

Soviet scholar and Shell Beach swimmer passes on

by Justin Nobel

David Hooson, a world traveler and renowned Soviet scholar who chaired Berkeley's Geography Department and was part of the first group of Western academics to tour the Soviet Union, passed away last Friday while swimming at Shell Beach. He was 82.

"David had faith in the human spirit. He walked into a room and lit it up and it stayed lit long after he left," said friend Tom D'Onofrio.

"We can have Walkmans and more TVs and artificial hearts but we also need people with that indomitable spirit to continue no matter what. You meet people like David and you feel better. When you're done talking to them you walk away and there's an extra lift in your step."

David was born April 25, 1926 in the bedroom of a 500-year-old farmhouse in a rural region of northern Wales called the Vale of Clwyd. His father was a Welsh peasant and his mother studied agriculture at Cambridge at a time when women were barred from getting degrees. David was the eldest of a brother and two sisters.

The kids grew up on a farm called Caerfellen—"Field of the Apple Trees"—and the family farmed strawberries and potatoes. At the one-room schoolhouse children were served a snack of baked potatoes and milk, both of which came from the Hooson farm.

David won a scholarship to a public school attended by kids from far-off British lands like India and Uganda. He learned Latin and Greek and taught himself Spanish on the side. In a writing contest judged by the headmaster he won a sterling silver pen.

He was accepted at Oxford but was quickly drafted into the military. Wanting to see the world he chose the Navy and at age 17 shipped out, steaming first to Port Said, Egypt before landing in Sri Lanka. His ship was to invade Malaya, where the Japanese were in control. But the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima while his ship was at sea and ended the war.

"Instead of Japanese soldiers were beautiful girls with mango, papaya, coconut," said Cariadne Margaret Mackenzie, his second wife.

He returned to Britain, trained as a teacher and met his first wife, Alison, a teacher from New Zealand. The two married and taught school in London. Later, David returned and earned a Ph.D. in geography at the London School of Economics.

He taught at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. The pay was low, and students expressed disapproval with his lectures by stomping their feet in unison.

David applied for a job in the United States, where salaries were ten times higher. He was offered a post at the University of Maryland but the only position available was in Soviet geography.

Russia had just launched Laika into

space on Sputnik II, and the country was bursting with energy and enthusiasm. America was bursting with jealousy, and intrigue as to how their wallowing rivals had exceeded them.

David's slim education on the topic was gained from conversations with communist friends but he accepted the position. He spent the next several months holed up in a carrel at the Library of Congress in D.C. learning the Soviet Union's history and language. He later lectured at the Pentagon and in 1960 toured the Soviet Union with the first group of Western academics to be let into the country.

David transferred to the University of British Columbia and eventually settled into the Geography Department at Berkeley, which he later came to chair. He and Alison raised two kids, Clare and Roger, who were quickly inducted into their parents globe-trotting lifestyle.

David took ten-year-old Roger on an overnight on the old California Zephyr train from Emeryville to Chicago. Several years later father and son road-tripped through the American West, pitching camp at a chilly lake in the remote mountains of eastern Nevada and outside a small town in Big Sky Country Montana. "He was always pushing new horizons," said Roger.

David and Alison eventually divorced. David remained at Berkeley and wrote two books on Soviet geography that were both picked apart and applauded by scholars on each side of the Atlantic.

"He was never a fan of communism," said Cariadne, who taught in Berkeley's Anthropology Department, where the two met. "The censorship, the poverty, the bread lines were terrible, but he was fascinated by this buoyant country which had achieved Sputnik under these conditions."

The two spent summers and sabbaticals in Bolinas and in 1981 were wed on a chilly November evening at Agate Beach. Cariadne wore a sequined purple dress and David a corduroy jacket with a nosegay in the pocket. Tom D'Onofrio, a Bolinas woodworker and ordained minister, officiated.

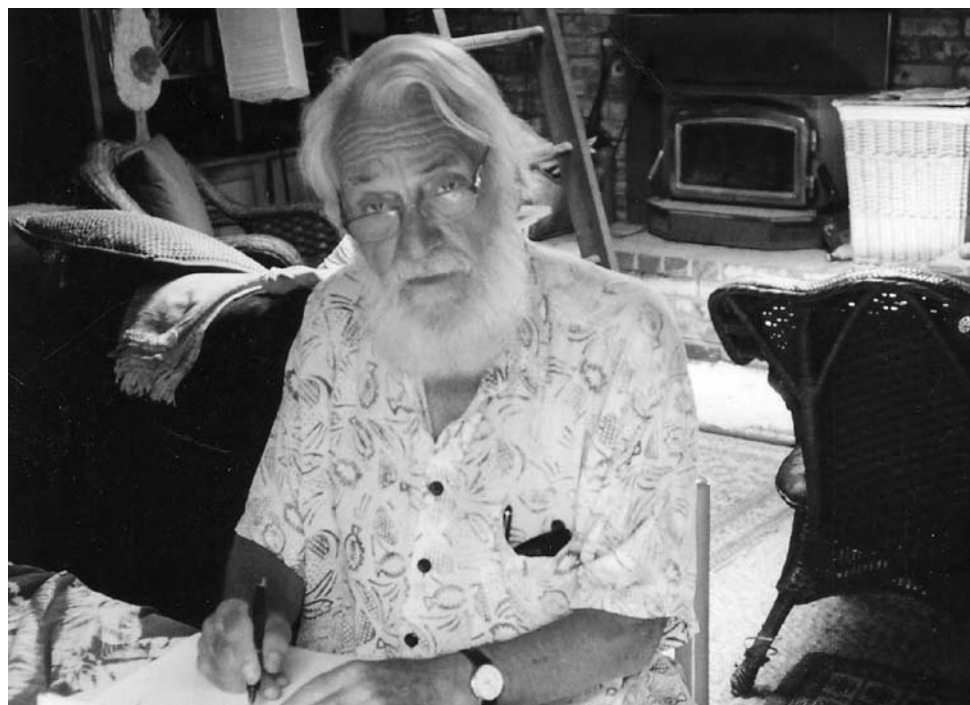
"I loved the two of them immediately," said D'Onofrio.

The crowd was small, a few friends and students, and several people who wandered in off the beach. They ate paella and watched a blowhole spit seawater high into the air. Duxbury Reef reflected the setting sun, which sank beneath the waves and flashed green.

"We all yelled," said D'Onofrio. "I turned to David and said, 'This is a shamanistic experience.'"

In 1992 David and Cariadne moved from Berkeley to Inverness Park. David retired from Berkeley but continued teaching at the Fromm Institute for Lifelong Learning in San Francisco.

"I am a classroom junkie and have heard some of the great lecturers but rarely have I heard someone better than David Hooson," said Virginia Brownback of Inverness, who



David Hooson of Inverness Park was part of the first group of Western scholars to tour the Soviet Union. He chaired the Geography Department at UC Berkeley.

took his courses in Russian history and cartography. The two met while swimming at Shell Beach, a scenic Tomales Bay cove where a coterie of mostly gray haired Invernessians enjoy magical morning swims.

"It's one of the Seven Wonders of the World," explained longtime Shell swimmer Moreva Selchie. "It's incredibly beautiful and peaceful. Somehow once you're there you're there. You drop everything else going on and you're simply there."

Last Friday, Moreva was at Shell just before noon for a swim. A jogger alerted her to an object drifting towards the center of the bay. Moreva swam out.

"We had just started the season and muscles were a little fast," she said. "By the time I caught up with it, it was well past the buoys. It looked like flesh on the water. I panicked and backed off. Then I realized that this could be a body, and people would be affected, and I wasn't going to let it go out to sea. I got closer, and it was a person. I saw blue swimming trunks and a head."

It wasn't until the next day that Moreva learned that the body belonged to her friend David Hooson.

"The old boy did it, what a flourish, to die in his favorite spot in the world," said Cariadne. "He did it cleanly, while things were going well. How can I be horrified about a man who dies in the place that he loved?"

David's last moments aren't known for certain, but according to seasoned Shell swimmers and County Coroner Ken Holmes they may have gone something like this.

On Friday he left home at 11 a.m. for Shell Beach. He wasn't wearing a shirt and forgot his towel on the top shelf but remembered swimming trunks. Cariadne had urged him to wear them, thinking the unseasonably hot weather would draw families to the beach.

"He thought swimming trunks were just

a useless, clammy wet object in the water," she said.

David parked his faded blue Geo at the end of Camino Del Mar and descended the packed dirt path to the beach. A rising sun screened by foliage splattered shadows across the forest floor and cast aglow swoopy oak branches greened by lichen. A warm breeze rustled leaves deadened by Sudden Oak. A metallic blue bird sprang from branch to branch.

He crossed a well worn foot bridge and carefully descended a set of steps to the beach. A gnarled forest curled over umber cliffs pocked with caves. A copper trickle coming from a reedy marsh cut cross damp sand tinged pink from quartz crystals. Browning seaweed marked the high tide and errant driftwood evidenced recent storms. Midget swells sent wavelets ashore and orange buoys bobbed beyond a snow white swim dock.

David removed his shoes and lay his watch, glasses and car keys on the beach. He squished bare foot across coarse sand in his turquoise trunks. Mud enveloped toes and strands of sea grass stroked his body. He submerged. The water was cool but invigorating and he swam his gentle strokes. The heart hiccupped, a slight murmur, and he went under. Cold water filled his lungs, blocking his airways, halting his heart. Eyes closed, body hung limp, and according to those who have come close to drowning, David experienced a great feeling of peace. Then the world went white.

David is survived by his wife, Cariadne; his son Roger Hooson and daughter-in-law Karen Hata; his daughter Clare; his former wife, Alison; a brother John and sister Helen; and nieces and nephews in Wales, England, and Scotland. There will be a small ceremony in West Marin in June, and a memorial service at Berkeley in September and another on a mountainside in North Wales.