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William A. Rockie

Seventy Years A Geographer in the West

***Revised and compiled by his son
John D. Rockie
Gig Harbor, Washington***

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FOREWORD

At the time of William A. Rockie's death in 1981 he was in the process of preparing a monograph for the "Occasional Papers in Geography" series at Portland State University. The monograph was to recount his long career as a professional geographer. He had started in the late 1970's writing his recollections in a random fashion. After Rockie's death several people from the Geography Department at Portland State University discussed the unfinished work with Rockie's son, John, who agreed to assume responsibility for organizing what Rockie had written and expand on it as needed to finish the monograph. Professors Courtney and Price agreed to help in editing.

Except where noted, the narratives that follow are in W.A. Rockie's words (subject to the limitations of editing), as he had written them, some many years ago, others in the years just before his death. Most of the writing that Rockie did in the late 1970's dealt with his experiences from the early 1900's until the late 1940's. Particularly sparse were periods in the late 1940's, late 1950's and from the 1960's on. For those periods, his son, John Rockie, made liberal use of diaries, as well as papers and publications written by W.A. Rockie.

The illustrations in the monograph were selected from photographs and other material from W.A. Rockie's personal files and several archival collections, so do not necessarily represent the choices of W.A. Rockie, but I think he would be pleased.

Larry W. Price

PREFACE

William A. Rockie's careers in government and educational service spanned more than two-thirds of a century, and throughout his life he was dedicated to the furtherance of man's optimum use of his environment. Although in recent years he resisted being termed an environmentalist (the "new breed of environmentalists," as he often termed them), he was a true environmentalist in the sense that he had a deep regard for protecting and improving the environment.

"Rockie," as he was usually called by his associates -- "Bill" or "Will" by many of his closer friends and family -- put in nearly 40 years as an employee of the federal government before he retired in 1952. His first government job was with the U.S. Forest Service in Targhee National Forest in Idaho in 1911, and he continued at summer work in the west for several years, interspersed with undergraduate work at the University of Nebraska, until he graduated in 1914. From 1914 to 1919 he was engaged in soil survey and land classification work for the Bureau of Soils, and later the U.S. Geological Survey. After a brief stint as assistant professor in the Department of Geography and Conservation at the University of Nebraska in 1919-1920, he tried farming in the Priest River country of northern Idaho from 1920 to 1922. His farming venture was not a roaring success, and he returned to government service in 1922, working for eight years in Blister Rust Control for the U.S. Bureau of Plant Industry. His work from 1922 to 1930 dealt primarily with ecological studies in the Pacific Northwest.

The majority of Rockie's government work was in the area of soil erosion control, and it would be difficult to think of the early development of soil conservation programs in the Pacific Northwest without thinking of Bill Rockie. His entry into soil conservation work began when he started the Soil Erosion Experiment Station at Pullman, Washington, in 1930. In 1933 the station became part of the newly organized Soil Erosion Service, and Rockie was named regional director for the Pacific Northwest. The Service was expanded considerably in 1935, and also underwent a name change to the Soil Conservation Service. During these years he was at the heart of the newly developing soil conservation movement in the United States, along with "the Chief," Hugh Bennett (called by some the "fiery apostle of soil conservation"), the assistant

chief, Walter Lowdermilk, and other regional directors throughout the country. Rockie had many stories to tell of his experiences with these people, but one he particularly liked telling was of Hugh Bennett's admiration for Rockie's prowess at eating cherries -- "Rockie is the only man I know who can be putting a cherry in his mouth while chewing another, and spitting out the seed from a third, all simultaneously." After three years as Regional Conservator, Rockie resigned in the summer of 1938 as regional head, and took a more active role in planning for the region, as well as research studies, of Alaska in particular. He continued in this planning capacity until his retirement in March 1952 on his 62nd birthday. Rather than this marking an end to his many years of scientific endeavor, it was the beginning of a new and different type of activity, less structured, and involving considerably more world travel than had his previous 40 years.

In April 1953 Rockie accepted an invitation to be the land use specialist on an international expedition undertaking a scientific study of northern Africa. Before leaving the United States for Africa, Rockie completed his term as president of the Association of Pacific Coast Geographers and in June 1953 delivered his address at the Santa Barbara meeting on what had been his favorite subject for many years, "The Palouse" -- a fitting way to close the first phase of his professional life.

The following year, after returning from Africa, Rockie was given an appointment with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations as soil conservation adviser to the Jamaican government. He was on this assignment from January 1955 to January 1956, during which time he and his wife, Edith, lived in Kingston, Jamaica.

After a year in the United States the travel bug bit again, and Bill and Edith spent the early part of 1957 in Jamaica, Mexico and Central America, visiting friends, and Bill, as always, looking at things through the eyes of a geographer. They left in September 1958 on a trip around the world, via Europe, Asia and Oceania, that included visits with former colleagues and other friends and relatives along the way. They returned to the United States in early 1959. Later that year he arranged to teach geography at Portland State College, beginning an affiliation that continued for another 20 years, and cemented many lasting friendships. Except for occasional assignments as

visiting lecturer at several west coast universities, and a year in Turkey as a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Istanbul, he was involved with the Geography Department at Portland State until 1979.

Edith, Bill's wife of 62 years, died in 1978, after accompanying him on nearly all of his world travels. In March 1980, two days before his 90th birthday, Bill married Beulah, a classmate at the University of Nebraska in 1910. During the summer they built a passive solar house on Chehalem Mountain near Newberg, Oregon. In February 1981 Rockie had a cataract removed and a lens implant, to enable him to keep his driver's license, and to continue to see the beauties and wonders of nature. He suffered cardiac arrest in the recovery room following surgery, thus ending a long and fruitful life.

John D. Rockie
Gig Harbor, Washington
September 1988