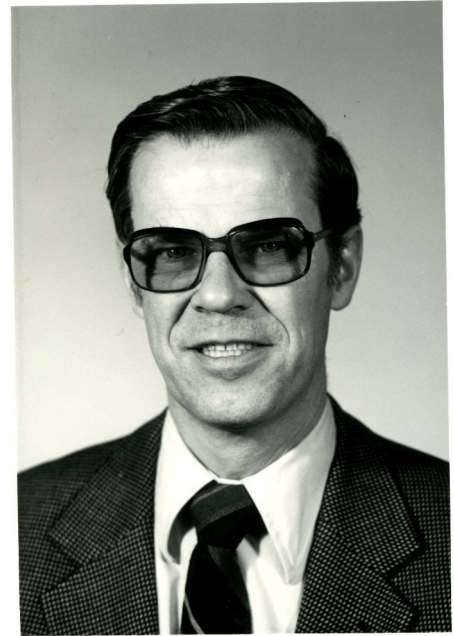


Professors 1960s, 1970s and 1980s

Les Coleman

@ U of S: 1960-1995

I tend to like everyone I meet so it's easy for me to recreate fond memories of our professors. I will start with Dr Les Coleman because almost everyone in geology and geophysics during the 1960s through 1980s had to endure Coleman's Mineralogy and Crystallography. Dr Coleman's expertise was igneous and he is a world-class expert. He earned his PhD at Princeton ('55) where Harry Hess, one of the discoverers of plate tectonics, was a mentor. Les Coleman saw the explanation of plate tectonics (seafloor spreading) first-hand as it was being developed. I mention this to place Dr Coleman's expansive years in earth science in context. By the time I met him in 1989, Dr Coleman's main interest seemed to be getting thick-headed undergrads to grasp a bit about the microscopic world of rocks. He was relentless and unforgiving in his labs. So, students worked hour after hour, squinting into the scopes and "crossing the nichols".



The rigour of Coleman's signature course is easily illustrative with this bit of historical data: In 1982, not long before the new geology building opened, space for students was in short supply in the old building but 90 students (Yes, 90!) were enrolled in second-year geology. Horribly overcrowded and short on instructors, the university could not handle the number. An unsigned document from the time said,

“ . . . Accordingly, only sixty students will be admitted to the second-year course in crystallography and mineralogy in 1982-83, and the holding of a credit for this course, or co-enrollment in it, will guide admission to other second-year courses. Members of the department believe these steps will be in the best interests of good academic standards and supplying the marketplace with well-qualified graduates.”

In other words, sign up for Coleman's class and pass it or you aren't going any further! And that was one of the ways the department could ensure good-quality graduates.

Crystals and minerals was tough, but I found out that I wasn't the only student who began to see thin-sliced basalt when I closed my eyes in the evening. Coleman's mineralogy lab was intense, especially for me – I'm totally red-green colour-blind. I'm also not so good at memorizing images. To pass the course, a student had to pass the lab final. I barely made it. I don't know if Dr Coleman took pity on me – maybe I should have failed. This brings up a revealing thing about Les Coleman. He had a very caring interest in his students.

Professors 1960s, 1970s and 1980s

Les Coleman

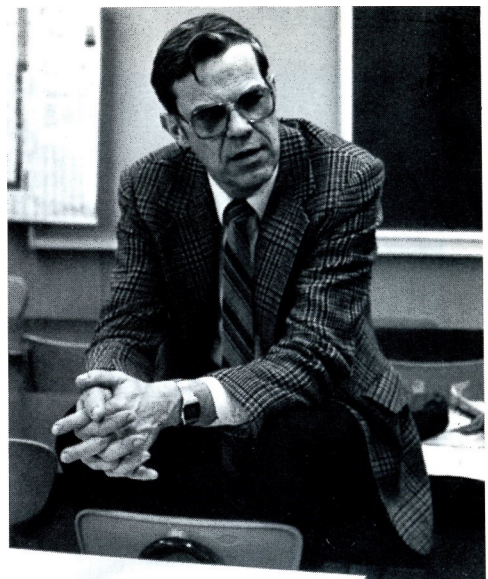
I'll honestly admit that I was intimidated by Dr Coleman. In lecture and lab he could be gruff and direct – that's because he expected the best from his students. But here's the kicker. He knew that I was an older student with two little kids. And other than Mineralogy, I was doing pretty well in the department. Les Coleman sought out scholarships and grants for me and, at one point, tracked me down a hall, running after me, "Miksha, Miksha! I want you to fill out this application and get it back to me tomorrow." He helped me tremendously.

Besides teaching and research at the university, Dr Coleman had spent months at a time in the hard rock northeast of Saskatoon. In 1962, he reported to the Concentrates, "Our three month's work in the field [near Amisk (Beaver) Lake, east-central Saskatchewan] indicate that the choice of area made last spring could not have been better. I have not previously encountered such good exposures of so complex and interesting geological features in any other place that I have worked in Canada. Mapping at a scale of 1" = 500', it is possible to spend time on everything that is of particular interest..."

His research papers included an analysis of the Catherwood meteorite (complete with X-ray diffraction studies) and extensive geology and geochemistry reports of the Hanson Lake area. Les Coleman and B.T. Robertson also found and named the new mineral Nahpoite, an almost opaque white mineral occurring in phosphate nodules among certain ironstone found in the Yukon.

Years after I finished university, I learned that Les Coleman was active in staging Saskatoon's annual jazz festival, raising funds, and serving on the board. A few years ago, Dr Coleman was filmed on a boat off Haida Gwaii, giving a very touching soliloquy about life, history, and the environment. (You can find the clip on YouTube) At home, his family had a pet named Guyot, an odd name until you remember that the guyot is a type of seamount – a formation named by Les Coleman's Harvard mentor and colleague, Harry Hess.

By Ron Miksha



From The Concentrates, 1983-1984