

FRANK H. THOMAS (1997 Winner)

In 1972 at age 43 our awardee left a successful career in academia to apply his geography skills to the Federal Service in Washington. In 16 years as an academic he had chaired the geography department at Southern Illinois University for six years and then the department at Georgia State for two years.

A native of Chicago he entered teaching after completing his undergraduate work at the University of Illinois and his M.A. and Ph.D. at Northwestern University. His special interest was the geography of transportation and his dissertation was a geographic analysis of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad.

He came to Washington on a one-year faculty fellowship, but stayed on for 20 years and retired in 1995 as one of the highest ranking geographers in government. His federal career centered on water management and other applied geography issues, not on transport geography. He was one of a relatively few Washington-based geographers of his era not employed by the Bureau of the Census or the various intelligence and mapping agencies.

His initial government fellowship was with the Water Resources Council, the agency that was part of the White House Staff under Jimmy Carter. The Council, consisting of eight cabinet level agencies, was charged with coordinating the various water resource programs and policies of the Federal agencies as well as state programs. The Council played the central role in the development of Presidential water policy. At the Water Resources Council our awardee helped implement the flood loss reduction activities of the National Flood Insurance Program, the Unified National Program for Floodplain Management, and developed related water resources policy. He was responsible for the development, adoption, and enforcement of flood loss reduction standards in building codes and zoning ordinances of some 18,000 communities. During this time over 1,000 high risk properties in 90 communities were removed from the floodplain and the land committed to open space.

In 1980 he became the Chief of the Policy Analysis Division and then Assistant Director of the Council for Policy. In 1981-82 he became Acting Director of the agency. As chair of the Federal Interagency Floodplain Management Task Force he applied his understanding of geographic analysis to guide its agenda, to direct its policy development, and to obtain interagency consensus for the first unified program in 1976, and its later revisions through 1994. This program provides a conceptual framework concerning floodplain use compatible with flood hazard and with natural floodplain functions. It also recommends standards and procedures for federal and other floodplain agencies.

In 1982, when the Water Resources Council was disbanded and its functions transferred to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, he moved to FEMA. In 1984 he became the Assistant Administrator for the Federal Insurance Administration and served in that capacity for eight

years. There his responsibilities included testifying before Congressional committees and acting as a liaison with Congress and state and local government bodies.

In 1993 he became Acting Director of FEMA's Region III, headquartered in Philadelphia. In 1994 he became FEMA's Deputy Associate Director for Response and Recovery and Acting Administrator of the United States Fire Administration. The following year he was named Deputy Director for Mitigation in FEMA's Washington headquarters.

He retired from full-time government service in 1995, but continues in applied geography as a disaster assistance reserve special assistant on call.

Our awardee is a member of the Board of Natural Disasters of the National Research Council. In 1996 he was a member of the Aspen Global Climate Change workshop on Natural Disaster Reduction sponsored by NASA. In 1994 he lectured at the NATO Flood Loss Reduction Seminar for East European Nations in Budapest. In 1993 he was the FEMA representative at the worldwide Hazards '93 conference in Qindao, China. He has received several major awards for his contributions to government resource policy and for his management skills. In 1992 he was honored with FEMA's Meritorious Service Award for "leadership in the publishing of Floodplain Management in the United States."

He has twice received the highest awards given to federal administrators: the Presidential Rank Awards given to the outstanding administrators in the entire Federal Service: in 1989 as Meritorious Senior Executive and in 1993 as Distinguished Senior Executive. Both awards were presented in the Rose Garden of the White House and carried handsome financial stipends.

In 1993 the Association of State Floodplain Managers presented our awardee with the James Goddard-Gilbert White Award, itself honoring another distinguished applied geographer, and recipient of the James R. Anderson Medal, whose recommendations formed the basis for the Federal Floodplain Management Program. In his letter of support of the nomination of our current awardee, Gilbert White said "(he) has consistently stood for high standards of scientific analysis and has himself contributed a distinctively geographic perspective to both problem definition and study method. Much of the good in the resulting public policies has been the result of his insights and persistence....Clearly, he has stood out as a constructive geographer in shaping and executing public policy."

In recognition of his outstanding achievements in resource policy management, it is with pride and appreciation that the Applied Geography Specialty Group awards its 1997 James R. Anderson Medal of Honor in Applied Geography to Frank H. Thomas.