



Often a person's life or career hinges on an innocent question. For Donald Pisani, the Merrick Chair of Western American History at the University of Oklahoma, that question came from his advisor at the University of California, who casually asked him one day, "What can I do for you?"

"I said, 'You can get me a summer job,'" Pisani recalls. The next thing the young Ph.D. candidate knew he was part of a research team on a National Science Foundation grant headed for Lake Tahoe to study environmental damage. The study was comprehensive and inter-disciplinary and included lithologists, political scientists, sociologists—and environmental historians.

The trouble was that few people in the early '70s, including Pisani himself, had a clear understanding of what an environmental historian actually did. He began by exploring the natural resources around the lake in both California and Nevada.

The Truckee River, which feeds Lake Tahoe, starts in California, flows north and cuts directly into Nevada, serving the lake, the Paiute Reservation and the farmers farther south. Pisani found when the states diverted the river for their own purposes, they did not consider the Paiute or the freshwater salmon that swam upstream to spawn. The fish were left high and dry and so was the Paiute economy, which depended on the river for salmon and irrigation.

Pisani was captivated by this "wonderful conflict," not just between California and Nevada, but between the laws of man and the laws of nature. "I knew I wanted to be a Western historian, and I had been concerned about environmental issues since the '60s, but I certainly didn't know I was going to combine them," Pisani says. He subsequently wrote his dissertation, *Storm Over the Sierra: A Study in Western Water*, on his Lake Tahoe experience, launching a career—spanning nearly three decades—devoted to the environmental history of the American West.

"You can't understand human society until you understand how human



Robert Taylor

The 1990 appointment of Donald Pisani to the Merrick Chair is considered a major coup for the OU Department of History, whose chair, Robert Griswold, rates him as one of the top three environmental historians in the nation.

beings relate to the natural resources on which that society depends," he says. "Environmental history emerged with the activism of the '60s, and what came out of it was an appreciation that, fundamentally, how we define our relationship to the land is the key to our entire civilization."

Pisani himself is a product of the American West, born and reared in Sacramento, the only son of a welder who never graduated from high school. "I was not a silver spoon kind of kid," he notes. What he did inherit was a bright mind and a strong work ethic that propelled him through the University of California, Berkeley, earning a B.A. in 1964. The same year Pisani joined the Army and was stationed with the 25th Infantry Division in Hawaii.

After two years in the service, he returned to Berkeley to earn his master's degree in history. Whether it was the afternoons of snorkeling in the clear bays off Oahu or the growing tide of '60s activism, Pisani had become keenly interested in the environment. Never in his academic life had anyone approached him with the idea of studying the history of hu-

mans' interactions with their environment. Even Berkeley did not have an environmental history program, nor any Western historians on its faculty.

"When I was a student, history was apart from the land," Pisani remembers. "It was concerned only with great deeds and events. But the way people had molded nature, their attitude toward the land and landscapes, their attitude toward the animals, were alien concepts. They were not a part of history.

"The professors I had were all Easterners who were raised in large urban areas, so the history of rural America seemed utterly silly to them." America may have been born on a farm, he was taught, but it grew up in the city.

Pisani encountered a different philosophy at the University of California, Davis, where a trio of scholars were researching the interaction of human beings and their physical environment. Among them was W. Turrentine Jackson, who one day would send Pisani to Lake Tahoe.

"Jackson was a wonderful man who kindled my interest in natural resources history and cured me of much of my prejudices toward rural



America," Pisani recalls. "He could also be hell on wheels."

Inspired by Jackson, Pisani earned his Ph.D. in environmental history and took an appointment in the history department at San Diego State University. But not until he accepted an assistant professorship at Texas A&M in 1977 did he experience first-hand what it meant to be part of rural America.

"It couldn't have been more different from what I was used to," Pisani says. "The people had an attachment to the land I had never seen in California, where everything from the scenery to climate to illusion was turned into marketable products, commodities to be packaged and sold. In Texas, generations of families lived and died on the same land."

At A&M he published his first book, *From the Family Farm to Agribusiness: The Irrigation Crusade in California and the West 1850-1931*. In the preface he writes, "My experience was the reverse of most Americans. I had migrated from West to East, from a dry climate to a wet one. But the effect was the same. I began to look at what had been taken for granted in a new light."

He completed this reverse Dust Bowl migration when he moved to Oklahoma in the summer of 1990, after being named to OU's Merrick Chair in Western American History. Established by the late oil man Ward S. Merrick Sr. in 1973, this prestigious position is the oldest endowed chair at the University.

"The area I have been concerned with in my research is how the law has allocated natural resources and what that tells us about the values humans place on things," Pisani explains. "I am intrigued by the limits of public policy—how difficult it is to pass laws that actually do what the people who support them intend. Large-scale policies, which were meant to promote things like the family farm, simply don't work."

For example, environmental historians are now critical of the early conservationists, most of whom came from government agencies like the Forest Service and thought Uncle Sam, not big business, should regulate the har-

vesting of trees. "They saw themselves as champions of nature," says Pisani. "However, in the '70s and '80s, the Forest Service became not so much a protector as an ally of the large timber companies."

Pisani thinks battles always have existed between government agencies, who think historians are "technologically challenged," and historians, who think the agencies focus too narrowly on projects, like building dams or

waters of Cozumel, Mexico.

"It's exhilarating being in the ocean," he says. "I love diving. It's very consistent with nature. Whether it's the mountains or the ocean, it is very restful to me. I would prefer either one than to go to Europe and be jostled around in crowds."

Pisani, who is president of the national Environmental History Society, is working on a new book, *Water in the United States from 1902 to*



Whether backpacking in the Wyoming mountains or diving the waters of Cozumel, Mexico, Pisani, here with wife Mary Alice, son Joe and their dog, Clio, finds being in tune with nature an experience both restful and exhilarating.

managing timber, and cannot see the forest for the trees. "They need to examine the larger social context of the political choices they make," Pisani contends.

In spite of a growing number of campus obligations with University committees, graduate students and ongoing research publications, Pisani occasionally manages to give the Ivory Tower the slip. The walls of his office are decorated with photos of pristine wilderness areas from years of backpacking trips. Shots of tropical fish, however, are beginning to outnumber the snowy peaks. Knee problems have driven Pisani from the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming to the clear

1933, which explores the use of water for irrigation, Indian reservations, flood control and hydroelectric power. Once again he is reviewing the policies of man and how they interact with the laws of nature.

"In the past 20 years," Pisani notes, "more and more people have become aware of environmental issues, and the public is turning to environmental historians wanting to know, 'Can we sustain life on the planet with the values that we have?' I have to say that until you change the pro-growth mentality, you will never change the way we operate."

"We all have to be activists to an extent."

—LYNETTE LOBBAN