

The Explorers Club

Northern California Chapter

December 2003

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San Francisco December 5, 2003 Alan & Shan Nichols

Cycling the Silk Road Through Central Asia A Father & Son Odyssey

Alan Nichols (MN'84) and his son, Shan Nichols, have a tale to tell: they cycled 2332 miles along the Silk Route in the early Summer of 1998. From Ashgabad, Turkmenistan, to Almaty, Kazakhstan, from where we heard stories told by an earlier speaker, this year, Thierry Thys. Thys flew away, to the northeast; the Nichols spent nearly two months on a trail they describe as:

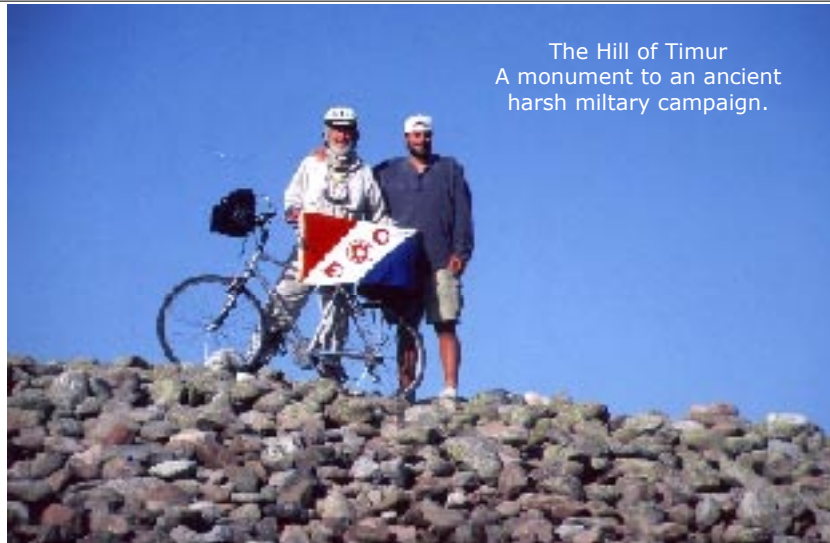
"...the hottest, coldest, windiest, sandiest, muddiest, wettest, driest, easiest, hardest, roughest, most beautiful, ugliest, highest, most remote and most trafficked road in the world."

LOCATION

Date: Friday, 5 December 2003
Place: Sinbad's Pier 2 Restaurant
Embarcadero, San Francisco
Time: 6:30 pm, no-host cocktails
7:15 pm, dinner
Cost: \$45 (by December 1)
\$55 (if posted afterwards)

Reach Steve at
nauticos@oceaneearth.org
or 925 934-1051.

Reservation Form on page 5
Please reserve promptly!



The Hill of Timur
A monument to an ancient
harsh military campaign.

PHOTOS COURTESY ALAN NICHOLS

Chapter-member Alan cycled 3300 miles a few years earlier on the Chinese length of the legendary Road and reported his experience in *The Explorers Club Journal**. With his son, he now will report on the wilds of Central Asia, along a ring extending from north of Iran through several 'stans' east to the Chinese border. Here is a land travelled for all of civilized times and, before, back into Paleolithic time. It remains 'incident' prone, a dangerous place to be from the vantage of

fellow man and nature alike. This bike ride is clearly not equivalent to crossing the U.S., even though the distance is similar! (Not to belittle such a feat). The mystical sense of the layers upon layers of peoples who have lived along this route, the conflicts, religious wars, devastation, and tenacity of the locals was felt throughout. The glory of Uzbekistan's Samarkand, the Golden Capitol, and the fertility of the Fergana Valley, likened to our own Central Valley were found along their way. The



Continued on page 2



The Silk Road is not paved in all places.



Continued from page 1

top historical layer is today, including the frequent need for 'negotiation' with widely varying levels of power, in a culture of men where woman have dual roles, along a rustic and rugged trail.

The experience, the absorbed sense of being so close to the place, the exhilaration and exhaustion, the real

danger (and skills needed to minimize it): all of these feelings were amplified by the father and son sharing. Come to our Christmas Season meeting and hear for yourselves, from father and son.

* *Explorers Journal*, Vol. 66, #1 (March 1998)

Note: Alan was one of the finalists in the recent Explorers Club Photo Competition, for his photograph of a sacred mountain, *The Mountain of God*, Ol Doinyo L'Engai, in Africa, see

http://www.explorers.org/events/photo_comp_2003/finalist_nichols.html



Valdivian Travels

Ed (FN'79) and Sandy Ross attended our November meeting and reminded us of the invitation to join them to South America in February. No doubt this would be a terrific trip for anyone intrigued with South American archaeology and travel to Peru and Equador.

If you are interested call (415) 383-6130 or email healthhab@igc.org.

Krist Jake (MN'79) reminds you to mark your calendars. The films details will be provided next month because we hope to have our next newsletter out just before this weekend! If you are interested in the ocean and marine activities, this will be a 'ground-floor' experience, a whole new fesitival.

The opening reception will be at the Maritime Museum on January 9.

<http://oceanfilmfest.org/about.html>

If you happen to be in New York in late January, The Explorers Club has its own Documentary Film Festival on January 24th.

Timbuktu Books Issa Mohamed San Francisco

Issa Mohamed has undertaken a difficult task: to find ways to save the historical record of his heritage. This record is tangible in well over a half-million documents entrusted largely to private families in his hometown, Timbuktu, Mali. Issa shared his enthusiasm for this city on the edge of the Sahara, often a metaphor for the remote and unobtainable. He showed personal video of the original parts of the city and the camel salt caravans that continue to this day. He shared the music and entertainment of his people. He then showed an interview about the manuscripts of Mali being filmed by the National Geographic Society.

It is these old books that are treasures, irreplaceable. These are texts of Islamic philosophy, political and natural science, and, in fact who knows what all. There are so many that date from more or less a millennium, that few have been read in recent times. Nevertheless, their content is obvious from the impression of anyone who can read Arabic. Timbuktu was a major academic center in Western Africa; it was the site of the western extension of Muslim expansion; scholarship and its documentation was a major activity. Timbuktu was also a major publishing center, and the product remains. Over the centuries the books have been dispersed from the central mosques into the hands of families who knew of them; they are being protected, perhaps. As generations pass their value is less recognized. [How many old books in your library have you read lately?] In modern times, when the western Sahara was plagued with drought and famine, many volumes were sold to tourists just to find money to subsist. Colonial powers, the French and British, took many. The Malian government has now placed a prohibition on the export of any texts. The residual, still a huge number, are now clearly endangered.

Issa Mohamed founded the Timbuktu Heritage Institute to save these.

After given a bit of insight into what the legendary Tibuktu looks like today, he responded enthusiastically to



all the questions the audience put forth. The task at hand is to build a conservation capability on site, in Timbuktu; he sees the key to this in IT (Information Technology). He wants to find the money to teach Malians to save their books, to copy them, to store them correctly, to read them and study them, to share them with the world via the web.

He is certain that the means to do this will come from the West, the philanthropy in the United States, the universities, the corporations, the research institutions. The Library of Congress, the Getty Foundation: these are the folks who can help establish an outreach in Timbuktu. They have the knowledge and his people have the need and skills. Now, right now, he is trying to find a way to enter into dialog with these source groups. It is not easy for there are competing interests that exist for their favors.

Issa Mohamed, at the behest of his elders and concerned Malians, is trying his best to get the generosity he knows is part of his American half to the waiting requirement he knows is a part of his Malian half. If you can help, contact him! Don't be shy:

<http://www.timbuktuheritage.org/>



Examples of the hundreds of thousands of manuscripts which need attention.

Ed. Note: In the announcement for Issa Mohamed's talk I wrote of the Incan written history being destroyed; I was reminded, kindly, that no Incan library was ever found; however, the Mayan codices were destroyed by the Spanish. That works; thank you.

ECAD - NEW YORK March 20, 2004

There has been an effort to select a table or two for our Chapter. In practice this could still happen, but it is important for each member who wants to attend to buy the tickets first. When the dues are solicited, the dinner invitations will be included. Send your reservation and money directly to New York!

This event will celebrate the 100th anniversary of The Explorers Club. Seating will be on a first-come, first seated basis, but we will make an effort to organize a table for those who wish.

Payments and reservations will be allowed on line, at the Explorers Club web site.

Merle Robertson's Gift



ROBERTSON

David Dressing, MGR Collection Director, with row upon row of Merle's rubbings in storage.

Merle with Dr. Hortensia Calvo, Director of the Tulane Latin American Library in front of her rubbing of Seibel Stela 13.

Dr. Merle Robertson (FN'90) just returned from Palenque, Chiapas, Mexico, and Mayan environs, where she escorted members of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco to many of the major archeological sites. But that is not the news; she shows people around Mayan places often. She has also just returned from Tulane University.

It is at Tulane where she has donated the product of her life's work in PreColumbian America to their Latin American Library.

The Merle Greene Robertson Collection includes, dramatically, over 4000 original rubbings of Mayan carvings! These are all carefully indexed and catalogued and represent the most extensive documentation of

that cultures' physical writing and art. In addition Merle gave her field notebooks and all associated materials: hundreds of original drawings and plans of Palenque and Chichen Itza, all of her working color and black and white drawings, all color notations of the monuments, over 6000 8" x 10" photographs, forty years of newspaper articles, hundreds of important letters from the White House to a prison, governors and presidents of Mexico, plus to all of the well-known archaeologists, such as Sir Eric Thompson. In Palenque, as an example, she has carefully measured and sketched every major and most exposed minor structures.

Merle has based her explorations at her research library in Palenque for over 40 years (and maintains this work currently.) It is understated to note that this is a very valuable donation to her

alma mater.

Tulane understands their good fortune and the addition that this corpus is to the world's most extensive collection of Latin American materials. Scholars now and into the future will have these priceless representations of Maya carvings to access and study. They are being maintained, as they should be, in conditions suitable for their long-term conservation. This is critical, for many of the actual sites where they were created are damaged by weather or, in some cases, the originals have been lost to vandals and thieves. Her energetic efforts were often made just after the pieces were excavated or discovered and show details now lost forever.

To have a sense of what she has done take a look at her PreColumbian Art Research (PARI) website; you can see pictures of many of the rubbings. You can also gain an insight into the highly original technique that she developed.

<http://www.mesoweb.com/rubbings/index.html>

<http://www.mesoweb.com/pari/>

Ed. Note: *Maya Sculpture of the Southern Lowlands*, Greene, Rands & Graham (1972). available from the PARI site, documents nearly 500 of Merle's early rubbings.

Elections

Not that we, at least in San Francisco, have not had a sufficiency of the electoral process recently, the Chapter traditionally acclaims new officers at the December meeting. There has rarely been a heady competition for the management of the

club, and those in the 'chairs' have been there but a year, but we shall go through the vote, nevertheless. Both have agreed to shoulder on for another term. Our trusted Treasurer has indicated he has served his time, so we are seeking a new member to accept these duties. Step forth

by calling Steve! Your newsletter editor is about to complete three years at the desk; we need interested parties to come forth to at least help in this task too. Contact Lee. The Webmaster remains steady at his tasks. Any comments? Bring them up at the December meeting.

The Chapter Chair

Dear Northern California Explorers:

At the November meeting I spoke of the challenge that our chapter currently faces in light of rising costs of operation. All organizations provide benefits and incur costs, which in-turn must be at least equaled by some sort of revenue source. When costs exceed revenues on an on-going basis, real trouble is not far behind. After studying our situation and considering a number of un-palatable alternatives, your Officers have decided to forward a proposal to the membership for instituting annual Chapter dues. I want to assure you that this decision is not taken lightly, and I want all of you to understand the background leading to our proposal.

First, let's review some of the benefits that our Chapter members receive. The Northern California Chapter is one of the largest and most active of any of the Explorers Club regional organizations. For nine months of the year, we offer a top-notch selection of speakers and a gracious venue in which to enjoy their presentations. Each month, the Chapter issues a newsletter, which without doubt is one of the best of any club Chapter. To date, the newsletter has been offered free to all Northern California members. Behind the scenes, your Officers arrange for the newsletter to be written, populated with photos, printed, folded, stamped, and mailed. Volunteer members spend time keeping the chapter roster up to date, publishing our web newsletter edition and providing members with Expedition News at no cost. On your behalf, we also communicate and coordinate with the National organization, recruit and husband new members, and recruit speakers and arrange

for the venues in which they appear. Speakers are always presented with tokens of appreciation purchased from National— e.g. shirts, cups, certificates, and the like— and they are hosted when they speak. In 2004, I expect the Chapter may incur additional unforeseen costs associated with Club's Centennial celebration.

So, how do we pay for all of this? Since I have been a chapter officer, our primary source of income has been the ever-dwindling surplus from dinner meetings. I am aware that in the past, individual members have made kind donations to help us meet extraordinary expenses. In the present, individual members and officers frequently donate operating expenses to help keep the boat afloat. To avoid any misconceptions, I would also point out that the National organization gives no on-going financial support to the local Chapters. While we receive a nominal one-time 'rebate' of \$50 for each new member from our region, no portion of the annual dues that you remit to New York flows back to the local chapter.

In light of the foregoing we face a conundrum. We recognize that the cost to attend the monthly dinners may be prohibitive to many members. It can be even more significant if one wishes to bring guests. Raising the price of our meetings in order to generate additional revenue risks limiting attendance even more and restricts member's access to some really fine presentations. Also, it seems unfair to ask those who do attend, to subsidize all the other benefits to members in general. In spite of its relatively high amount, our meeting charge has barely covered the cost of the venues, much less that of the newsletter and associated Chapter expenses. Over the past few months, we have been unable

to break-even, yet we have resisted moving to the 'market price', which would be in the \$60 per person range. All of this leads us to the following:

Effective with the New Year, we propose to institute a nominal annual dues structure of \$20 per member; a similar amount would be welcomed from non-members who wish to receive the newsletter. Please note that the newsletter will continue to be available electronically at no charge. If one does not pay the dues, well, we would be disappointed.

The attempt is to broaden the support of overall expenses. I believe that this step will allow us to reduce the costs of our meetings and hopefully it will broadening attendance. Participation from a larger portion of the membership is our primary goal. We strongly solicit your comments and suggestions for alternatives which may further our cause.

Finally, I would encourage those of you who plan to attend the upcoming meeting to get your reservations in early. Due to the competition of the Season, our venue size is limited this month. First come, first served. I hope to see you on December 5th.

—Stephen E. Smith, FN'96



Sinbad's Pier 2 Restaurant is easy to find: JUST south of San Francisco's Ferry Building! Parking is available. BART access.

Please make your checks out to The Explorers Club, Northern California Chapter, and mail with this form to:

Please reserve _____ spaces for December 5, 2003, at the Sinbad's Restaurant. Cost: \$45 each by Dec 1 \$55 if postmarked thereafter (contact Steve at nauticos@oceanearth.org or 925 934-1051 to assure a reservation).

Name: _____

Address (if changed): _____

Guests: _____

Dr. Stephen E. Smith
402 Via Royal
Walnut Creek, CA 94596

meal choice (please circle):

meat

fish

vegetarian

Northern California 2003-2004 Event Calendar

(Mark the dates! Venues will be identified at time of event.)

October 3, 2003 Thierry Thys "Private Piloting Across Russia"
St. Francis Yacht Club, San Francisco
November 7, 2003 Issa Mohamed "Ancient Manuscripts of Timbuktu"
Sinbad's Restaurant, The Embarcadero, San Francisco

**December 5, 2003 Alan & Shan Nichols "A 2300-mile Father/Son Odyssey Through Central Asia"
Sinbad's Restaurant, The Embarcadero, San Francisco**

January 16, 2004 Dana Isherwood "Helping Out in Western China"
February 28, 2004 Sheldon Breiner "Remote Sensing in Archaeology"
March 20, 2004 ECAD, New York 100 Years of The Explorers Club
March 27, 2004 Eugene Boudreau "An Evening with the Tamajumara of Northern Mexico"
April 30, 2004 Rupert Isaacson "The Bushmen of the Kalahari"
June 4, 2004 Greg Crouch "Enduring Patagonia"
June 19, 2004 Chapter Picnic Contact Anders Jepsen to help

Please note venues and dates with care.

The December 5 meeting is at
Sinbad's Restaurant, San Francisco.

In full and lively color!

To experience this newsletter in color,
see the 'pdf' version at our web site.

(When copying the URL addresses be sure to keep them all on one line; most are also available as links on our Chapter web site.)

December 2003

Dr. Stephen E. Smith
The Explorers Club
Northern California Chapter
402 Via Royal
Walnut Creek, CA 94596

