

C. Richard Beam (1925–2018): In Memoriam



In late 1924, a young schoolteacher Marcella Slabach Beam trudged through cold winter fields on her way to teach at a rural schoolhouse. Perhaps because of the rhythmic beats of the schoolteacher's feet, the boy developing in her belly would one day become a teacher himself. He was, after all, in the classroom even before he opened his eyes to the world. And so, too, perhaps because of his heavily pregnant mother's exerted walks to the schoolhouse, her son was born dangerously premature. "*Des glee Ding kann net lewe*" (that little thing can't survive), exclaimed the child's Pennsylvania Dutch grandmother upon seeing his diminutive size after birth. Nonetheless, she helped his mother wrap him tightly and warmly, put him in a cigar box, and set him in the oven away from drafts. Fortunately, the grandmother's prophesy would not come true. That child, C. Richard Beam, breathed his last breath on January 26, 2018, just weeks short of his 93rd birthday.

C. Richard Beam was a larger-than-life figure in German-American Studies and was a founding member of the Society for German-American Studies. For over a decade, he was the Society's treasurer and served on the Society's Executive Committee, adding his wit and good humor to many a meeting. Dick also served on the Editorial Board of the SGAS Yearbook from 1994 until his death. In 1994, he received the Society's Outstanding Achievement Award at the Annual Symposium held at Penn State University for his many contributions to our field and SGAS. He

was subsequently honored with a special issue of the Society's Yearbook, *Preserving Heritage: A Festschrift for C. Richard Beam*, published in 2006 and presented to Dick at the Annual Symposium held in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, that year.

Dick was born in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and educated in Ephrata, where he graduated as valedictorian in 1943. He served in the 99th Infantry Division in the European theater of World War II and fought in the Battle of the Bulge, though memory of the war eluded him in later life.

Returning from Europe, he again sought out education. He enrolled at Franklin & Marshall College, where he came under the guidance of J. William Frey, along with fellow experts on Pennsylvania Dutch Alfred Shoemaker and Don Yoder. In 1949, he received a fellowship to work at the renowned language research institute, the *Deutscher Sprachatlas*, in Marburg, Germany. He went on to study in Vienna and, upon returning to the U.S., taught German at various schools before enrolling for graduate studies at Middlebury and Penn State. He completed all doctoral coursework at Penn State under the supervision of Albert Buffington. From there, he taught and ultimately ended his teaching career in German at Millersville University.

Dick worked tirelessly, yet enthusiastically, on Pennsylvania Dutch. He published many Dutch newspaper columns in the *The Budget*, *Die Botschaft*, *Middletown Press and Journal*, and *Ephrata Shopping News*. For 42 years, he hosted weekly radio programs on WLBR under the pseudonym *Bischli Gnippli* "Little Clod Hopper." In 1986, he established the Center for Pennsylvania German Studies at Millersville University—a research center that published forty books and a quarterly journal—the results of countless of hours of fieldwork.

Dick passed away at Hospice and Community Care in Mount Joy, Pennsylvania, with Dorothy Pozniko Beam at his side. Dick and Dorothy were inseparable for 53 years of marriage and undertook much together; they shared many achievements together. He is buried at the Muddy Creek Lutheran Church in Denver, Pennsylvania, with a tombstone fashioned after the Pennsylvania Dutch folk art gravestones of his ancestors nearby.

"Herr Beam" was an inimitable force in my life. I began work with him in late 2000, while a student at Millersville University. By then "Herr Beam" had retired, but I was taking German literature courses from his former student Leroy Hopkins. Leroy told me to apply for work at the Center and so I did. I worked from the Beams' home and on the weekends joined them for lunch at area restaurants. Often we would do some editing in the morning, "attach the feedbag" (as "Herr Beam" would say), and then head out into the rural stretches of Lancaster County to meet with

Amish, Mennonites, or other native Pennsylvania Dutch speakers. I would furiously write out the sentences they gave us of words in context. In fact, that was what we did on my first day working for the Center. “Baptism by fire,” as “Herr Beam” called it. I got to know many of the backroads of Lancaster County, I was immersed in the language that my grandmother spoke at home, and I was getting an early taste for linguistic fieldwork. As an eighteen-year-old, I did not understand that those tasks were integral for the work on the *Comprehensive Pennsylvania German Dictionary*, but I would come to realize the enormity of the research and the importance of those many afternoons collecting data. I was fortunate to be the co-editor of the first two volumes of the dictionary and also of the Center’s quarterly newsletter.

“Herr Beam” was steadfast in preserving Pennsylvania Dutch, which he learned from his grandparents. He always had poignant bits of wisdom to share. One of my favorites, adopted from his own mentor “Wild Bill” Frey was: “telling is not teaching.” As a university professor myself, I have held those words to heart many times. He had seemingly endless amounts of energy. He jolted off quickly and when he had a project in mind, he pursued it with vigor. He often belted out responses to questions in song and made me laugh with his comical observations of daily life. Fieldwork sessions with “Herr Beam” were always filled with plenty of laughter and plenty of gentle ribbing in Pennsylvania Dutch. My favorite moments were when he was confronted with a new idea or technology and would exclaim “*Well, sell geht iwwer mei Lanning!*” (Well, that’s above my learning!).

I interrupted my work at the Center for a while to participate in the same exchange program that “Herr Beam” had set up years before. I even had an internship at the *Sprachatlas* in Marburg like he did. When I returned after a year and half, I moved in with the Beams’ neighbor and worked fulltime for several months before beginning graduate school at Penn State. At the time, I felt a bit of remorse that I was leaving Millersville and the Beams while the momentum for the dictionary project was at top speed. But in my final days working at the Center, a visitor—astounded by the first volume of the dictionary—questioned how I could leave. Before I could answer, “Herr Beam” piped up “Yossi needs to get on with his education. That’s the most important thing.” That baby boy born to a rural schoolteacher held close to the importance of education and, like the best of educators, he inspired in so many of us a passion for it.

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