Searching for Dr. Shelmidine

We could fill a year's worth of this magazine's pages with stories of professors who change lives. Here's one.

by C. Mark Smith '61

Shelmidine's many trips to the Middle East in the 1930s and while in the military during World War II made him a respected expert on the region.

It has been almost 50 years since I last saw or spoke to Lyle Stanton Shelmidine, but he has been in my thoughts—almost continuously—since then. He was my faculty advisor, my mentor, and my friend. Whenever I see or listen to news of some unfolding crisis in the Middle East, I remember that it was Shelmidine who first explained its root causes to me and gave it meaning.

I was his reader in his world history survey course during the 1959–60 school year, following Walter Lowrie '58 in the position after the lapse of a school term. In fact, Lowrie would have been the logical person to write this article. He was a Shelmidine student, friend, protégé, and faculty colleague who then went on to his own illustrious teaching career at Puget Sound. Walter and I talked about working together on this article before his all-too-early death in May 2010 left the project in my hands.

Though his given name was Lyle, Shelmidine was universally known as "Stan" to his friends and associates—and even to some of his students—although few would have dared to refer to him that way in public. In return, he invariably addressed his students by their last names, preceded by "Mister" or "Miss"—all very professional, but somewhat intimidating at the same time.

Shelmidine was an acknowledged expert on Turkey, the Middle East, and Islam, but he was also a student of modern British history. Indeed at one time or another he taught almost every type of history. He spoke Turkish, French, and German, and possessed moderate fluency in numerous dialects of Arabic.

In class he favored well-worn tweed jackets and slacks, button-down shirts, and a tie. When at ease, he skipped the tie. He would pace in front of his class as he lectured, or sit at his desk, where, in a characteristic move, he would lean forward on his elbows and peer at his students through heavy-framed glasses, extending his fingertips as they flexed against each other like an arrow pointing toward the sky.

Grace Swan Austin '60 told me: "He did not use notes, but rather the information came from recollection. I was intrigued as to whether his memory was accurate with regard to historic happenings, facts, dates, and sequences of events he mentioned in class. So I decided to compare the facts from our textbook and other readings to my notes from his lectures. Sure enough, I found he was correct in all aspects."

His standards of scholarship were high, both for himself and for his students—particularly his better students. Learning—and, more important, *understanding what you learned*—was his ultimate teaching goal.

His generally reserved demeanor masked a razor-sharp wit, a dry sense of humor, and a mastery of the pointed barb that could skewer a recipient with deadly accuracy. The latter was an experience few enjoyed or ever wanted to encounter again, whether they were a student or a faculty colleague. I vividly remember a day when he was teaching the world history survey course, in one of the old war-surplus buildings [South Hall]. It was several weeks before an important test. Shelmidine asked how many in the class had read all of the assigned reading material. Sixty or 70 of the students raised their hands. He then asked how many had read the suggested supplemental reading material. This time, only about 30 raised their hands. Fixing the class with his trademark deadpan stare, he asked us how we intended to pass the test. "Are you going to sit on your texts and assimilate it by *ass*-mosis?"

On rare occasions, the tables were turned. Don Droettboom '58 attended CPS under the GI Bill. He remembers taking Shelmidine's world history course in that same old classroom. It was a warm, early-fall day, and the windows were open. Droettboom and several of his friends had survived the Korean War and were more interested in enjoying the beautiful weather than listening to a lecture. When Shelmidine turned away for a moment, Droettboom and his buddies bailed out through the open windows. If Shelmidine realized they were gone, he never admitted it.

In Shelmidine's apartment in the old Rust Mansion on I Street, he converted the former ballroom into a library.

He was an imaginative, lifelong practical joker who purchased outlandish Christmas gifts for his friends and family members at the local thrift store. After his death, his faculty colleague John Regester Hon.'87 remembered, "On the phone he could convincingly impersonate an IRS agent, a customs collector, or an unexpected cousin who had just arrived at the bus station from Denmark. His particular specialty was to call his unsuspecting victim late at night, speaking in some foreign language or with a heavy accent, to ask for some favor." Not even CPS President R. Franklin Thompson was exempt from the late-night calls.

A lifelong bachelor, Shelmidine first lived in an apartment in Tacoma's Old Town neighborhood, but in 1953 he moved to a larger apartment in the former Rust Mansion at 1001 North I Street. The home had been built in 1905 for copper-smelting magnate William Rust, for whom the town of Ruston is named. Shelmidine's second-floor apartment included the former ballroom, which he converted into a library that contained thousands of books. The entrance was marked by a Quran resting on its ornate wooden carved stand. Scores of oriental rugs, photographs, artworks, and other mementos of his travels to the Middle East filled the rest of the rooms. As a student it was a great honor to be invited there for a drink and conversation that often lasted long into the night. It was not unknown for a student to leave in the early-morning hours with the gift of a rare book from Shelmidine's library.

Hugh McMillan '50 remembers, "It was in his Old Town apartment that he introduced me to Khachaturian's *Gayne Suite,* which, although I've been a music nut all my life, I'd never heard before. He encouraged me to believe that maybe I had some talents after all. After graduation and some graduate school at UC-Berkeley and the University of Washington, I wound up in the Central Intelligence Agency in Washington, D.C., with my wife, Janice '52, for some training before heading overseas. Stan came back to do some research work at the Library of Congress and the National Archives and spent a couple of nights with us in our condo. On one of these nights, after Janice had gone to bed, Stan and I sat cross-legged on the living room floor solving all the problems of the world until 6:15 a.m., soothing our erudition with a full bottle of Armagnac brandy that he'd brought.

"My last visit with Stan was in 1966, while on home leave out of New Delhi, India, en route to my [new] assignment in Alexandria, Egypt. We spent another long session correcting the ills of the Middle East over dinner at the Harbor

Lights restaurant, a favorite of his, and briefly at his apartment. He was the most knowledgeable person I ever met, both in and out of the [region]."

Shelmidine was born in Spencer, Iowa, on June 16, 1906, the sixth of 10 children born to David Edgar Shelmidine and his wife, Mae Galusha, between 1893 and 1913. His mother's ancestors were French Huguenots, who first settled in Vermont before the Revolutionary War. His father's family came from Germany and England and settled in New York and Pennsylvania. Both families migrated to Iowa by 1854.

Shelmidine's father owned a clothing store and supplemented his income by buying and selling farmland. His mother, grandmother, and three sisters were all teachers. Both parents were amateur musicians. Stan's older brother, Donald, moved to California in the hope of becoming an actor but instead became a successful investment broker who made it possible for five of their sisters to attend college, including two who attended the College of Puget Sound.

Spencer, Iowa, was and remains a quintessential small, Midwestern town—a farm community; the county seat of Clay County; and the gateway to Lake Okoboji in northwestern Iowa. The town is probably most famous for its library that once was home to Dewey, the famous library cat.

According to his only living aunt, now more than 100 years old, young Stan lived a normal boyhood among his numerous siblings. His greatest pleasures were music, baseball, and public speaking. In the fifth grade, he received an award for giving the best five-minute extemporaneous speech at his school. As a teenager he considered becoming a minister or a lawyer. When the pastor of the local Congregational church went on vacation, it was Stan who was asked to read the Sunday sermon to the congregation. His interest in the history and geography of the Middle East came from the pictures and maps of the Holy Land in the family Bible.

Graduating from Spencer High School in 1925, he was accepted the following year at Iowa's Grinnell College, from which he graduated with a dual major in history and philosophy on June 9, 1930. Within a month, in response to an earlier application, he received an appointment from the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to become an instructor at the American College (actually a high school for boys) in Tarsus, Turkey. While no official connection existed, Grinnell and its graduates had a long history of involvement with the school. It is estimated that in the years prior to World War I, half of the teachers at the American College were Grinnell alumni.

Located near the busy port city of Mersin on the Mediterranean Sea, the school had been founded in 1888 as St. Paul's Institute. By the time Shelmidine arrived in August 1930, it had survived the First World War, a subsequent French occupation, the founding of the Turkish Republic, and state-sponsored repression of religious (mostly Muslim) education. Fewer than 50 students were enrolled, but they included the sons of some of Turkey's most elite families.

At Puget Sound, with history department colleagues in 1963. Shelmidine is second from left.

Shelmidine became fluent in Turkish during the next three summers. His passport indicates that he traveled to Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jerusalem, Syria, Transjordan, Iraq, Greece, and Germany, where he honed his existing language skills and learned various dialects of Arabic. In the summer of 1932 he embarked on a dangerous two-week horseback trip into the mountains of central Turkey and visited historic ruins, ancient churches and mosques, and even troglodyte caves. An unfinished, handwritten account of the trip is among his papers in the Shelmidine Room at Collins Memorial Library.

Based on his experiences in Turkey, he was able to obtain a graduate assistantship at the University of Iowa during 1935–1936, while he worked on his master's degree in history. The subject of his thesis was "The Reasons for Turkey's Entrance into the World War."

Upon securing his master's, Shelmidine applied to several teacher placement agencies and to the American University in Beirut without success. Finally, in mid-August 1936, he was offered a one-year temporary position at the College of Puget Sound as an instructor at the lordly annual sum of $1,800—from which he had to deduct the $92 fee he owed to the Fisk Teachers Agency for placing him in his new job. CPS president Edward H. Todd wrote to Shelmidine on August 22 informing him that there would be a faculty meeting on September 12 and that he was expected to be present.

The temporary appointment at CPS became permanent, and in 1939 Shelmidine was promoted to assistant professor after obtaining his Ph.D. in history at The University of Iowa, presenting a dissertation titled "Anglo-Turkish Relations: 1907–1914." He also took postgraduate courses at Princeton in the summer of 1938, studying Arabic and Islam under the renowned Arabist and author Philip K. Hitti. He was promoted to associate professor at Puget Sound in 1941.

Always a keen observer of world affairs, Shelmidine carefully followed events in Turkey and the Middle East during the years leading up to World War II. In May 1941 he penned a detailed three-part analysis of the prospects for continued Turkish neutrality for the *Tacoma News Tribune*. He reminded his readers that Turkey's decision to enter the First World War on the side of Germany not only had doomed the Ottoman Empire but had led, after the war, to an ill-fated Allied decision to invade Anatolia. A second Turkish war ensued, in which Mustafa Kemal Pasha (later Kemal Atatürk) defeated the Allied invaders. In 1923, Atatürk became the first president of the modern Turkish state. During the peace that followed, Turkey made great progress toward becoming a modern, secular nation. When Atatürk died in 1938 he

was succeeded by Mustafa İsmet İnönü, a man Shelmidine would come to know and respect.

Shelmidine volunteered for service in the U.S. Navy on April 6, 1942. A background check by Navy and FBI investigators concluded that Shelmidine had "no apparent radical leanings" and was a Methodist "who appears to be loyal, honest, and discreet." Neither his personal papers nor his Navy personnel file provide any clues as to why he chose the Navy, or of his declared interest in intelligence, but it is possible that he was influenced by his close friendship back in Tacoma with Jonathan Haley (co-founder of the Brown & Haley candy company) and his sons, both of whom would serve in the Navy. Letters of recommendation were provided by Haley, CPS President Todd, and Tacoma Mayor Harry P. Cain.

Shelmidine was commissioned as a lieutenant in the United States Navy Reserve on June 2, 1942. After training he received an assignment that placed him "in sole charge of the Turkish Desk, Southern European Section, of the Intelligence Branch of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, D.C."

In September 1943, the office decided to send a naval mission to Turkey. The commander of the mission was Captain Gail Morgan, a 1916 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and a pioneer naval aviator. Morgan wrote to Admiral Ernest J. King, the chief of Naval Operations, requesting that Lieutenant Lyle S. Shelmidine be sent out to Ankara as his assistant.

Shelmidine arrived in Turkey prior to Jan. 30, 1944. It is unclear what his specific duties were as Morgan's assistant. Almost certainly he served as interpreter and advisor, but he would also have taken the opportunity to reconnect with his former students and contacts, many of whom now held important positions in the Turkish government.

In September 1944 Gail Morgan, promoted to commodore, left Turkey to command the naval air station at Midway Island in the Pacific. He took Shelmidine, now a lieutenant commander, with him as his executive officer. They stayed there for a year, until the Pacific War ended in August 1945.

While stationed at Midway, Shelmidine wrote the only known history of Midway Island to that time. It was later published in the July 1948 issue of *American Neptune*, a quarterly journal of maritime history. An article in the island's newspaper, the *Midway Mirror*, on Oct. 26, 1945, announced Shelmidine's transfer to the Office of Naval History in Washington, D.C. "He played a most important part in every decision regarding this station during the regime of Commodore Gail Morgan" and was a man whom civilians would call a "swell Joe." The article also suggested that Shelmidine continued to be involved in intelligence work while stationed at Midway Island, noting that "most of Mr. Shelmidine's service [here] must be shrouded behind the veil of 'military security.'"

As an officer in the Office of Naval History, Shelmidine wrote "The History of Naval Communications to the Outbreak of the War." It was one of the many chapters in the massive *Administration of the Navy Department in World War II*, which chronicled the administrative rather than the combat history of the war. He was promoted to the rank of commander in March 1946 and remained on active duty until Sept. 21, 1946, then on inactive reserve until July 15, 1954.

Shelmidine served in the Navy during the war, attaining the rank of commander.

Shelmidine returned to the College of Puget Sound in October 1946 as a full professor. His expertise on Turkey and the Middle East, bolstered by his war experiences, made him much in demand as lecturer, writer, and visiting professor. He supplemented his CPS salary with summer teaching jobs at the universities of Washington and Montana, and at Alaska Methodist University. In 1951 he took a year's leave of absence to teach Far East history at the University of Puerto Rico.

As he was before the war, Shelmidine became active in the community, volunteering with the Tacoma Philharmonic, the Tacoma Art League, and the Tacoma Drama League. He belonged to the World Affairs Council and the English-Speaking Union. He renewed his personal friendship with the Haley family and often shared Sunday breakfast with them at their home when they were in town. In addition to the Haleys, other influential friends and business leaders invited him to dinner parties and to their homes during the holidays. These included the Chauncey Griggses, major owners of the St. Paul & Tacoma Lumber Co.; George Weyerhaeuser, an heir to the giant timber company of the same name; and Tacoma clothing company executive Judd Day.

While important to Shelmidine on a personal level, these relationships also benefitted the school. It was Shelmidine who worked with the Haley family and their company to initiate the Brown & Haley Lecture series at Puget Sound in 1953. Over the years, some of America's best-known scholars have been brought to Tacoma to speak, including John Kenneth Galbraith, Howard Mumford Jones, Henry Nash Smith, Hadley Cantril, Merle Curti, and T. Harry Williams.

In his spare time, Shelmidine read, conducted research, traveled, and even found the time to repair his prized oriental rugs. (He loaned them out to friends the way libraries loan out books.) He wrote, but never published, a pictorial history of America through the stamps that it issued—the *Stampictorial Outline History of the United States*. He found time to pass on his love of biblical history to new generations of Sunday-school students at Tacoma's First Methodist Church.

Shelmidine was a demanding teacher. I personally knew of many good students who refused to sign up for his classes. More adventurous souls were often rewarded with remarkable experiences. At the start of each new school year, the students in his trademark Middle East history class would be treated to the spectacle of his unrolling a prayer rug across the top of his desk, followed by his climbing up on it to exhibit the five positions of Muslim prayer while reciting the appropriate prayers in near-perfect Arabic.

Martha Dalke Hindman '65 took the course because she needed an extra credit. "One day Dr. Shelmidine was talking about Istanbul and the St. Sophia Mosque. I raised my hand and asked him, 'Where in relation to St. Sophia Mosque is the Blue [Sultan Ahmed] Mosque?' He stopped his lecture, looked me straight in the eyes, and

asked, 'Miss Dalke, how do *you* know about the Blue Mosque?'"

Frightened, she told him that a friend at the University of Idaho had showed her pictures of the various mosques in Istanbul, and the Blue Mosque had been one of them.

"All I was asking for was information. To put it bluntly, Dr. Shelmidine frightened me, but I listened intently as he took the rest of that period to explain more about the St. Sophia and the Blue mosques."

He enjoyed mentoring promising students. Winifred Hertzog Sihon '60 said, "In 1960, as I applied to become a teacher for the American Board in Istanbul, I was scheduled for an interview with Dr. Shelmidine. Why? Because he had been a teacher in Turkey who stayed on to actually serve on the staff of Atatürk. No *wonder* he knew and taught so much about Turkey. The school I was going to was in Üsküdar, and Shelmidine sang the song to me that tells of a girl going to Üsküdar."

Richard Wiest '63 told me how much Shelmidine valued his friendship with [Turkish President] İsmet İnönü. "Shelmidine's contacts remained good enough that he said he could get me a job at the school in Tarsus or İzmir after UPS, and looking back I sometimes wish I had done that instead of going to graduate school."

A number of Shelmidine's former students confirmed the importance of his high standards of scholarship. Robert Keller '57, now a retired history professor and the author/editor of five books, believes that Shelmidine determined the course of his career. "In graduate school at the University of Chicago I silently thanked him again and again for what he had taught me. His classes operated beyond the usual survey level, teaching one how to think carefully, how to *inquire*, how the study of the past must be rigorous and demanding, how to see connections. His classes also took students into the history of the Near East, a subject usually neglected at the time. For the first [time], I learned details about the creation of modern Israel, information, questions, and interpretations that 50 years later inform my understanding of the Arab world."

But as much as his teaching, his friendships, and his community activities occupied his time, Stan Shelmidine remained a lonely man. Some of his isolation was self-inflicted. Most of his family lived in the Midwest, and he didn't see them often. As his siblings grew older, there was less and less contact among them. His mother passed away in 1955, as did a favorite brother-in-law, William Heathcote, in 1963. His nephew, Barrie Heathcote, remembers a summer trip back to Iowa in Stan's pride and joy—a sporty Studebaker Golden Hawk. "For the most part, Stan's attitude was that if the relatives wanted to see him, they could come to Tacoma." Letters from friends during this period often contain a comment wishing that he would write to them more often.

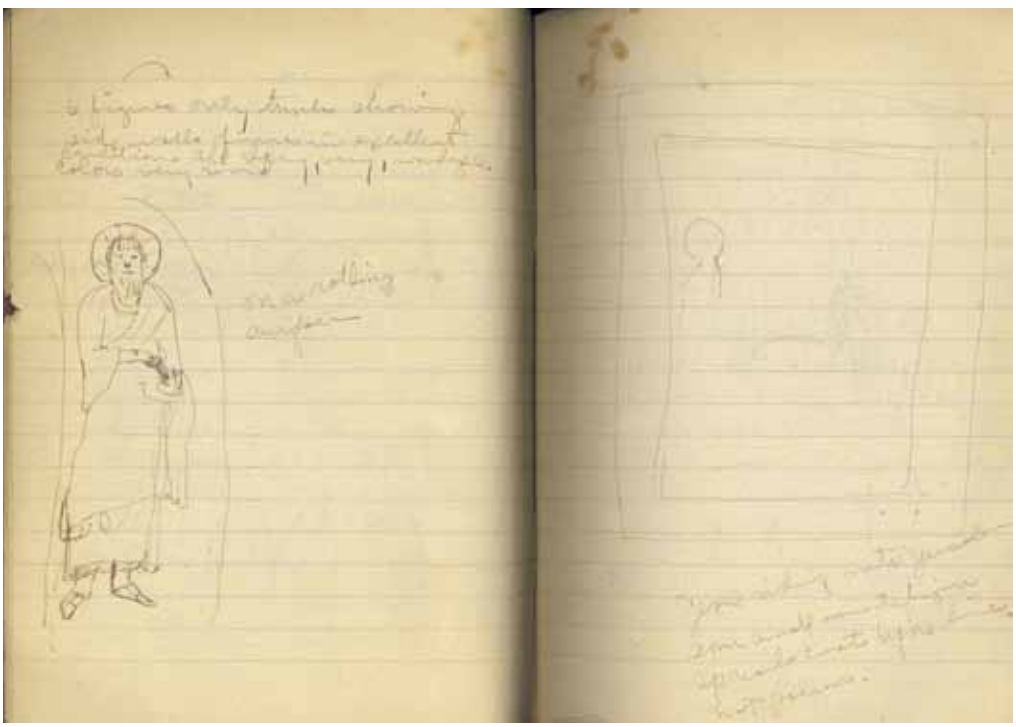
Shelmidine was something of a hypochondriac. A candid tribute written after his death for the 1966 *Tamanawas* by Dean John D. Regester noted that Shelmidine suffered from "chronic digestive troubles," and that "his diets, yogurt, and shelves of drugs were objects of friendly humor." He became increasingly despondent and began to dwell upon his own mortality to the point where alcohol became a major part of his life. On the night of May 5, 1966, alone in his apartment and talking to a student on the telephone, his end of the line went dead. He had suffered a massive heart attack. He was only 59 years old.

Stan Shelmidine's death was both a surprise and a cause for reflection for his friends. Regester's tribute to him admitted that "we did not perhaps understand his moods as much as we might have, or help him as much as we should have, but whether he was in a serious or playful mood or in high or low spirits he had always a secure place in the hearts of his associates."

Stan Shelmidine left his mark on the University of Puget Sound through the excellence of his teaching and in the career of his protégé, Walter Lowrie '58, who joined Stan on the history faculty in 1961. He certainly influenced my life and career and is enshrined in the memories of many of his other students.

After his death, a sale of his rare books, rugs, and other belongings was held, and along with gifts from friends and faculty associates, the proceeds established the Lyle S. Shelmidine Scholarship. Some of his prize possessions were set aside at the time of the sale and now decorate the Shelmidine rare book room in Collins Library. His private and university papers, augmented by contributions from family members and others, are housed in the library's archives.

Pages from Shelmidine's journal of a dangerous two-week horseback trip into the mountains of central Turkey, where he visited and sketched historic churches and mosques.



C. Mark Smith managed economic development organizations at the local, state, and federal levels for more than 40 years. He was a history major at UPS and a trustee of the university from 1979 to 1985. He is the author of a well-received biography of former Tacoma mayor and U.S. Senator Harry P. Cain, which was published in 2011, and is hard at work on his second book. Mark and his wife, Elsa Lindberg Smith '65, live in Richland, Wash.