

## OTTO WILLIAM GEIST, 1888–1963

IVAR SKARLAND

OTTO WILLIAM GEIST, Research Associate in Vertebrate Palaeontology at the University of Alaska, pioneer archaeologist and naturalist, died from cancer at Munich, Bavaria, on August 2, 1963. He was on the first leg of a trip around the world, but he became ill in Germany and spent most of the time thereafter in a Munich hospital.

Otto Geist was the eleventh of 15 children born to Mr. and Mrs. Franz Antone Geist. His father was superintendent of the consolidated schools of Eiselfing and surrounding country in the Bavarian Alps. The elder Geist was an amateur archaeologist of note, and Otto grew up with an unusual knowledge of Hallstatt, La Tène, and Roman archaeology. As a boy he assembled a fine collection of Roman artifacts, and these were later placed in a Bavarian museum.

Geist's education consisted of the usual primary and secondary training at a Benedictine school in Bavaria. He was trained to be a mechanic and machinist and received a journeyman's diploma in metal work. He also worked for some time as a driver-mechanic for one of the earliest bus companies in Germany.

In 1908, at the age of 19, Geist was drafted into the German Army. He never liked the iron discipline and, after serving in the army for two years, he entered the United States as an immigrant. His first job was in a hospital; then he worked on a Kansas farm for \$100 a year, and from that he moved on to work as a mechanic in Kansas City. Later he served as chauffeur for Sterling Morton, the well-known industrialist, with whom he kept in touch during the rest of his life.

In 1916 Geist entered the U. S. Army and saw service on the Mexican border under General John J. Pershing. After this Mexican adventure he again worked for Morton, but when the United States entered the First World War in 1917 he enlisted and drove trucks in France. After the war he had his own trucking firm in Kansas City, but this business was "wiped out" by the economic depression of 1921–23.

The turning point in Geist's life came in 1923, when he moved to Alaska to join his brother, Joseph. In Alaska he worked as a section hand, as an engineer on a river boat, and as a gold

miner in the Wild Lake region of the Brooks Range. Here he met Olaus Murie, the nationally known naturalist who, with his wife, wintered in the North. Geist learned the techniques of preserving natural-history specimens and became a master in field taxidermy.

Then he got in contact with Charles E. Bunnell, President of the Alaska Agricultural College and School of Mines (this institution became the University of Alaska in 1935), and the two men organized the first "Bunnell-Geist" expedition in 1926. Geist went to the Bering Sea and Arctic regions, where he collected large amounts of archaeological and ethnographic material. This material constituted the beginning of the University of Alaska Museum. Later he spent many winters on St. Lawrence Island, and he also conducted archaeological excavations there every summer until 1935.

During his stay on St. Lawrence Island Geist became thoroughly familiar with all phases of Eskimo life. He lived in the house of the famous Eskimo hunter, Otiyahok. He was a full-fledged member of Otiyahok's whaling crew, the first non-Eskimo to be so honored, and he was initiated into the whale cult and participated in all the ceremonies connected with whaling. He left a voluminous file on this, and the data will be published according to his instructions.

In many ways Geist's lack of formal anthropological training was an advantage in his work. He did not try to interpret actions according to preconceived theories on standard patterns; he wrote things as he saw them and with an unusual flair for detail. Doubtless his early mechanical training came in handy here.

Geist excavated the Okvik site on Penuk Island and recognized that the Okvik culture was something more than an early phase of the Old Bering Sea culture. To my knowledge, he was also the first to recognize the western phase of the Thule culture. He did not publish this, but it is in his early notes. He recognized that the ceremonial function of the Eskimo "clan" system was more important than the kinship function, although the two are interlaced.

In 1937 Geist observed and took accurate notes on and good pictures of the spectacular Black Rapids Glacier advance. This has proved

to be extremely important in the recent study of glacial advances and retreats in this area.

After 1935 Geist devoted most of his time to field work in vertebrate paleontology, although he kept up his interest in archaeology and collected quantities of zoological and botanical specimens. The hydraulic-mining operations in the interior of Alaska uncovered vast amounts of Pleistocene fossils. The University of Alaska, under an agreement with the Frick Laboratories of the American Museum of Natural History, collected several tons of this material every year, and it was sent to the museum headquarters in New York for classification and study. Geist was trained by the veteran preparator, Peter Kaisen, and after 1935 took over all the field work. As mining operations slowed to a standstill during the war and never afterward reached their former proportions, Geist expanded his field operations to Kotzebue Sound, Norton Bay, and to the great inland rivers of Alaska, and from these areas he recovered great amounts of material.

During World War II, although overage, Geist served as supply officer with the Alaska Territorial Guard, holding the rank of major.

In 1957 the University of Alaska honored Geist by awarding him the degree of Doctor of Science. At a time when most persons would think of retiring, Geist organized and led an expedition to the Porcupine River country. He brought back a rich collection of fossils, natural history specimens, and ethnographic material. In 1960–62 he worked out of the Arctic Research Laboratory at Barrow and again secured much valuable material.

In many ways Otto William Geist was the last of the old naturalists who mastered many difficult field techniques and collected his information from primary sources. He did not publish a great deal (the following list of publications is probably not complete), but he generously provided younger persons with much valuable information and knowledge gained in a lifetime of rich experience. Great quantities of unpublished data are on file in the Laboratory of Vertebrate Palaeontology Research and in the office of the President of the University of Alaska. These materials include extensive field reports and notes, specimen catalogs, expedition diaries (some of these are bound and available), charts, maps, and photographs.



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- 1933 Habits of the Ground Squirrel *Citellus lyratus* on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. *Journal of Mammalogy*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 306–08. Baltimore.
- 1934 Brown Bear Seen on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. *Journal of Mammalogy*, Vol. 15, No. 4, pp. 316–17. Baltimore.
- 1935 First Flight to St. Lawrence Island, Alaska. *The Geographical Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 488–9. New York.
- 1936a With Froelich G. Rainey. Archaeological Excavations at Kukulik, St. Lawrence Island, Alaska: Preliminary Report. *Miscellaneous Publications of the University of Alaska*, Vol. 2. Government Printing Office, Washington.
- 1936b Notes on a Fight between Alaska Jays and a Weasel. *The Condor*, Vol. 38, pp. 174–5. Santa Cruz.
- 1939 Sea Birds Found Far Inland in Alaska. *The Condor*, Vol. 41, pp. 68–70.
- 1951 Collecting Pleistocene Fossils in Alaska. *Proceedings, Second Alaskan Science Conference*, pp. 171–2. College, Alaska.
- 1956 Biogeography—The Fossil Record. *Proceedings, Fourth Alaskan Science Conference*, pp. 200–01. College, Alaska.
- 1957 With T. L. Pewe. Quantitative Measurements of the 1937 Advance of Black Rapids Glacier, Alaska. *Proceedings, Fifth Alaskan Science Conference*, pp. 51–2. College, Alaska.

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