Remembering Robert J. Sharer
1940-2012

BY ELLEN E. BELL

Dr. Robert J. Sharer was the Sally and Alvin Shoemaker Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and Curator Emeritus of the American Section at the Penn Museum. He completed a B.A. in history at Michigan State University in 1961 and a Ph.D. in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1968. He worked in Mesoamerica for nearly 50 years, publishing over 20 books and more than 100 articles synthesizing the state of Maya studies and the results of his extensive research.

While he may have been best known for directing two of the flagship archaeological projects of the Penn Museum’s American Section, the Quirigua Archaeological Project (1974–1979) in Guatemala, and the Early Copan Acropolis Program (1988–2003) in Honduras, some of the best stories Bob would tell during downtime in the field came from the Verapaz Archaeological Project in highland Guatemala (1970–1974) and the Honduras North Coast Project, which seems to have involved a lot of beach survey and relatively few archaeological sites. In the best tradition of archaeology, Bob worked hard and laughed hard, and I think he delighted most in telling the stories in which people who took themselves a little too seriously were forced to lighten up by the vagaries of life in the field.

More than anything else, Bob was nearly universally respected. In a discipline where personalities are large and tempers often flare, Bob was seen by many as a calm, steady, rational presence. Students, colleagues, and friends often sought his council, knowing that he would have a thoughtful, balanced, and practical solution for nearly any problem. One of the things I think many value was his consistent ability to bypass the drama and focus on the work—and to persuade others to do the same by his example. A well-placed “Sounds great!” from Bob would also buoy any meeting to a successful conclusion.

As a student privileged to work with Bob both at Penn and in Copan, I truly appreciated Bob’s uncanny ability to be there for his students exactly when his help was needed, and his willingness to step back and let us become our own best scholarly selves when it was not. Bob never sought to create clones of himself through his students, but rather to let us find our own way forward. We continue to do so, but sorely miss his calm, supportive presence. A “Sounds great!” sure would hit the spot right now…”

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