

**PROFESSOR EDUARD C. HANSEN (1940-2021):  
REMINISCENCES OF AN OLD FRIEND  
Ronald Waterbury**

Ed Hansen died of lung cancer on August 14 at his home in Amherst, MA surrounded by his wife, Geraldine Grant, a passel of kids and grandkids, and his dog Max. His dying was consistent with his living. Ed had a magnetism that attracted people: family, friends, colleagues, students, and the occasional hanger-on.



*Ed, Geraldine, and me at our joint retirement party*

Ed Hansen and I joined the Queens anthropology department in 1968 as part of CUNY's baby-boomer-driven expansion. We both retired in January, 2000; and he, Gerri, and I had a joint retirement party on March 4. Shortly after (March 22) Ed suffered a stroke that physically left him partially paralyzed, but fortunately spared his intellect. During those years at CUNY and beyond we shared a strong friendship, although following retirement when Carole and I moved to Mexico we haven't been geographically close.

Ed Hansen was an accomplished researcher, and author of books and articles; plus he was an inspiring teacher who not only intellectually nurtured numerous students at Queens and the Graduate Center but also became friends with many. Barbara Bleiweis attested to that in a recent post on the department's Facebook page.

In this brief testimony, however, I will pass over Ed's professional accomplishments, which will undoubtedly be enumerated in forthcoming academic obituaries. Rather I will offer a few personal reminiscences. For an encapsulated take on Ed's overall personality I begin with an excerpt from the spot-on obituary that appeared in the Ames, Iowa Tribune (<https://www.amestrib.com/obituaries/p0138755>). (Ed spent his early years in Ames where his father was professor of chemistry at Iowa State.) The obit was written by Ed's step-daughter Andrea "Segunda." (Ed had a daughter named Andrea from his first marriage; who, of course, was known as Andrea "Primera,") Andrea II writes: "Professor Hansen is remembered for his ferocious wit, bawdy sense of humor, and limitless store of inappropriate limericks." I would add: incisive intelligence, and that beneath the bawdiness lay a fervent humanism.

Ed never hesitated to employ “inappropriateness” for a good cause. When he was department chair (1977-79) he was a fierce fighter for the department’s interests. His immediate adversary was the social science dean, whose name I won’t mention; I’ll just say he probably resides in the special place in the underworld for practitioners of the dismal science. One day the dean accosted me in the hall and asked, “Why in hell did you people elect that brute to be your chair?”, or words to that effect. According to my diary I replied, “That’s why.” I eventually learned what brutish act Ed had allegedly performed. Fed up with the dean’s weak defense of our needs with the higherups, Ed sent him a box containing a female-associated object that I won’t mention for fear offending feminist sensitivities. Let me make it clear, though: Ed admired, respected, and loved women; but he occasionally abandoned political correctness when effectiveness (or an indelicate joke) demanded. As a result of Ed’s inappropriate representation, the department emerged relatively unscathed in those years of CUNY’s economic crisis. Ed once explained to me his philosophy of chairmanship: Anticipatory Democracy. “I anticipate the will of the people and act unilaterally on their behalf.” (The department unanimously voted for him to remain in the chair for another term. He declined.)

Friendship was very important to Ed, and he would go all out for a friend in distress. A personal example occurred in the summer of 1975 in Oaxaca. I had been accused of murder (I didn’t do it) and unable to leave Mexico. Carole and I were living in a house in the village where we were conducting fieldwork. An excerpt from my diary for Aug. 8, 1975 reads: “Big surprise. At about 10:00am I heard a car stop in front of the house. Went out to see, and there emerging from a cab is Ed Hansen.”

Determined to help his friend out of a mess, Ed had convinced Joe Murphy, then president of the college, to authorize him to act on behalf of the university. That required an officious letter with a glittery gold seal and dangling blue ribbons that Ed called a “Dago dazzler”— a tad politically incorrect, perhaps, but apt. As it turned out, however, we didn’t need Ed or the Dago dazzler because our Mexican colleagues were working their connections to our benefit.

On the plus side of the situation, however, due to the limited flights that then served Oaxaca, for several days Ed was able to share with us the “rigors” of participation-observation. That included, among other things, an elaborate quinceañera fiesta at which Ed impressed our “informants” by the quantity of mezcal and beer he could consume and remain standing. The villagers, and our Mexican anthropology colleagues, also enjoyed his repertoire of chistes colorados (“colorful” jokes) in Spanish-accented Spanish.

Over the years prior to the Internet invasion we corresponded regularly via snail mail, especially when one or both of us were in the field. To entertain myself in my dotage I have been going through and digitizing old correspondence—37 letters with Ed, and I haven’t finished. The correspondence dried up after Ed’s stroke, but Gerri has supplied an annual update on their active life despite Ed’s partial paralysis.

A few excerpts from Ed’s letters:

**1972, Nov 1, all Souls day.** On his way to Brazil for fieldwork Ed spent a few days in Lima. His impression: “I was indeed in the cuna of colonial Spanish civilization... Imagine the pleasurable

stupefaction I felt viewing the remains of Pizzaro under a glass case, not even the worms could digest him. He still has most of his skin although something ate his unmentionables. A conquistador on display sin cojones shows the absence of national pride prevalent in the upper strata of Limeños.”

**1973, May 3.** From Brazil where he was researching elites: “If I ever think of doing another elite study I will cut my balls off and give them to science. I never understood the standard reason offered as to why anthros don’t study elites more often, which is that they are presumably remote. That may be somewhat so, but I am beginning to think that the real reason is that nobody can stand them for a long enough time to study them. Give me a jolly peasant or even a surly proletariat, but from now on and evermore, que Dios me libre de banqueros.”

**1977, Jan 31.** On being department chairman: “As I mentioned in an earlier letter, potentially the job is easy, it is just the numbers of things that roll across the desk are unsettling. Under all that horseshit there should be a pony somewhere, but I haven't found it yet... Oh yes, there has been one remarkable change. Two guys showed up a while ago and actually painted SS 234 so that it no longer looks like the world's worst maintained indoor urinal.”

**1985, April 26.** When Carole and I were living in Ecuador: “A more serious matter is missing one's buddies. Not having you about has created a substantial hole in our lives for sure. Ditto for Del[\*] and others. Yesterday Del told me that he is making travel arrangements to see you in Ecuador this summer. The two of us had discussed this for a couple of weeks now, and I was agitating with Geraldine to consider a summer in Ecuador, until the IRS took a significant sample of our financial blood last week.” [\*Delmos Jones, professor at the Grad Center and close mutual friend. Del and I had been undergraduates together at San Francisco State.]

**1985, July 25.** While Carole and I were traveling in Peru: “I hope that your Andean peregrinations do not include a nasty encounter with the likes of Sendero Luminoso or surly alpaca-humping inditos.”

And I remember the time when Ed... I could go on and on with delightful Hansenisms but alas there’s not space for that.

The last time I saw Ed was in December 12, 2013. When Carole and I were in NYC, along with Peter and Jane Schneider we drove to Connecticut where Ed and Gerri lived at that time. Although his mind was as sharp as ever his physical mobility was seriously impaired. He mostly got around in an electric wheelchair that he referred to as his BCT: basket case transporter.

His wits and wit never failed him. I miss him.