Mission to Map

Geography and the Environment

BY EMILY NIELSEN

As a boy growing up in San Antonio, Nathan Garza spent a lot of time hiking on trails.

His Boy Scout troop organized and led the Mission Trail Hike for years. Scouring from San Antonio and surrounding areas would gather at Mission Espada and begin their two-day hike to the Alamo. At the end of his first trip, Garza was rewarded with the Mission Trail Hike patch. Little did he know that years later he would become more familiar with the paths.

"It’s how my mind when I found out that the missions in San Antonio were along a stretch of El Camino Real,” Garza says. "I had come full circle, from being on the trail as a scout and learning about the history to now doing GIS mapping of the trail as a college student."

Garza, a senior majoring in geography, is a GIS intern for El Camino Real de Los Tejas, a member of the National Historic Trail Association. The trails were originally trade routes from Mexico City. They stretch across Texas and into Louisiana. GIS stands for geographic information systems, which use a series of layers that help people visualize and analyze different types of information and trends. Geomorphologists can use GIS data to study such things as a river’s effect on a landscape. Demographers can use other GIS data to see where lives and predict voting preferences in certain districts. GIS can be used by a wide variety of people for a wide variety of purposes, Garza says.

When Garza was younger, it was hard to find him without a pen and paper, sketching anything in the line of sight. He was fascinated by old maps and cartography.

"When I realized I could make digital maps for all sorts of purposes, it seemed to be the best of both worlds,” Garza says. "I could make sort of a utilitarian art that I would be proud to display, while others could use them functionally as maps."

Garza spent most of his time at El Camino Real last summer creating county maps showing the location of the trail. His maps also showcase trail markers placed by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). In 1998, much of this work was featured in the new book "El Camino Real De Los Tejas, Images of America."

"The DAR markers serve as the visual symbol for the trail on the ground,” Garza says. "I was able to make a map so that you could use to get from one marker to marker starting near Eagle Pass, Texas, and wrapping up just east of San Augustine, Texas, and into Louisiana."

Garza is continuing his internship this year and spends about 10 hours per week working in the El Camino Real office. Lately, he’s been working on georeferencing historical hand-drawn maps. Garza says some known markers, such as a mission church or a meeting of two rivers, to their actual geographic coordinates, which stretches and corrects the hand-drawn maps to scale.

In late October, Garza traveled to Salt Lake City for the 2014 Partnership for the National Trails System Workshop, a gathering of 70 trail system professionals from across the country. He was one of just eight interns to attend and spoke on a panel, answering questions about how to get youths more involved with national trails and their preservation.

Garza says that his internship has helped him to solidify his future plans and recognize a lifelong passion.

"It’s interesting to see people from all walks of life come together for the betterment of history and local culture,” Garza says. "It has definitely shown me that I want to go into this line of work — I’d like to be able to say I help preserve our cultural history while working with communities all over the state."

Fifteen-year Project Introduces India’s Earliest Text to Modern Readers

BY ALICIA DIETRICH

Like so many big ideas, it all started over drinks — in this case, glasses of wine in New Orleans. Fifteen years later, a labor of love finally came to fruition for Joel Berenstern, a professor of Asian Studies and Religious Studies, when his joint translation of India’s earliest text, the Rigveda, was finally complete.

Berenstern was teaching at the University of Missouri in 1998 when UT Austin Professor Patrick Olivelle invited him and his colleague Stephanie Jamison for drinks during the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society in New Orleans. Olivelle proposed a challenge for them: Do a “quick and dirty” updated English translation of the Rigveda, the oldest extant text of India that forms part of the Vedas, the formal scripture of Hinduism.

“There is a good but old German translation of the Rigveda. There is a good, mostly complete French translation, and a new German translation is now underway.” Berenstern says. “But the English translation that people have been using is from the 19th century, and it was already outdated when it was published. Moreover, that translation was written in a Victorian English, which would understandably discourage any modern translation of the text."

That just would not do for such an important text, and Berenstern and Jamison agreed that the only way for people to have access to the text was to do a translation. So they enthusiastically agreed to take on Olivelle’s “quick and dirty” challenge. But “quick and dirty” it was not. Berenstern and Jamison soon realized that the process would take longer than they’d initially estimated. The Rigveda is composed of 1,028 hymns praising various gods that were designed to be recited during a ritual performance. The poems are believed to have been composed between 1500 and 1000 B.C. and were passed down orally over many generations and millennia. "We got off to a somewhat slow start partly because we had other projects, but we also soon discovered that the text is more difficult than we had expected,” Berenstern says. “And while we’d both done some of the Rigveda, we found that it was more difficult than we anticipated and harder to make it accessible to readers."

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Joel Breereton, associate professor of Asian studies and religious studies

Breereton and Jamison met in graduate school at Yale University, and they both studied ancient Sanskrit texts under the same professor. Breereton comes to the text from a religious studies perspective, and Jamison approaches it from a linguistic perspective. "That turned out to be hugely advantageous to us," Breereton says. "The Rigveda is a text that can give rise to many forms of interpretation and translation. But at least we had a common, general perspective on the text. It’s not that we agreed on everything—it’s not that we still do agree—but we found ways of reaching accommodation with one another about how we were going to handle certain issues and problems in the text."

Even though the translation is 1,700 pages long, there is not a single footnote in it. Breereton and Jamison made the decision to avoid using footnotes because they wanted the reader’s attention to be on the hymn itself. They wanted readers to be able to take in each hymn as a whole and not to get caught up in footnotes about archaic references and explanations. They chose to write an introduction for each poem, explaining their interpretation, noting whether there were special problems and discussing things that they as translators found interesting. If Breereton and Jamison disagreed about some aspect of the translation, they were both able to share their notes and thoughts.

"The hymns are far more complex than I had realized when I began the project," Breereton says. "The poems are very clever and subtle, and their use of language and play with language are much more studied than I had imagined."

During the 15-year-long process, both Breereton and Jamison changed jobs. Breereton is now at The University of Texas at Austin and Jamison at the University of California, Los Angeles. They curved out time to work on the project in between their teaching responsibilities, other research projects and various other "distractions," such as Breereton’s stint as a departmental chair at UT Austin. But they both remained enthusiastic about the project and kept up the momentum over a sustained period.

Now that the translation is published, Breereton and Jamison are working to publish an online commentary about the text and to use that digital forum to share annotations from their research. The digital format also allows them to update their translation and notes as scholarship on the Rigveda advances, creating a more dynamic text.

"We knew it was going to be a long haul, but I must say that, for both of us, this is the most exciting thing we’ve ever done and probably the most exciting thing we ever will do," Breereton says. "It was incredibly engaging. So, OK, it took a long time, but it meant that I had a good time for a long time."