

The American Geophysical Union: Fall Meeting 2005

— by *Mika McKinnon, former SPS Intern*



The American Geophysical Union (AGU) holds its fall meeting in San Francisco, CA, every December. The conference takes place in the Moscone Center and in the basement rooms of the Hyatt Hotel. It is overwhelmingly big.

The influence of the conference stretches along the public transit lines. There aren't many places someone on the subway reading about faultlines could be heading. When I arrived at the transit stop in Union Square, it was easy to find the conference even from two blocks away. There were legions of people wearing white nametags and carrying poster tubes converging on the conference hall from all directions.

I didn't get an official number for how many people were in attendance, only that it was record-breaking. At the hour breaks when people moved from one building to another to attend talks, traffic stopped as five thousand people crossed the street. The escalators were

in such demand that security had to monitor how many people crowded on at a time.

A conference booklet is normally a skinny affair that can be rolled up and shoved in a back pocket. This was not so for the AGU conference booklet. For AGU, the guide to lectures, exhibits, and events was a tome, an inch-and-a-half of bound newsprint crammed with information. It is not possible for one person to see everything.

There were speakers on every possible aspect of geophysics. The talks ranged from atmospheric sciences to volcanology, touching on the topics of cryosphere, geodesy, environmental change, paleoclimatology, heliospheric physics, and tectonophysics in between. There were talks about rocks on Mars, new modeling techniques for Antarctica, isotope interactions, and how to teach it all to the next generation. If one person knew something, three others wanted to learn and a talk was born. The sheer quantity of information that was shared, the number of ideas that infected minds with new data and new interpretations is beyond my ability to comprehend.

Everyone in any field related to geophysics comes to the AGU Fall Meeting. They come to share their results, to disseminate information, to bounce around ideas with geographically distant colleagues. As a newcomer to geophysics, I thought I was in a sea of strangers. I discovered I was wrong when I bumped into the graduate student who had taught my first geology lab section, and I asked him how things were going. He told me it was pretty good, but there weren't enough geomicrobiologists studying extremophile near mid-ocean ridges.

Even when classmates are out of sight, there are so many people in such close proximity that it is easy slide into conversations with strangers. On my way back from lunch one day, I met two charming seismologists from southern California in this manner: Chandan Saikia of URS Corp. and Eli Baker of SAIC. They work on determining if seismic signals are from earthquakes or nuclear blasts. I thanked them for their efforts in avoiding the onset of WWII every time the San Andres slipped.

While we waited for the escalator-crush to die down, my new friends told me how they got started in geophysics. Saikia had been a physics undergraduate, and made it until his final year of geophysics graduate studies before taking his first geology class. After being hassled by his advisor, he finally took a course on earth structures, and absolutely loved it. In contrast, Baker used to trade math tutoring with his peers for their assistance with his earth structure classes. He was a geologist in his undergraduate years, moving into geophysics for graduate school. Both seemed happy to be on their annual pilgrimage to San Francisco for the meeting, and returned to discussing changes in their labs when we parted to go to different talks.

Some of the talks I went to were full to capacity with rows upon rows of people in chairs filling entire ballrooms and even more people standing along the walls or craning their necks from the doorways. Other sessions were well-populated, but with attendees more interested in the dark room and the soft seats to snatch a nap than they were in the content of the talk. I never saw a session with an audience of less than twenty.

The sessions varied in quality as much as they did in size of audience, although the two were not always related. Some first-time speakers were nervous but well-rehearsed. Some of the veterans gave wonderful talks, while others were so relaxed that the time limits were more like guidelines. My first day of sessions was hit-and-miss, but after talking to more experienced conference-attendees I was more consistent in picking higher-quality sessions. I learned the topic was secondary to the speaker. A good speaker could make anything fascinating, while even the most hypnotizing topic couldn't keep my eyes propped open when the speaker was poor.

For every topic not covered in a talk, there was a poster session stretching across the exhibition spaces of the Moscone Center. The posters on outreach ideas for teaching about





volcanoes were particularly entertaining. There were instructions on how to use trashcans of water to demonstrate pressure buildup leading to eruptions. There were comparisons between common food products and a variety of pyroclastic formations. There was even a poster about building a lava lamp from items commonly found under the bathroom sink. For every idea, there was a poster.

The lower exhibition hall had to share floor space with booths set up to share information about special services, scientific supplies, and programs that might appeal to the scientists in attendance. Every booth had its own giveaway items. The NASA calendars were absolutely beautiful, but the pens provided a unique challenge. A group from the University of Liverpool was on a quest to see which of them could gather the largest variety of free pens. Their collections were impressive.

With all the people and events, it is easy to get worn out as the day goes on. This is typical of any large conference. A common way to take a break from a conference is to play tourist in the host city. As a native, it fell to me to be a tour guide for my classmates. We visited the sea lions for lunch, caught a tram along the waterfront, ventured into the parks, and prowled the streets of North Beach. Where ever we went, what ever we did, we would run into someone wearing a forgotten badge. For one week San Francisco was home to geologists, and they were everywhere.

AGU takes a unique step ensure attendance in the afternoon and to refresh the audience for another round of sessions. Each day at exactly 3:30pm, free beer is served in every large room and hallway of the conference. Jeremy Winters, an atmospheric scientist with the Air Force, chuckled that for the price of registration there had better be some perks! Thinking of it that way, it may have been very expensive beer. Pablo, a security officer for the Moscone Center, takes this as a sign of how practical geologists are.

Pablo makes sure to work the AGU meeting every December. He appreciates that the attendees are real people and not as pretentious as some of the other conferences he works. He told me that the AGU meeting was “the only down-to-Earth conference I work,” a special compliment to earth-scientists. He says we’re the only group he sees that really looks at the planet, who really know what’s going on. We were interrupted by someone looking for their briefcase. Pablo didn’t have it, but laughed while he listed off all the items they did have in the lost-and-found. There were umbrellas and laptops, backpacks and makeup bags. Down-to-earth they may be, but according to Pablo and the inventory of lost items indicates that scientists may have their heads lost in the clouds!

Scientists may be lost in the clouds, but the city was lost in fog. Each morning as I caught the ferry into the conference, the city would slowly emerge from the fog as the ferry surged closer. The red of the Golden Gate was muted to monotones of pale orange against steel blue in the morning light. When I exited the conference for the lunch break, the skies were clear and sunny. It’s good to be in San Francisco in the winter.

