

WILBUR AND ME

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ABSTRACT. Wilbur Zelinsky has spent his spectacular scholarly career enhancing our understanding of American life through explorations into the nation's cultural geography. Although he has illuminated grand themes, he is also celebrated for his eclectic work on the geography of Americana. Few, however, may appreciate his lifelong enjoyment of American literature. Early in my scholarly journey, Wilbur encouraged my awakening interest in reading widely, beyond the boundaries of professional literature. Conversations with him about shared literary enthusiasms affirmed my reading proclivities. From classic novels to those of minor authors, commentary by journalists, biographies, and mass-market fiction, literature offers provocative insights into American life and landscape. Reading widely takes one in unforeseen professional directions and yields unexpected rewards. Wilbur's sheer delight with the phenomena of the American scene, however seemingly trivial, instructs us to not overlook their possible geographical significance. *Keywords:* American literature, cultural geography, landscape reading, sense of place, United States.

About twenty-five years ago I received a telephone call from Wilbur Zelinsky, wondering whether I would like to drive with him to the SNACS conference in Louisville, Kentucky. I had not been planning to go to Louisville. In fact, I am not certain that I could have accurately translated the acronym "SNACS" into its full title, the Society for the North American Cultural Survey. However, this was Wilbur Zelinsky at the other end of the telephone communication. . . . Although I did not know Professor Zelinsky personally, I certainly knew who he was. I was only a handful of years out of graduate school; he was a recent past president of the Association of American Geographers. His *The Cultural Geography of the United States* (1973a) sat near at hand on my bookshelf, a staple in my courses. His articles on population geography, American settlement, and the cultural landscape informed my graduate training (Zelinsky 1994). His essay "In Pursuit of Historical Geography and Other Wild Geese" had stirred controversy, and even some heat, among those of us who identified ourselves as historical geographers (Zelinsky 1973b). Of course I was going to Louisville, and I would be delighted to travel with him!

As I recall, Wilbur swooped down to the University of Pittsburgh in the late afternoon from Pennsylvania State University, nestled snugly in the Allegheny Mountains. To reach Louisville that night, he uncharacteristically stuck to Interstate highways because the distance was long and daylight growing short. The more Wilbur-like peregrination through the countryside on blue highways had to wait for the return journey. At our stop for dinner that evening, I received a quick lesson in being a cultural geographer. We historical geographers out of the University of Wisconsin, from the Andrew Clark and David Ward years, had received training in archival research, not cultural observation. In the restaurant we sat down to table settings with coffee cups turned upside down on their saucers. The waitress approached our

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