” or simply the “G.I. Bill,” this legislation enabled returning soldiers to obtain a formal education in one of the nation’s colleges or universities. Don selected the University of Wisconsin-Madison (Randall 2000). Don was awarded a degree in Geography with concentrations in Cartography and Anthropology in 1952. A year later, he secured a position in the Office of Cartography at the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). This assignment would be the start of an illustrious career.

In 1959, he transferred to the USGS headquarters in Washington, D.C. where he quickly made a name for himself. No less than twelve months after his arrival in the nation’s capital, he was appointed Chief of the Office of Geographic Names. He held this position for nearly four decades. In 1984, his many years of superior service and outstanding contributions to the fields of cartography and toponymy earned him the US Department of the Interior’s prestigious Meritorious Service Award.

During Don’s long and successful USGS tenure, he was also appointed Executive Secretary of the US Board on Geographic Names for Domestic Names. In this position, he was instrumental in creating one of the very first automated toponymic databases: the “Geographic Names Information System” or GNIS. The GNIS laid the groundwork for a whole new generation of automated toponymic databases (e.g. the National Geographic Names Database of

the United States; the Geographical Names Database of New Zealand; the Base de données toponymiques du Canada; and the Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann of Ireland).

The international impact of Don's visionary scholarship can also be seen in the many professional roles he simultaneously played over his lengthy career. He was an advisor in the United Nations' Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEN); a leader during his presidency of both the American Name Society (1972) and the Arlington Historical Society of Virginia; an educator at Georgetown University and Catholic University; and as a prodigious researcher (MFH n.d.; Randall 2000). However, Don's remarkable publication record is not simply lengthy but ground-breaking. Today, many of his works are internationally recognized as toponymic classics. Two excellent examples are the *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names* [ISBN-10: 0944780024] and his seminal work for the *U.N.'s Manual for Establishing a Geographic Names Authority* (Orth 1971). In 2000, ANS member, Margaret Powell published a listing of Don's books, articles, and selected papers in NAMES (Powell 2000). Nearly ten pages long, this catalogue does not even include the last twenty years of Don's professional life.

Despite this sterling career, as many long-time members of the ANS report, one of Don's most enduring legacies will no doubt be his extraordinary character. Precisely this point was made by former ANS President (1989) and retired Chief of the USGS Geographic Names Office, Roger Payne. A close friend of Don's, Roger had the following to say:

I knew Don for over 45 years as a mentor, colleague, and close friend for more than 30 of those years. I traveled extensively with Don and always continued to learn much from him. I was always fascinated and impressed by the depth of Don's knowledge and the respect he gained from colleagues and acquaintances (2020, e-interview).¹

This personal and professional admiration was echoed by two other former ANS Presidents, Christine De Vinne (2003–2004) and Cleveland Evans (2005–2006).

Don was a leader in his field and, for us in ANS, not just a scholar but a mentor and friend. Ever ready with an example, an anecdote, or an intriguing bit of toponymic history, he could brighten a presentation panel as well as a dinner table conversation. When I was new to ANS, in the late 1990s, he took time to get to know me at the annual conferences and to share his wit and wisdom. When I talked to him about names in literature, he could always make an apt connection to names on a map. At root was his conviction that names matter, that whether in fiction or fact, decisions about names rested on important cultural values. (De Vinne 2020, e-interview)²

I remember him as a kind man and supportive colleague who had a great sense of humor, and who was very knowledgeable as an expert on geographic names. It was a great asset to ANS to have someone who had such a long career with the U. S. Geological Survey to share his knowledge and research. (Evans 2020, e-interview)³

Similarly warm were the memories that our former ANS Treasurer Michael McGoff shared:

Don Orth was a respected mainstay at ANS conferences for many years in addition to being such a pleasure to be around. Seeing him arrive at the meeting always gladdened my heart. When I was a doctoral student, he was a thoughtful, kind, and supportive mentor. [...] Don would attend every possible ANS session, some quite far afield of his toponymic expertise. And yet, he would very often offer insightful comments and valuable questions. I took a few toponymic tours with Don and Martha at COGNA conferences (Council on Geographic Names Authorities), perhaps the most memorable being a sailing adventure on a tall ship to from Washington to Annapolis on which Don enlightened me and others with his encyclopedic knowledge of the local toponyms. Don Orth was a valuable friend and mentor to many (2020, personal communication).⁴

Donald J. Orth is survived by his wife Martha; their three grandsons Christopher O’Loughlin, Scott O’Loughlin, and Michael O’Loughlin; two granddaughters, Gené Kent Kirkwood and Nicole Kent Cowling; 10 great-grandchildren and 17 great-great-grandchildren. His eulogy took place on November 16, 2019 at the First Presbyterian Church of Arlington, Virginia. Don’s final resting place is the cemetery of the North Farham Episcopal Church in Northern Neck, Virginia (MFH).

Notes

1. Email message to author, February 24, 2020.
2. Email message to author, February 24, 2020.
3. Email message to author, February 25, 2020.
4. Email message to author, February 22, 2020.

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