NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

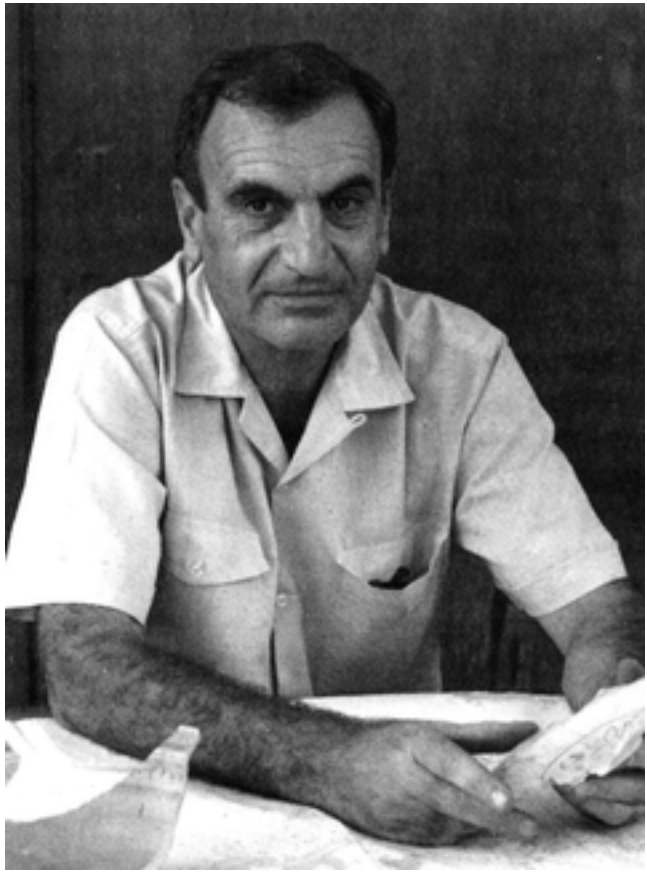
ALEXANDER SPOEHR

1913—1992

A Biographical Memoir by

DOUGLAS OLIVER

Biographical Memoir



Alexander Spoerl

ALEXANDER SPOEHR

August 23, 1913–June 11, 1992

BY DOUGLAS OLIVER

Among persons trained to become scientists, there are some who excel in carrying out, and publishing, original and significant research, some who educate and inspire as teachers, some who provide and supervise opportunities for fellow scientists to conduct and publish their research, some who donate much of their time and energy to the benefit of their whole profession, and some who devote much of their time and talents to serving the wider community, local or national. There are, however, only a few anthropologists who have succeeded in two or three such roles and only two or three, in my memory, who have succeeded in all five; one of those was Alexander Spoehr.

First, a chronology of Alex's seventy-eight years of life.

He was born on August 23, 1913, in Tucson, Arizona. His father, Herman Augustus, was a biochemist and plant physiologist and a staff member of the Carnegie Institute. His mother, Florence (nee Mann), was a writer and a translator of Danish and German. Herman's forebears were Danish and German; Florence's were Austrian.

In 1920 the Spoehrs moved to Palo Alto, California, where Alex attended public schools and then Stanford, but after two and a half years at Stanford he transferred to the Uni-

versity of Chicago. There he earned an A.B. in economics but transferred to anthropology for graduate work, persuaded by lecture courses with Fay-Cooper Cole and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown. These latter, along with Manuel Andrade, Robert Redfield, and Fred Eggan, were singled out by him as his most influential mentors. Although his principal interest was, and remained, social anthropology, he gained experience in archeology during three summers of fieldwork—one at the Kincaid (Illinois) mounds and two in southwest Colorado. Under the supervision of Fred Eggan, he carried out his dissertation research among southeastern U.S. Indians, focusing on social change. In Oklahoma this involved salvage ethnography among some dispersed rural families; in Florida it was a functioning community of Seminoles.

In January 1940 Alex joined the staff of Chicago's Field Museum as assistant curator of American ethnology and archeology. In this position he had much to do with the design and installation of a new exhibition hall labeled "Indians Before Columbus," which was a radical departure from the previous practice of most U.S. museums of anthropology of stuffing their cases with artifacts, of storing them mainly for study by scholars. The new purpose, based on Rene d'Harnoncourt's exhibition, "Indian Art of North America," at New York's Museum of Modern Art, was more widely and specifically educational—the presentation of objects in their visual cultural contexts. For Alex a most fortunate bonus from work on the Field Museum project was its employment of Anne Harding, a talented exhibit designer who had worked with d'Harnoncourt on the New York exhibit; Alex and Anne were married in 1941. From this marriage were born two children: Alexander Harding and Helene (Dinsdale)—the former was to become administratively associated with native Hawaiian support organizations; the latter, an artist, now resides in Vermont.

During World War II, and after short tours of duty in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Alex was commissioned in 1942 as a lieutenant in the Naval Reserve, where he served in air combat intelligence and mainly in air-sea rescue operations in the western sea frontier and central Pacific areas. His experiences in the Marshall, Gilbert, and Caroline islands led him to shift his anthropological interests from North America to the Pacific—a change that led to his appointment as curator of oceanic ethnology (including Southeast Asia) when he returned to the Field Museum in 1946. During the next eight years, he supervised reorganization of the museum's huge collection of Oceania objects, both for exhibiting and studying, and undertook two sessions of fieldwork: a sociological study of Majuro (Marshall Islands) and archeological and ethnological researches in the Marianas and Palau. Also, during this chapter of his professional life he did much teaching—one term at Harvard and regularly at the University of Chicago.

In January 1953 he moved to Honolulu to become director of the Bernice Pauhi Bishop Museum, the position having become vacant through the death of its part-Maori director, Sir Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa). During the next nine years, Alex succeeded not only in rehabilitating that famous institution—financially, organizationally, and scientifically—and in improving its public educational function and community support, but he also served as member and sometime chairman of the Pacific Science Board (NRC); provided office space and other facilities for headquarters of the Pacific Science Association; served as one of two U.S. commissioners of the South Pacific Commission; and taught for one semester at Yale (like his Bishop Museum predecessors he held an ex officio professorship there).

In 1962, responding to the challenge of heading and

pioneering a new, larger, and potentially more widely influential organization, Alex resigned his museum job and accepted the chancellorship of the Honolulu-based Center for Cultural and Technical Interchange Between East and West (subsequently abbreviated as the East-West Center). Two years later, however, he resigned because of power rivalries among the center's sponsors, but only after he had planned its initial structure and programs and had recruited some 1,500 persons to participate in those programs.

As to be expected for a person of his qualifications, Alex was soon offered high administrative positions in several mainland institutions, but he chose instead to accept a professorship in anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh, a position he held until retirement. While thus engaged he was coeditor (with G. P. Murdock) of the journal *Ethnology*, served a term as president of the American Anthropological Association as well as on several national scientific committees (e.g., NRC, NSF, Smithsonian), and was an outside member of the Harvard Overseers' Visiting Committee to the Peabody Museum and Department of Anthropology. In addition, he indulged his wish to return to research by undertaking archeological and ethnological surveys and intensive studies in the Philippines, which resulted in two book-length monographs and eight journal articles. Meanwhile, he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences in 1972.

In 1978, at age sixty-five, Alex retired from Pittsburgh and returned to the family's home in Honolulu, reportedly to rest. "Rest" consisted of observational study of the tool-using techniques of Japanese-American carpenters and archival research on the history of the Hudson's Bay Company in nineteenth-century Hawaii; the writing and publication of several journal articles; and service on several committees and trustee boards (e.g., of the Bishop Mu-

seum, the Western Pacific Regional Fisheries Council, the Hawaiian Historical Society). He was in the process of undertaking more archival research in Hawaii's fine libraries when, in 1990, his wife, Anne, suffered a crippling stroke, which required his daily full-time efforts and which undoubtedly contributed to the heart attack from which he died on June 11, 1992—just two weeks before the death of Anne.

So much for the chronology of Alex's extraordinarily full and multifaceted career. It remains now to describe how valuable it was scientifically and societally.

I begin with his associations with museums. During his employment at Chicago's Field Museum, Alex undertook, as mentioned earlier, to remodel and install some of the museum's vast, and largely storaged, American Indian collection into a public-oriented exhibition. That undertaking was, however, interrupted by his lengthy war service, mainly in Micronesia, which served to shift his anthropological interests to their peoples and, at war's end, to have his Field Museum position changed to curatorship of Oceanic Ethnology with responsibility over one of the very largest and most important collections of native Pacific objects in the world.

During the following seven years, in addition to carrying out that job (with extraordinary success in preserving, documenting, and exhibiting the collection), Alex engaged in field research in the Marshall and Mariana islands and joined forces with Fred Eggan to develop a program of ethnological research in the Philippines. However, just as that program was getting under way, he received a job offer that he described as "too exciting to resist"—namely, to become director of Honolulu's Bishop Museum.

The Bishop Museum was founded in 1889 by Charles Bishop in memory of his wife, Bernice Pauhi, last of the Kamehameha line of Hawaiian rulers. The museum had

achieved an international reputation for its researches and publications on Pacific biology and anthropology but had made only token attempts to exhibit its rich collections, and had permitted access to its unique archival resources to only a few scholars. During his nine-year directorship, Alex changed all that and did much else besides.

He ended the museum's isolation by inviting the general public to become members of an association that was to participate influentially in the planning and operation of the museum's activities. Additionally, he originated an extensive and informative exhibition program, including periodically new displays in the museum itself, portable "Museums in Miniature" for traveling display among the several Hawaiian Islands, and support of a liaison teacher with the island government's education department to serve the public schools in matters respecting the museum's collections and activities. Other public educational endeavors initiated were the establishment of a planetarium and a bookshop that offered for sale not only the museum's own publications but also a very large inventory of books and pamphlets on Pacific science.

Another of Alex's firsts consisted of fund-raising. Previously, the museum and its meagerly paid staff survived mainly on the small proceeds of its original grant, having received only small grants from local foundations and occasional ones from wealthy philanthropists, including some who gave for personally accompanied expeditions. In contrast, Alex went out actively in search of funds. He began by seeking, and receiving, the museum's first grant from the Hawaiian Territorial Government—a sum of $25,000 to improve facilities for the care of the museum's collections. Even more important than that money itself was the precedent set, it having been the beginning of a continuing and growing source of government support for the museum.

Those and other monies that Alex succeeded in obtaining for the museum served not only to preserve and increase its collections, to enlarge and better compensate its staff, and to widen greatly its educational reach but also most importantly in the eyes of many scientists to provide sponsorship for more research throughout the Pacific. The largest-scale example of the latter was the Tri-Institutional Pacific Program (TRIPP), which was initiated in 1953 with a Carnegie Corporation grant of $100,000 for anthropological and linguistic research. Under general oversight of a steering committee consisting of Spoehr, Murdock (Yale), Leonard Mason (and the president of the University of Hawaii), and Harold J. Coolidge (NRC), more than a score of experienced scholars—anthropologists, linguists, historians, and political scientists—carried out field studies in places extending from Palau and New Britain to the Society and Marshall islands.

Other research programs initiated or sponsored by Spoehr were the Yale-Bishop Museum fellowships, a survey of the insects of Micronesia, the zoogeography of Pacific insects, several Hawaiian archeological digs, the natural and cultural history of the Honaunau (Hawaii Island) City of Refuge, and the Sulu Sea Expedition (in collaboration with the Philippines National Museum) for studies in zoology, history, and anthropology.

In addition to the above, Alex managed the day-to-day operations of the continually growing museum organization with great success. In the words of one long-time staff member who worked at the museum before, during, and after Alex's directorship:

> Dr. Spoehr was not only a scientist and scholar, he was a gentle person who was a most unabrasive leader, with the ability to delegate authority and at the same time the intelligence to stay in the background, provide support when asked for and await results. He was seldom disappointed. His ability

to empower his staff in this way was the key to transforming the Museum's program in a very short time.

Also, he found—or made—time to befriend and assist the increasing number of scientists passing through Honolulu en route to researches elsewhere. And with the gracious help of his wife, Anne, he established friendly and beneficial relations with many of Honolulu's most influential community leaders.

In view of Alex's unique combination of regional knowledge, administrative ability, professional expertise, and social-relational skills, it is not surprising that he was invited to become the first head—that is, chancellor—of the newly created Honolulu-based East-West Center. The idea for such a center was inspired by a few internationally minded faculty members of the University of Hawaii and was made possible, in 1960, by means of a grant-in-aid agreement, to be funded by Congress, between the U.S. Department of State and the University of Hawaii. Its stated objective was "the increase and improvement of mutual understanding among the countries of the Asian-Pacific area and the United States," with emphasis on the interchange of "persons, knowledge, and ideas"—a daunting challenge even to someone as hitherto successful as Alex Spoehr, who nevertheless accepted, later explaining: "After nine years at the Bishop Museum I felt I was growing stale at the job; and succumbing to a sense of adventure and with the blessing of my wife, I accepted the University of Hawaii Regents' offer and assumed my duties in January 1962."

Unfortunately for the fledgling center, but fortunately for anthropology, this chapter of Alex's life did not last long. He resigned the chancellorship, to become effective at the end of 1963. Some of his reasons for resigning may never be known; the most obvious ones included increasing tensions among the Center's three controlling bodies (i.e.,

the University of Hawaii, U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Congress) concerning goals, priorities, and, derivatively, the budgeting of funds—plus the perceived wish of some University of Hawaii administrators and faculty to exercise stronger and more direct control of the center's programs. Concerning the latter, Alex himself was outspokenly in favor of expanding the center's academic ties to include other Asian-Pacific-oriented universities on the U.S. mainland and to some leading universities in the Pacific and Asia as well—a predictably unwelcome proposal to some members of the University of Hawaii. Adding to those complications were the circumstances that the university itself was subject to political pressures from Hawaii's governor and legislature and that congressional control of the center was split among four separate committees. In other words, this stew had so many cooks, each with his own recipe, that its chancellor, the one responsible for preparing it, was permitted only to heat and stir.

Nevertheless, under Alex's brief chancellorship, the center became fully operational and structured in a way that might have become highly productive had not each succeeding set of leaders changed its course.

After this "challenging" but frustrating interlude, Alex and his wife needed, and took, a lengthy vacation through the South Pacific, and then returned to Honolulu to plan what he labeled the next "chapter" in their lives, which turned out to be a teaching position at the University of Pittsburgh.

Throughout his career, Alex had taught often at the University of Chicago and occasionally at Harvard and Yale and, upon leaving the East-West Center, he received other offers to teach. In the end he chose Pittsburgh, attracted partly by its promising innovations and partly by the presence on its faculty of two close friends, G. P. Murdock and

John Gillin. During his stay there, he taught a full schedule of courses and engaged in several other activities listed earlier. In 1978, at age sixty-five, he retired from Pittsburgh. Because his principal duty there was teaching, it is pertinent to assess his performance through the eyes of one of his most successful students, Richard Scaglion:

> Spoehr offered a wide variety of seminar courses, all of which were both comprehensive and extraordinarily well-organized. His area course on the Pacific, for example, included the geology, ecology, prehistory, history, and contemporary politics, as well as the ethnography and ethnology of the region, thus reflecting [his] own wide-ranging interests and expertise. Ever responsible to both student needs and contemporary directions, I remember how, on at least two occasions, he offered new seminar courses in direct response to student requests (the courses were "Maritime Adaptations" and "History of Anthropology").
>
> That he was greatly respected by students is evidenced by the fact that even [up to 1995] he had supervised more Ph.D. theses than any other faculty member in the history of the Department.

Alex's fifteen years of retirement may have been "restful" in comparison with the thirty-eight "working" years of his professional life, but they were anything but leisured. (From his house on the green hills above Honolulu, he enjoyed a wide view of the Pacific, but I doubt that he ever sat on its beaches.) Among the many public services he performed were a term as a trustee of the Bishop Museum, membership on the Scientific and Statistical Committee of the Western Pacific Regional Fisheries Council, a consultancy to the newly founded Hawaii Maritime Center, plus very active membership in the Hawaiian Historical Society, including membership on its Board of Trustees and a term as its president.

"Retirement" also provided Alex with more time for research and writing, including an observational study of the tool-using techniques of local carpenters of Japanese descent and archival research on the nineteenth-century ac-

tivities of the Hudson's Bay Company in Hawaii. Other research projects were being planned when his wife's paralyzing illness required him to lay them aside.

Mention has already been made of some of the previous outside organizations and causes in which this otherwise fully employed man played voluntary, often leadership, roles. Perhaps most notable of these were the South Pacific Commission, the Pacific Science Association,and the American Anthropological Association (AAA). Limitations of space prevent a fuller description of that side of his life, but his service to the AAA deserves special mention.

The period of Alex's presidency of the AAA, in 1965, has been correctly characterized as the most crucial one of its history. The crisis arose when it became publicly known that a young anthropologist had been employed in a clandestine CIA operation, known as Project Camelot, in politically riven Chile. Social scientists throughout the United States became concerned by the disclosure, many of them holding that members of their profession ought not to engage in politically motivated activities that contradicted what they considered to be their moral responsibilities toward the peoples they studied. The AAA was especially concerned, and angrily divided, over the issue until Spoehr, then the association's president, commissioned a respected senior member, Ralph Beals, to investigate the matter and submit a report. Spoehr's initiative and the findings of that report resulted eventually in a code of ethics being adopted by the association—a document that doubtless contributed, nationwide, to a more ethically principled policy concerning the clandestine use of academics in government work in peacetime.

There remains to add some comments about Alex's principal research publications. In all he individually authored, coauthored, edited, or prefaced some 114 items, including

short ethnographic or archeological reports, theoretical ethnological pieces, substantial ethnographic monographs, bibliographic surveys, and book reviews. Of these the most noteworthy are the monographs based on his own wide-ranging field researches. For an evaluation of these I have consulted anthropologists more familiar than myself with their subject matters, beginning with that of his dissertation research (1941, 1942, 1944, 1947). The following is a paraphrase of remarks by William Sturtevant of the Smithsonian Institution, who made a more recent study of those Indians, the Florida Seminole, observed by Alex in 1938-39:

Spoehr was the first real anthropologist to study the Florida Seminole, his work among the *Oklahoma* Seminole was pioneering too, but others had been there before him. His field work in Florida was not lengthy, but he did manage to collect a good deal of very valuable data under very difficult circumstances. [The Seminole did not like to be "studied"; Sturtevant had some problems even in the 1950s.] The fact that Spoehr followed his Florida work with the study in Oklahoma was innovative, and may have been suggested by his mentor Eggan, who would do comparative kinship studies too. Spoehr's kinship data from Florida [were] valuable compared with [those] from Oklahoma, and since there was almost 100 years of fairly complete isolation between the two groups, it made an interesting study to see changes in terminology.

The major publication to result from Alex's study of Majuro (Marshall Islands) is listed in the Selected Bibliography (1949,1). About this I quote from Robert Kiste, director of the Center for Pacific Island Studies of the University of Hawaii, who has carried out intensive ethnographic fieldwork in the Marshalls:

Spoehr provided excellent description and analysis of Marshallese social organization. He outlined the ideal system as Marshallese themselves describe it. They couch things in terms of a system of matrilineal clans and lineages with the latter being the landholding corporations. As things work

out in reality, however, residential extended families tend to be bilateral which reflects the system of land use rights. The children of males and affinal relatives have use rights [of] the land of their fathers and spouses, and thus matrilineality is not readily evident in the social units on the ground. Spoehr clearly understood all of this and his description is very clear. His description is of such quality that the reader can do an independent evaluation of the generalizations and conclusions that Spoehr offers. I don't know what else one could ask of the ethnographer. Spoehr did all of this before David Schneider and Kathleen Gough produced their monumental work on matrilineal kinship. The reader also gets a good feel for what daily life on Majuro was like—as with most atolls, boring.

About Alex's ethnographic studies in the Marianas, Kiste adds:

[It is] "top drawer." Because of the long period of colonial rule in the Marianas, Spoehr devoted about a fourth of his book on history. That was necessary to account for the nature of Chamorro culture as he found it in the late 1940s. I don't think anyone has subsequently written a better historical account. He also provides a good description and understanding of the Carolinian community on Saipan, and his outline of the ethnic relations between the Chamorros and Carolinians is also quite good. As with the Majuro book, we have good clear description, and one comes away from the work with the feeling [of having] a solid understanding of the place. I think [it] is a crucial work in that it would be very difficult to understand Saipan if we did not have this piece of work as a point of reference. Both works [of Majuro and Saipan] represent solid well rounded ethnography, the holistic approach at its best.

The specialist consulted about Alex's archeological researches in the Marianas is Ross Cordy, who has conducted numerous archeological studies throughout Micronesia (and Hawaii):

Alexander Spoehr's 1949-50 work in the Marianas—primarily on Saipan and Tinian—included identification of a number of village sites, and important excavation work. These were the first modern archaeological excavations in Micronesia. His excavations contain careful description of soil layers in which artifacts were found and document features (post-holes, firepits, burial pits, etc.) within the layers. His findings were revolutionary

for Micronesian research at the time. His excavations uncovered deep deposits, and he hypothesized two chronological phases of culture based on pottery types and on the presence/absence of stone house pillars (latte). More surprising, his radiocarbon dates—the first samples processed for Micronesia—placed initial occupation ca. 1500 B.C., a time depth far greater than any researcher had anticipated for the islands of Micronesia. These initial findings were roughly concurrent with the spread of . . . . linguists' findings, which also postulated a long time depth for Micronesia. Indeed, Spoehr's findings [together with] the linguists' molded many of our present ideas on the origins of Micronesian cultures. Today, the details of Marianas prehistory differ somewhat from those proposed by Spoehr, but few would disagree that the basic underpinnings of today's models owe much to Spoehr's initial work.

The most important publications to come from Alex's researches in the Philippines are *Protein from the Sea* (1980) and *Zamboanga and Sulu* (1973). An evaluation of the former was provided for this memoir by social anthropologist Richard Lieban (emeritus professor at the University of Hawaii, Manoa), who has carried out much fieldwork in and has written prolifically about the Philippines:

As Spoehr observed when he wrote this monograph, anthropological interest in fishing and fishing communities in the Philippines and other parts of S.E. Asia had been slow to develop, and with regard to these areas there was a major disparity between anthropological knowledge of the use of land as opposed to the use of the sea. Spoehr's monograph helped to redress the balance.

The monograph is a description and analysis of the technology and economic organization of the capture fishing industry in the Central Philippines. The fundamental problem addressed is technological change and its economic impact. A historical perspective is maintained throughout the monograph. Documentation of continuity and change in fishing equipment and procedures is a basic concern of the author, and his diligent and perceptive search for evidence in this regard is one of the strengths of the work.

Five of the eight chapters of the monograph are devoted to fishing technology, which is described lucidly and comprehensively. In these chapters the author discusses small, middle and large scale enterprises. He finds

that small scale fishermen have shown receptivity and ingenuity in adapting to change. In examining the dynamics of technological change in middle and large scale fishing endeavors, Spoehr is attentive to the relative importance of technical specialists (boat builders and master fishermen) and operators of fishing enterprises in the process. . . . Although the main emphasis of this monograph is on fishing techniques and its economic ramifications, a substantive chapter is devoted to fish markets in the urban centers. Sociocultural as well as economic dimensions of the exchange system receive attention in an informative description of how the markets work. . . . He originally planned a study of technological change in a simple Filipino fishing community. However, he soon realized that knowledge of a larger network of production and marketing was necessary to place a community study in appropriate perspective. The monograph . . . is a work of considerable scope that contributes significantly to knowledge of both local and broader aspects of a set of marine activities that are of fundamental importance in an archipelagic society.

For an assessment of Spoehr's archeological researches in the Philippines, I turned to another Philippines specialist in the anthropology department of the University of Hawaii, Manoa—Bion Griffin:

Zamboanga and Sulu has had a bigger impact [than *Protein from the Sea*], as has the related archaeological excavations Spoehr undertook. He influenced a generation (no huge crowd, to be sure) of Filipino archaeologists at the National Museum of the Philippines. He encouraged the young scholars to take their studies seriously, to get into the field and dig, and to undertake serious research topics. He also was decidedly influential in his choice of Mindanao and Sulu as excavation locations. These places were considered real backwaters by Manila people; the awareness of archeological materials there led to further work in the south by the National Museum. In addition, [his] inquiry into historic/Muslim archeology was unique. Spoehr really complimented the influence of Robert Fox, who was the teacher and leader of all the Filipino archeologists, . . . [who was] largely untrained in archaeology . . . [and] who never wrote up anything. Spoehr provided a different model. I really see this as his Philippines legacy.

For a sampling of Alex's shorter but nevertheless significant writings, the reader is referred to the Selected Bibliog-

raphy, which will also provide an impression of the wide interests and talents of this remarkable man.

I WISH TO ACKNOWLEDGE, gratefully, information from the following individuals used in compiling this memoir: Steve Boggs, Ross Cordy, Barbara Dunn, Roland Force, Bion Griffin, Alan Howard, Marion Kelly, Yosihiko Sinoto, Robert Kiste, Richard Lieban, Roger Rose, Richard Scaglion, Alexander Harding Spoehr, William Sturtevant, and Stephen Williams.

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