

If You Can't Think Fast

The year I graduated from the University of Arkansas, I also had my thesis published by the Arkansas Geological Commission. My thesis advisor, Dr. K, co-authored the article with me and gave the talk at the regional Geological Society of America convention held in Little Rock that year. The keynote speaker was John Rodgers, a famous geologist and co-author of the renowned textbook ***The Principles of Stratigraphy***, along with Carl Dunbar.

As part of the convention, we took a field trip to nearby Lake Catherine, a location in the heart of the Ouachita Mountains. Rodgers had a full head of bouffant white hair that bounced in the wind and caused him to look like Moses. Whenever he glanced at a fault or tortured slab of rock, everyone halted what they were doing and listened to his ensuing proclamation. He was quite literally the most famous geologist that I had ever met and I, along with everyone else, was in awe.

Dr. K had assigned me the job of slide projectionist for Dr. Rodger's keynote speech, the last of the convention.

"I don't want his talk screwed up," he told me, "And you're the only one I trust to work the slide projector."

I was terrified, but it did not stop me from accompanying Garland and Ed later that first night to Hot Spring, once known as a wide-open town, complete with gambling, gangsters and prostitution. We were only looking for strippers, and we found them shortly after arriving in the little resort town located not too far from Little Rock.

Ed and Garland were both from Shreveport, Louisiana. Being from that fair state, they could party with the best of them. Since I was also from Louisiana, we proceeded to spend every penny we had and to paint the town a very bright red. It was six the next morning when we made it back to the hotel in Little Rock, my stomach churning and head pounding. I only had time for a quick shower, drink a cup of coffee and down a couple of doughnuts before the talks began, along with my duties as slide projectionist.

The day wore on and I frankly do not know how I made it – by cursing Ed and Garland, still asleep in their beds upstairs, I guess. Finally it was five and time for Professor John Rodger's keynote address. My body felt like hell and my rear end puckered as he began.

Everything went well until Professor Rodgers' last slide. I do not remember much about his talk but I will never forget that last slide.

“I hope I’ve conveyed some of my love for the science of geology today and nudged some of you fledgling scientists in the right direction. I just want to leave you with one thought.”

When Dr. Rodgers stopped talking, looked me straight in the eye and nodded, I pressed the button for the last slide. When it appeared on the large screen, I almost had a heart attack. It was a fifties pinup of a very naked, extremely well endowed woman. Oh my God! I thought as my mind raced. Someone has played a cruel trick on me. As I sat there, expecting the filled auditorium to start hissing at me, Rodgers added, “If you can’t think fast, then think big.”

Within seconds, the stunned audience regained their composure and broke into universal, belly-rolling laughter, quickly followed by thunderous applause.

The slide was not a plant. It was Rodgers’ own wonderful way to end the convention on a note of levity and laughter. It also taught me a much-needed lesson in life – no matter how famous you are, or think you are, do not ever stop acting like a normal human being. Oh, and if you are going to be wasted the night before, then be prepared for the consequences the next day.