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Author(s): THOMAS WESSEL

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THOMAS WESSEL

THE ACADEMIC WORLD IS A LESSER place today with the passing of historian John T. Schlebecker on August 11, 2010. John will be sorely missed by his former students and colleagues. He received his BA from Hiram College in 1949, an MA from Harvard University in 1951, and his PhD from the University of Wisconsin in 1954. That year he was offered an appointment as assistant professor of history at Montana State University (now the University of Montana), and then moved on to Iowa State University in 1956. Professor Schlebecker remained at Iowa State University until 1965, when he accepted a position as curator of agriculture and forest products at the Smithsonian Institution. He remained at the Smithsonian in various capacities until his retirement in 1985. During his years at the Smithsonian, Dr. Schlebecker continued to teach as a visiting professor at many of the universities in the Washington, DC area.

Dr. Schlebecker was active in a number of professional associations. His peers elected him president of the Agricultural History Society in 1975, president of the Association of Living Historical Farms in 1973, and to the Research Board of Advisors of the American Biographical Institute. He was a long-time member of the British Agricultural History Society, the International Economic History Association, and an honorary life member of the International Association of Agricultural Museums.

His former students remember him as a dynamic classroom lecturer. He patrolled the front of the classroom as though he were on a mission and barked out the words of history like the Marine gunnery sergeant he had once been. Some of his lectures became legend and remain vivid in the minds of those who heard them decades after the event. Word would pass through the student grapevine that Schlebecker was lecturing on “The Origins of the American Legion” and at the appointed hour every

seat in the auditorium was filled and students lined the walls to listen. No one who enrolled in a class with Professor Schlebecker ever forgot the excitement and, for some, it was a life-changing experience. Only in later years did he admit that while the historical material always excited him as he spoke, his lectures were designed with a bit of calculated theatrics.

Dr. Schlebecker devoted his principal research to agricultural history producing a number of books and monographs including *A History of Dairy Journalism*, *Cattle Raising on the Great Plains, 1900–1961*, a widely admired textbook *Whereby We Thrive: A History of American Farming, 1607–1972*, and the delightful *The Many Names of Country People*. Among his nearly forty articles are his take on “Braddock’s Defeat” published while still an undergraduate, a serious, though sometimes whimsical, “Informal History of Hitchhiking,” and a powerfully argued article employing place theory to explain “The World Metropolis and the History of American Agriculture.”

He was a demanding scholar who never let conventional wisdom dilute his view of the past. He noted in his book on cattle-raising on the Great Plains that

“Nothing is so striking in the records of the Plains cattle industry as the divergence between history and legend. Cattlemen have always seen themselves as fiercely independent, neither seeking nor receiving help from anyone, and certainly not getting help from the government. They represent themselves, without guile and without deceit, as the last surviving defenders of ancient American liberties. Oddly, most Americans do not even take offense at these airs. Yet the slightest glance at the record reveals countless efforts by cattlemen to get government assistance of one sort or another. They continually sought help, and they often got it. This is true, neither good nor bad, but just true.”

Regrettably, he was not given time to express his view of the tea party movement, our most recent claimants as the exclusive guardians of ancient American liberties.

Dr. Schlebecker’s strong sense of principle occasionally embroiled him in controversy. His defense of the National Farmer’s Organization (NFO) brought him into conflict with the powerful Farm Bureau Federation while at Iowa State University. Later he confronted the

establishment in defense of academic freedom at the Smithsonian Institution. He quickly established himself at the Smithsonian as an outspoken advocate of scholars' right to seek publication of their work without intervening approval or censorship by Smithsonian administrators. He framed and hung prominently on the wall of his office a memo. from Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley endorsing his view of the matter.

Dr. Schlebecker helped make the Smithsonian a haven for young would-be historians. His generosity of spirit and willingness to spend countless hours tutoring novice scholars created memorable experiences for all who had the privilege of becoming part of his circle. Dr. Schlebecker took the Smithsonian Institution's commitment to public education seriously. He curated several exhibits and initiated a study that led to the establishment of the numerous "living historical farms" that now dot the landscape from coast to coast. He remained a guiding hand of the Association of Living Historical Farms and Agricultural Museums for over thirty years.

Although he epitomized the individualism that he admired in farmers he was not complete without his family. He met his wife of sixty-three years, Ruth Atwater (Toni) while both were serving in the Marine Corps in 1944. Together they raised five children and lived to enjoy ten grandchildren and seven great grandchildren. Daughter Susan McKenna died in 1999, and Toni preceded him in death in 2008. Though profoundly saddened at their passing he could at the end of his life reflect on a distinguished scholarly career, the gratitude of hundreds of students he nurtured, and the love of his children and friends.