

Leo Carson Davis  
[ledavis@suddenlink.net](mailto:ledavis@suddenlink.net)  
August 10, 2020

### **“Take Out All the Dead Things”: A Gypsy Scholar’s Tale**

The domain name of the Overseas Marylanders website, Gypsy Scholars, aptly describes my experience of teaching geology and biology between 1975 and 1979 for the University of Maryland University College--European Division. Of course, I and my wife, Elizabeth, had to be ready to move every two months, and, as a newly-minted Ph.D., I also had ambitions to continue my research. A memorable experience in Brindisi in the spring of 1977 illustrates the tensions between those roles of gypsy and scholar.

But first, some background. UMUC assisted with the gypsy travel challenges. An especially helpful meeting in the 1975 faculty orientation in Heidelberg was with a used car salesman who had a \$600 VW Beetle, the old indestructible kind with an engine in the back. Tilda Turtle carried all our worldly possessions beneath her rounded shell. From Heidelberg to Bitburg, from Hahn to Torrejon, from Spangdahlem to Rota, she was full to the gunnels, not only with clothing, ONE box of household items, my textbooks and lecture notes, but also geology lab specimens like lava, tufa, limestone, shale, and, of course, granite. An old faithful chestnut of a joke, used with countless geology students, was not to take anything (like rhyolite) for granite.

I also taught biology. In fact, my dual expertise was key in landing me the job with UMUC, since I could be a one-man science department on small military bases.

My actual scholarly field was vertebrate paleontology. When I left for Europe, my Ph.D. dissertation was still at the printer, to be delivered to the University of Iowa graduate school by a friend as soon as the ink had dried. The dissertation delved deeply into the climatic implications of microscopic variations in tiny rodent teeth from a Quaternary deposit in Kansas. To study the relatively recent Quaternary fossils, I found it useful, for comparison, to have even more recent specimens (like from yesterday).

Among all the joys of travel in Europe with the UMUC was the opportunity to encounter exotic critters--small mammals, but also snakes, lizards, and frogs, as I had an additional interest, from my master’s thesis, in fossil herpetology. But the living creatures were of limited scholarly use for me. To compare skeletal or dental characteristics, I needed to find a road kill and reduce it to its enduring, on-the-way-to-being-fossilized hard parts. (Of course, I preferred road kills to the sacrifice of any live animal still enjoying its earthly existence.) During the winter term that I was stationed at the NATO air base in Glyfada, Greece, my wife and I enjoyed many weekend excursions—to Mycenae, Corinth, Nauplion, Epidauros—and I found on the scenic roads several likely posthumous contributions to science, intriguing species that I had never seen before in all my born put-together.

In ordinary, non-gypsy circumstances, processing such specimens could occur in a well-ventilated lab or a remote facility totally away from anyone who might object, like my wife. During the early, halcyon honeymoon days of our marriage, she once let me process a specimen from the hills around Fayetteville, Arkansas, by boiling it in a soup pot on the stove in our apartment. But, after throwing away that pot, she told me in no uncertain terms that our kitchen

was totally off limits for such scientific endeavors. Remembering that earlier experience, I tried to finagle a compromise in the UMUC gypsy existence. I wired the mummified remains in small packets to the rear bumper of Tilda Turtle. My wife insisted on the rear bumper rather than the front, even though mummification was well advanced in the dry Greek climate.

Then, with a new teaching assignment for me, we had to leave the marble temples, moussaka, and blue skies of Greece to return to the Baroque churches, schnitzel, and cool mists of Germany, with Tilda Turtle fully packed, including the beasties on the bumper. Totally oblivious to any danger as we passed from one friendly NATO country to another, Italy, we took the car ferry from Patras to Brindisi, so we could then drive north to Germany.

What we failed to take into account was that, in the 1970s at least, the Patras-Brindisi route was an illegal drug-trafficking thoroughfare from the Middle East.

And, at the Brindisi port, there were drug-sniffing dogs.

When one of the intimidating German shepherds approached Tilda Turtle, he forgot everything he had ever learned about focusing on drugs and was beside himself with the enticing aromas emanating from those packets wired to the rear bumper. He had not sniffed anything that interesting since he was a pup.

Immediately, we were surrounded by Italian border police, and we began to wonder how friendly this NATO nation would be and how the Heidelberg office would respond to a call from a teacher jailed in Brindisi on drug charges. My wife, usually my translator with Europeans of all languages, looked at the situation caused by those wired packets, having been dubious about them from the beginning. She announced, "I'm going to go get the gas coupons," and then abandoned me to the carabinieri.

Fortunately, at least one of the policemen spoke English, and I explained my research interests and what was actually in the packets. Though a law enforcement official by profession, he had some spirit of scientific inquiry, so he opened one of the packets and took a deep, investigative sniff.

Then, overcoming his urge to retch and struggling to regain his dignity as a representative of the government in Rome, he commanded, with a voice of authority that recalled the power of the Caesars, "Take out all the dead things."

I obeyed. The first dog was dismissed, in disgrace, though still dancing around and wagging his tail in delight, and the police brought in a fresh canine for a second opinion.

Thus, finally, we passed inspection, and I was allowed to rewire the treasured scientific specimens to the bumper. We continued our journey through Italy and the Brenner Pass and arrived, without further incident, back in Germany for my next assignment.

Teaching for the UMUC--European Division was a life-changing experience for me and my wife. We had a terrific time, from the first 1975 bus transport provided by UMUC out of the Frankfurt airport and up the Rhine, where we exclaimed about castles high on the valley walls, to the last journey down the Rhine from Switzerland to Heidelberg, where we finally sold Tilda Turtle. With a clean bumper and thousands and thousands of glorious additional miles on her odometer, she was still worth \$200.

After returning to the U.S. in 1979, I wound up teaching geology and biology at Southern Arkansas University, where I retired as a tenured full professor in 2012. At SAU I taught mostly traditional-age college students, but I was always glad to see a veteran in class, or even a

nontraditional student. They would remind me of those disciplined, highly engaged UMUC students with life experiences to inform and enrich their academic studies. In my years of teaching at SAU, I extensively used materials gathered during my European experiences--from the UMUC years in the 1970s as well as from later summer adventures--to help expand students' perspective on the earth sciences to a global one. Many SAU students, especially before they encountered exchange students from Nepal or faculty members from Cameroon, regarded adventurous travel as being a drive to Dallas. The materials I used in my classes were primarily photographic slides of geologic features--from a meteorite impact crater in Germany called the Nordlinger *ries* to the tombolo that connects the Rock of Gibraltar with Spain. But I also continually collected lab specimens so the students could touch the world that I had seen—like lava from Mount Etna, fossils from Lyme Regis, or obsidian from Milos.

I also still have some tiny skeletons from the Peloponnese.

Acknowledgment: This memoir is a collaborative effort with “my wife,” mentioned several times above, Elizabeth Hawk Davis, who, after being an accompanying spouse, taught English part-time for the UMUC—European Division at Pirmasens and Wildflecken in 1979.