Lita Osmundsen and the Wenner-Gren Foundation: An Appreciation

by Mary Douglas

Lita Osmundsen will shortly retire from her post as president and director of research of the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. For the last 24 years she has been its chief inspirer and organizer. Now that she is about to step down we realize what a heavy debt is owed to her by anthropology worldwide.

The perspective entertained by American anthropology comprises archeology, cultural anthropology, biology, and linguistics. That anthropology still holds to this four-field definition, that it is a discipline, identifiable and professionalized, is not to be taken for granted as part of the nature of things. In the history of ideas academic subjects break up into parts; they often dissolve or realign. After World War II, when large amounts of research money suddenly became available, the rush was on for all academic disciplines to compete for funds. There was no reason to expect that 40 years later the different elements in this particular collection would still be together. Other disciplines did not withstand the pressure so well. If we still have a characteristically anthropological set of problems and methods, sustained by confidence and unity of purpose, it is very largely due to the vision of the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

The first director of research of this private foundation was Paul Fejos. In 1945, with the approval of the trustees, he bought its headquarters on 71st Street in New York City. Moving into the new quarters called for help with clerical tasks and the switchboard, help in washing walls, unpacking cartons, and shifting furniture. Just about three blocks away was Hunter College. It was only natural to ask the college to recommend a student for the summer job. The anthropology department at Hunter was quite new. Lita Binns was its eighth major. Two other candidates were suggested who, for one reason or another, were not free, so she was hired in spite of the director’s fears that she was too good-looking to be serious. She applied herself so effectively to the tasks at hand that at the end of the summer she was invited to continue on a part-time basis while she finished her degree. Even more indispensable by the time she was ready to go on to Columbia University, she retained her appointment to the end of her graduate years, at which time she went on the books full-time. In 1957 she married Paul Fejos. When he died in 1963, she was already associate director of research and had been effectively exercising the authority of director during the latter’s year-long last illness. The trustees naturally appointed her director of research, a post she has held ever since.

“We were a real team. Paul had great style. He had all the imagination and all the ideas. I was good at seeing to the nuts and bolts.” This typically terse and modest account of the partnership reverses one popular version of the division of labor, according to which the feminine gender has the imagination which would be useless without masculine drive and logistic power. Conversely, it endorses another version by which the hard slog and backroom work fall to the woman and the front-line initiatives and recognition to the man. At the begin-

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hung up their washing, old people came for sun and gossip, children played their games there. They had nowhere else to go from the crowded apartments in which they lived. It seemed to her that the paradox of people so intensely reticent playing out the intimate scenes she witnessed in full public view was explained by conventional cues which transformed public into private space. Paul Fejos encouraged her in this interest, remarking that in his own fieldwork in South America he had noted that the Yagua turned their faces to the wall to signal a desire for privacy. Ruth Benedict regarded it as an excellent topic and sent her to the Human Relations Area Files to start researching it. When, in 1948, Ruth Benedict suddenly died, her pupil was assigned to an archeologist as adviser. He scrapped what she had done so far and took her off the subject, exclaiming in graphic terms that he thought it was nonsense. She moved, disappointed, to a thesis topic to do with the introduction and use of new technical equipment in anthropological research.

Her early interest in communication found expression, however, in her work at the Wenner-Gren Foundation, where she had begun in 1947 to run the main program of supper conferences, until 1980 a regular series in which lecturers and regional specialists met for an evening and exchanged ideas. She soon assumed full responsibility for selecting topics and speakers and organizing these meetings. In 1949 she began working on the Mexican anthropology program, which funded research and provided technical aids and training. In 1950 she was put in charge of the laboratory and loan equipment program. Still a graduate student, she went to Mexico to help install the linguistics laboratory at the National Museum of Anthropology. The skills she acquired in this work and the involvement in technical aids developed when, years later, the program for replicating fossil materials for paleontology was established. At each stage she was learning about research, business methods, diplomacy, flexibility, stability, and the rest.

The Wenner-Gren is the only moderate-sized private foundation devoted entirely to the support of anthropology. It was endowed in 1941 as The Viking Fund by the Swedish industrialist Axel L. Wenner-Gren, founder of the Electrolux Corporation. The scale of the endowment was too small for it to compete with major foundations such as Ford and Rockefeller. Paul Fejos persuaded the founder that he could use his funds to make a distinctive contribution to learning if he concentrated on supporting the young field of anthropology. The attraction of this subject (apart from its romantic association with the origins of humankind) seems to have been in the combination of the smallness of the discipline and the greatness of its vision. Anthropology was a place in the scheme of human knowledge where some well-directed giving could make a significant difference.

At this time Paul Fejos had a remarkable personal record. A Hungarian who had served as a cavalry officer in the Hussars in World War I, an artist and a qualified doctor, he achieved his independence when his family lost its land and money in the postwar revolution, leaving him free to pursue the career of his choice. In Hollywood he had an astonishingly successful career as a film director. He was famous for his imaginative directing and his distinctive use of the medium. But throughout his varied career, as his biographer (Dodds 1973) says, he evaded constraints; he had to be free and was happier as a free lance than as a company executive. Time after time he moved
out and moved on, going from biological research to award-winning feature films to ethnographic filming in Madagascar, Southeast Asia, and South America and from there to ethnography. With this record of restless brilliance there seems no reason he should have stayed with anthropology, and it seems a marvel that he should have established a learned foundation. Admittedly, he helped to draft the original charter so that it incorporated risk and change, but this sounds easier than it really is.

Paul Fejos had the style of a Hungarian aristocrat. The style comprised three ideals, magnanimity, creativity, and risk taking. He passed on some of his aphorisms in training Lita Osmundsen: “Saying yes is easy; saying no is a fine art. Take care in saying no never to diminish a person.” His care for the dignity of the person on the receiving end called for nothing less than the institutionalizing of the virtue of magnanimity: “Give, but never in such a way that the other person knows the cost. Giving gives the receiver a reason to hate you. Never give the other a burden of gratitude.” Such prescriptions are all very well for Knights of the Round Table, who can gallop away once they have effected a rescue. A foundation in continual interaction with its beneficiaries had a harder task translating these precepts into routine practice. Fejos had a lifelong habit of galloping away; someone was needed to attend to the nuts and bolts.

The other important principle that Fejos insisted upon for the foundation was continuing creativity. Scope for innovation was like life-blood to him, but hitherto in his life he had exhibited enormous drive and leadership in short bursts. A self-renewing institution is so rare as almost to be a contradiction in terms. Yet he demanded an instituted ferment of self-renewal to sustain his own commitment. That improbable dream was what he got. But it is clear that his own brand of genius could never have established a stable institution that fulfilled all the legislated requirements of a public trust or carried the strain of burdensome accretions of rules or accepted the escalation of administrative costs which follow on bureaucratization. At the beginning it was evidently a more lighthearted undertaking.

The third ideal was written by Axel Wenner-Gren into his foreword to the 1951 Annual Report: risk bearing. The foundation was to be “a pioneer in new approaches—[taking on] . . . the risk-bearing areas of research” (quoted in Osmundsen 1985). Here, again, is another unlikely condition. Great educational institutions tend to be mainly risk-averse. A mandate to innovate and to take risks would clearly have suited Fejos, especially if he could work with individuals rather than institutions. It called for flexibility in policies. But foundations tend to slide toward a rigid conservatism. However inspired their founders’ vision, they can hardly ever resist the pressure of thousands of candidates for aid and the conventional standards of timid, conservative trustees. It is easiest for the officials to protect themselves from criticisms by playing safe and resorting to bureaucratized procedures.

When I asked Lita Osmundsen how these routinizing tendencies were resisted, she began to reflect on the general mood of expansion of the 1950s, financial and intellectual. For one thing, there was so much money around. However, the Wenner-Gren noticed that the quality of its candidates seeking support was dropping off. The small foundation was losing to the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, which had begun to take an interest in anthropology. In face of this competition, the Wenner-Gren clarified its own role. It was there to provide diversity, to offer alternatives—new options for the profession and new openings for individuals who could not get through the established institutions. The foundation was to look not for great names but for “very good mavericks,” scholars who fell between the existing categories as fashionably defined. It had to avoid standardization and mediocrity but, of course, be prepared to tolerate a certain amount of failure. Lita Osmundsen maintained this approach, believing that flexibility was possible because the foundation was small.

Foundation officers are fascinated by the topic of evaluation. What counts as a success? What is a tolerable level of failure? How is failure reckoned? Lita Osmundsen would never fall into the trap of reckoning success only by number of publications, their size or weight, or even by thousands of volumes.

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A successful program, on these exacting standards, was the program of fossil-casting. It was devised to meet the needs of paleontology. Access to original fossil finds is necessarily restricted: light, air, and handling are detrimental to the objects. But without access, teaching and research are severely constrained. The foundation decided to mass-produce accurate casts of the fossils. In 1958 a program of fossil-casting had been started on an experimental basis. If research was to be conducted with these replicas instead of with the originals, they would need to conform to an ideal of total accuracy. After ten years of experiments, a casting factory was opened by the foundation to mass-produce casts for sale; the objective was to become self-financing in due time. By 1968 it was mass-producing standardized quality-controlled casts which were used for teaching and research. By 1976, when the project was breaking even financially, it was terminated.

Lita Osmundsen applies two kinds of tests to programs. A program may fail because it has not achieved its particular mission, or it may fail because it no longer embodies the general mission of the foundation, having gone dull and dead, routinized and lacking in the intellectual ferment which sustains the good mavericks. This would mean that beneficiaries or their selectors have forgotten that they are supposed to be risk-bearing pioneers.

Since her working life has been so closely involved with the development of the foundation and since the latter is so close to the development of anthropology, it is not possible to pay tribute to the achievement of Lita Osmundsen without a step-by-step account of the history of both over the last 40 years—out of the question for this article. Two anthropologists who were there from the beginning, Ralph Linton and Cornelius Osgood, helped to formulate the guiding vision, and everyone who has been involved has helped the history to unfold. In 1950, when its mission seemed about to be submerged by the large foundations, the foundation decided to rise above temptations to insularity or provincialism by setting international standards. It would develop an interdisciplinary conference center in Europe and start a new international journal. CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY was launched in 1958 out of the 1952 conference “Anthropology Today,” attended by 90 internationally known scholars. Burg Wartenstein, an 11th-century castle in Austria, was bought by the founder and donated to the foundation, which renovated it in 1958 as a major international conference center. What that meant as a nuts-and-bolts problem is impressive. Lita Osmundsen, as associate director to Paul Fejos, had to speak German well enough to engage local purveyors, train village staff for maintenance and service, find a chef, engage a village music group to play Viennese waltzes, establish good relations with the Austrian neighbors—and all this as background to initiating, developing, and organizing small-group summer conferences on an international basis. Over the last 20 years, the program that has most pleased her is aid to students, especially the Developing Countries Fellowship, a result of her life-long interest in indigenous anthropologists. Within the foundation’s regular operations, other programs have multiplied and developed out of all recognition: a special program in the late ’60s on the origins of man, general support of primatology and of the International Biological Program, Human Adaptability Section, museum research fellowships, symbolic studies, etc. Asked what the foundation had done about women anthropologists, she made the interesting observation that a policy of giving money in small amounts had been especially helpful to women: mavericks, marginals, and women can do a lot with less just because they are not established. In addition to the high output of publications resulting from its research and conference support, her main satisfaction is in reflecting that the foundation has stimulated international scholarly communication and that its support of promising individuals at significant points in their careers has made a difference.
At first glance the unwary visitor may take her for an unusually charming, tactful chatelaine hostess, attentive to the comfort of guests. Anyone who has had the good fortune to be helped with the organizing of a conference at the castle immediately recognizes the sophisticated intellect and steely grasp of academic outcomes together with the organizational skills that explain the success of the famous Wenner-Gren conferences. Now that she is going, it is very hard to imagine anyone taking her place. We can recognize a unique niche in the history of anthropology created and filled by a particularly tough and disciplined intelligence. If American anthropology had not flourished, things might have been very different for world anthropology, and we can salute the person who primed it.

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The Human Career in Africa:
A Conference to Honour
J. Desmond Clark

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Few anthropologists have made such major and durable contributions to their chosen areas of research as J. Desmond Clark. Clark has not only worked in the field of African prehistory. He has been active in the study of African prehistory. His 70th birthday was held at the University of California at Berkeley April 12–16, 1986, under the title "The Longest Record: The Human Career in Africa." It was originally conceived by Glynn Isaac and Jack Harris (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee), but the tragic and untimely death of Isaac in October 1985 left the organisation on Harris's capable shoulders. Over 300 scholars attended what proved to be the largest and most representative gathering of Africanist archaeologists that has been held for over a decade. It was particularly gratifying that scholars from all African nations, without exception, were able and actively encouraged to attend.

Clark, born in London in 1916, took a first-class degree in archaeology and anthropology at Christ's College, Cambridge, and immediately after graduating was appointed Curator of the then Rhodes-Livingstone Museum in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). In two decades of intensive fieldwork, interrupted by military service and archaeological exploration in the Horn of Africa, he established a detailed framework for the prehistory of south-central Africa which has proved of lasting value for studies in all periods of human activity throughout the eastern and southern regions of the continent. Since moving to the University of California at Berkeley in 1961, he has enhanced the scale and range not only of his fieldwork but also of his writing and synthesis. He has also, in conjunction with the late Glynn Isaac, developed at Berkeley an acknowledged world centre for the study of African archaeology and the training of African archaeologists. A notable feature of the conference was the large number of participants, from Africa and elsewhere, who had begun their careers as students of Desmond Clark.

At an early stage in the conference organisation, a decision had been taken that all participants who wished to present papers would be welcome to do so and that there would be no parallel sessions so that all participants could be encouraged to attend all presentations. That these policies could be maintained even when the number of participants had grown to more than double that originally anticipated reflected great credit on the organisers, session chairmen, and individual speakers. Even so, almost all presentations had to be restricted to ten minutes' duration, and there was very little time for formal discussion. Inevitably, some contributions consisted of very preliminary statements of current research, while others dealt with materials that had already been published in some detail. Nevertheless, the conference provided a highly successful and stimulating forum in which current concerns in most areas of African prehistory from human origins to ethnoarchaeology were aired, discussed, and evaluated.

The conference opened with a symposium on African rock art, separately funded by the National Humanities Council. Attention was focused on the paintings of southern Africa, and their interpretation in terms of San belief systems and trance experiences. Major statements had been commissioned from two of the leading pioneers of these studies, Patricia Vinnicombe (Western Australia Museum) and David Lewis-Williams (Witwatersrand University). Vinnicombe compared Africa-based hypotheses with evidence relating to Australian rock art and demonstrated how, in the latter area, paintings can inter alia serve to demarcate territory and its varied seasonal exploitation and to record the totemic creatures of individual populations. She showed how "visual images integrate a complex multi-dimensional cross-referencing mechanism of encoded information" and stressed how this is maintained through time by the repainting of images whose origin is attributed to the "dreamtime"—the supernatural period of creation. By contrast, Lewis-Williams sought to interpret most San paintings in southern Africa by reference to species-wide neurological and culture-specific hallucinations derived from trance experience and practice. He demonstrated how certain elements of this trance-related art could be recognized in other regions, notably Zimbabwe and Tanzania, where previous San occupation was also indicated. The search for monocular explanations of archaeological phenomena was a recurring if often unspoken theme in the conference, and further comment on it will be offered below. Other speakers offered detailed accounts of research illustrating the prehistory of presumed San populations through the period to which the majority of the paintings are commonly attributed. Only Fidel Masao (National Museum of Tanzania), however, carried this study beyond southern Africa, and it was regrettable, although symptomatic of the present focus of research, that no consideration was offered at this symposium of rock art in other parts of Africa.

The remaining four days of the conference were devoted to over 130 brief presentations on current research. Approximately half of these related to Mid-Pleistocene and earlier periods, and these were arranged thematically. In this overview, only a selection of the individual contributions and themes can be noted.

Palaeoenvironmental and chronometric studies on early hominid sites were largely restricted to eastern Africa, although Eric Delson (American Museum of Natural History) offered correlations between eastern and southern African Plio/Pleistocene localities based on cercopithecoid biochronol-