Svend Einer Holsoe: The Scholar, the Man, The World Citizen

...... A summary portrait by D. Elwood Dunn and Emma Lapsansky

Svend Holsoe (1939-2017) was a generous and expansive man. With great intelligence, compassion, and vision, he wrapped himself around the globe, with a deeply wise and tender touch in the eastern United States, the American mid-west, the Caribbean, East and West Africa—and of course, Denmark, the home-of-his-heritage.
The only child of peripatetic parents, Svend learned early how to create and nourish a community everywhere he went. He was admired by scholars of anthropology and history, and by young children who remember his unwillingness to dismiss their ideas and their intellect simply because they were young. Generous with his time, energy, his analytical mind and attention to detail, and with historical energies and collections, he was often able to see into the crux of problems that needed untangling in organizations as diverse as heritage institutions, schools and academic conferences—and a New York housing co-op. Kind and witty, with a gentleness that belied his great strength and persistent resolve, Svend was astonishingly multifaceted.

What follows is a composite portrait of the man, a blend of snapshots, documentary research, and oral history that we hope will do justice to a man who was the consummate anthropologist in both profession and temperament.

It’s as if Svend was destined to be a citizen of the world even before he was born. His father, Torkel Holsoe—himself the child of a community-minded architect who was instrumental in developing the city-plan of modern Copenhagen—had come to the United States to study forestry at Harvard University.

Svend’s mother, Birthe Ambt Holsoe, an accomplished landscape and still-life painter, took the toddler Svend with her when she went to live and perfect her craft among friends in Mexico, for several years while Torkel was molding his career. Though the family moved to many places in pursuit of Torkel’s profession as a forester/environmentalist, the defining years of Svend’s life occurred when Torkel signed on as a forestry advisor to the Liberian government and as part of the United States Navy team supervising construction of the Free Port of Monrovia (now the National Port Authority).

Hence, a part of Svend’s early schooling was in Monrovia in the late 40s and early 50s. There, accompanying his father as he traveled the Liberian countryside Svend began to form lasting friendships, and to develop a “feel” for things Liberian. Though he would later go on to study anthropology with a focus on the Vai people, he developed
early a broader interest in the history and culture of all the peoples of Liberia. It is this broader interest that led him to become perhaps the largest single collector of documents and artifacts on or related to that West African country.

Always a free spirit, Svend chose Westtown School, because it was the only boarding school that would accommodate both him and his chimp, Kofi.

But Svend was never parochial. Born in Morgantown, West Virginia, where his father was teaching, on March 16, 1939, his formal education, begun in the American schools in Liberia, was followed by boarding-school education at Westtown School, and Haverford College in Pennsylvania (B.S., 1961). At Westtown and Haverford he discovered the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), and eventually he would join Lansdowne Friends Meeting, near his home in Lansdowne, PA. For graduate training, he relocated to Boston University, where he earned an M.A. (1963), and a Ph.D. in anthropology with a minor in African History, 1967). With a dissertation entitled “The Cassava Leaf People, An Ethnohistorical Study of the Vai People with Particular Emphasis on the Tewo Chiefdom,” Svend began what would be a spectacular career, with research interests that expanded to East Africa, to the Caribbean, and to the American South. Beginning his career as assistant professor of anthropology and director of the African Studies Center at DePauw University (1967), Svend then moved to the University of Delaware, where he was assistant-, then associate-professor of anthropology until his retirement in 1995. He also lectured about Liberia at many venues in the United States, Africa and Europe, acquiring and developing a following that greatly benefitted from his abundant intellectual enthusiasm and generosity. As governmental entities, corporations and NGOs frequently called upon his deep knowledge of and love for Liberia, it seemed inevitable that Svend would become the driving force behind the birth of the Liberian Studies Association and Liberian Studies
Journal in 1968. Serving as editor of the Journal from 1968-80, he spearheaded the foundation that has made these two enterprises the only surviving institutions devoted to Liberian studies anywhere in the world. For this leadership, and his unique contributions, he was awarded the Liberian Studies Association Annual Lifetime Achievement Award, and, in 1999 the Indiana University’s Chancellors’ Medallion in honor of his scholarship and of donation of his valued Liberia collection papers.

Liberian scholar D. Elwood Dunn, of Tennessee’s Sewanee University remembers Svend thus, and thinks ahead to the future of Svend’s legacy:

“I first came to know of, and subsequently met, Svend not long after I arrived in the United States for graduate studies in 1967. Incidentally, this was the effective beginning of my own journey into understanding my country and its peoples. No doubt I travelled with Svend on this journey for my first exposure to his then already large collection of books and other material on Liberia at his home in Delaware sparked my interest and developed in me what in time became by own passion for Liberian history and culture. This was in 1971 as he hosted the annual conference of the Liberian Studies Association. It was there in Newark, Delaware that I learned of Svend’s pioneering role in the creation of the Liberian Studies Association and the Liberian Studies Journal the same year. It was my fortune to serve as editor of the journal for a decade, 1985-95. My friendship and association with Svend led to much collaboration including our joint compiling of the first edition of The Historical Dictionary of Liberia (No. 83, 1985), and an aborted attempt to edit for publication his manuscript on President E.J. Roye. To assist me and my family shortly upon our arrival in the United States following the 1980 overthrow of President Tolbert, Svend schemed with the Roman Catholic Fathers at Tenafly, New Jersey in compensating me for copying important documents I had acquired during my six-year service in the Tolbert administration.

I was but one of scores of Liberians who benefitted in diverse ways from his friendship and assistance. In the interest of brevity I will cite but three. The first is Hon. Morris M. Dukuly, Sr. (former Minister in the Sirleaf administration) who met Svend in Liberia and Svend would soon come to have a defining impact on Morris’s life. After doing very well in elementary school Morris’ prospects were uncertain, as his family circumstances could not allow for further education. In 1967, while in Liberia to do dissertation research, Svend met Morris in 1967, and provided the financial means for Morris to complete High School. In minute details Morris recounts Svend’s many other acts of kindness toward him, adding ‘I wanted to share this personal story with you to know how profoundly and indelibly Svend impacted my life, and the lives of members of my own family.’ And then he added: “I want to share that because Svend literally and singlehandedly transformed the course of my life, he gave me the opportunity to fulfill my potential and become who I have been in this life ..” “Hopefully, this
personal story will let you in on the depth of the sadness and sorrow that I and my family feel. Svend will remain irreplaceable in my life. He will always be the father I never had [father died when Morris was age 6]. His love of Liberia will remain indelible and exemplary. He was a non-Liberian Liberian patriot. His name in my family will remain forever.”

The second case I cite is that of Dr. Al Hassan Conteh (Liberian Ambassador to Nigeria) who speaks for himself as follows: “Svend took me and my family under his wings when I arrived at Penn in 1983 for graduate studies. He became my mentor and academic advisor. This contributed in no small measure towards my academic success at Penn. For a few years, before he moved to Lansdowne, PA, he was our distinguished neighbor on Chester Avenue in Philadelphia. I benefitted immensely from studying some of his massive collections on Liberia in his personal Library, and at the Institute of Liberian Studies, which was then located around the corner from Chester Ave. We later became “colleagues”, collaborating on matters pertaining to the LSA and Liberia...I believe after the late Professors Gus Liebenow and Warren d’Azevedo of blessed memories, Svend became the Doyen of Liberian Studies. As the saying of the wise goes in Nigeria, where I’m currently serving, another ‘Iroko Tree has fallen’ in the Liberian Studies Community. May God Almighty have mercy on him, and may his soul rest in perfect peace.”

The third case is that of Eugene Peabody who in tears read to me on the phone the following: “A beloved friend and brother, a Liberianist, a faithful and devoted son of the soul of Liberia: After my university years at Cuttington College he schooled me in the use of the English language by pronunciations and enunciations. His methods of research in Anthropology gave me the privilege to attempt to enter the realm of other social sciences. We penned the Liberian Studies Journal for several years at the Department of Anthropology of the University of Delaware while I studied graduate economics. We lived together. Your general knowledge of African culture and specifically of the socio-cultural history of Liberia is evident by your vast collection diminutive only to the U.S. Library of Congress. You were a beloved family friend. As a street philosopher once said in Gbarnga: ‘Man’s ingress into this world is naked and bare. His journey through the earth is fraught with trials and tribulations. His egress is to a place no man knows. If you can make it here you can make it there.’ Sleep Svend! You’ve fought a good fight. We will always remember you. Your Brother, S.T.E. Peabody.”

And there are scores of others who would have volunteered testimonies of their time with our friend. I will sneak in here part of an email message I received from Dr. Emmanuel Dolo: “I recall how Svend was generous with his knowledge and time. He took time to share documents with me during research on the manuscript for my book and to write a statement endorsing it….He added an immense value to the knowledge base on Liberia.”
Svend was a member of the Friends of Liberia (FOL), a group of American returned Peace Corps Volunteers who formed an association that grew to include Diaspora Liberians and other Americans interested in Liberia, who came together to help the people of a country in civil war. Svend served as a Board member of the organization 2007-2013, contributing as well to the establishment in 2008 of the association’s small grants fund to finance small educational and social projects. Members of the group, including Svend, visited Liberia in 2009. This may have been Svend’s last visit to Liberia captured in a photograph with him in a tête-à-tête with President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

There are many dimensions to Svend’s scholarly work on Liberia. Apart from the fieldwork he did in Cape Mount County for his dissertation, he started early collecting a wide variety of materials on Liberia. Probably as a result of his father’s work and high regard in Liberian circles, Svend was allowed entry in 1965 into the Liberian National Archives then housed with the Department of State (now Foreign Ministry) under the leadership of the late Mr. Augustine Jallah. This entailed some controversy as the unorganized documents contained some classified materials that were not open to the public. Nevertheless Svend gained access and proceeded with the cooperation of Jallah to organize the documents. The late Professor Tom Shick later produced a listing and categorizing of the work Svend had initiated. Svend copied perhaps the bulk of the documents dating to Liberia’s founding circumstances in the early 19th century up to and including the early 1960s. This would become the core of his Liberia collection, but he was far from done. From that date perhaps up to the outbreak of civil war in 1990, Svend visited Liberia frequently, collecting quantities of government published documents such as the annual reports of the various ministries and other government agencies. One could say that he became obsessed with securing absolutely all he could on Liberia, resorting at times to buying expensive out-of-print items on the Internet. It is these materials, his books and other documents, that he donated in 1997 to Indiana University. The Svend E. Holsoe Collection includes copies of the Liberian government Archive Documents between 1824-1983; extensive genealogical records, including analyses and family trees developed from these records; political, institutional, social and cultural surveys from the 1980s Liberia Rural Radio Project; field notes and oral history tapes of Vai and Bandi research; Vai script materials, and slides and photos spanning decades and covering many geographical areas and activities.

In the late 1990s, discouraged by Liberia’s protracted civil war, Svend took a long hiatus from his research. But he could not long stay away from what might be called his adopted homeland. About two years ago he sent an additional 100 boxes of the Holsoe Collection to Indiana University that he had collected/produced after the first large consignment went to Indiana in 1997. Due to massive destruction of the Liberian government archive during the civil war, the Indiana’s Holsoe Collection may contain the only surviving copies of important Liberian state papers and historical and cultural documents.
Perhaps one of Svend’s last major public addresses on Liberia was his testimony on September 2, 2008 in Monrovia at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Hearings. He titled his paper “Troubled Boundaries,” as he spoke to what he considered an environment of tension induced by cultural dualities/contradictions that the old regime could no longer contain. He opined the necessity that any new post-war political structure acknowledges “regional political and social differences.” (*See below a partial list of the scholarly publications which reflect not only Svend’s intellectual talents, but also his passion for Liberia’s past and future.)

A decent, kind, and friendly man, Svend had many interests, hobbies, and friends in his long and fruitful life. His scholarly interests extended to West Africa, Africa in general, and the genealogy and history of slaves and slavery in the Virgin Islands. He was knowledgeable about art and opera, poetry and cinema. But it is the Liberia dimension of his work that absorbed the bulk of his time and talent. (*see partial publication list below) He was also a humanitarian who believed in giving back to sources that elevated him, and he said as much to some of his Liberian friends and acquaintances. It was perhaps this character trait that led him, following his fieldwork in Liberia, to so completely devote himself to the collection of massive Liberian documents and artifacts.

In a sense Svend’s Liberia legacy is three-fold. The archives he created and gave to posterity are of monumental importance for those archives preserve a huge part of the story of the Liberian past, that remains critical to charting a future course, and which exist nowhere else. Svend’s second legacy is the Liberian Studies Association and the Liberian Studies Journal. There were attempts to undertake such enterprises in Liberia itself and elsewhere, but the efforts were ad hoc and short-lived, whereas the LSA and the LSJ have endured for half a century and seem solidly positioned for a bright future. The last though not the least part of Svend’s legacy concerns his ethnographic work not only among Vai-Liberians but other Liberian ethnic communities, inclusive of the cross-border groups. Svend has here initiated important scientific analysis that awaits vetting, and expansion by alternative perspectives from scholars who are themselves a part of the ethnicities under study, as well as by a wider community of Liberians in general.
Svend has made his contribution and made a valiant start. The challenge remains for Liberian scholars schooled in the various disciplines such as anthropology, political science, history and sociology to now step up to the plate and deepen our understanding of the country both in its particularities and its generalities – regional Liberia and national Liberia.

**Thank you Svend; Rest in Peace!**

But let’s not bury Svend’s story yet! His broad-based career and his myriad community-building enterprises did indeed engage a great deal of his focus, but he also had a boundless energy for an abundant and infectious joy in life that reverberated wherever he went, throughout his life, even though he battled cancer several times, and fended off several other health challenges beginning in the 1990s. Along the way, Svend-the-only-child acquired Emma Lapsansky, the sister-he-had-never-had. When Emma moved into the house next door to Svend in West Philadelphia 1979, an immediate bond was formed, with Emma’s toddler first falling in love with Svend’s dog, Lucky. Soon Emma and Svend discovered that Svend’s parents, and Emma’s aunt, had been Americans-in-service-to-the-Liberian government at the same time in the 1950s. The deal was sealed when Svend and Emma discovered their overlapping research interests, and began a monthly seminar, the “Chester Avenue Historians” which consisted of a dozen or so scholars who met to encourage and critique each others’ work for almost two decades. Lapsansky’s soon became the go-to place where Svend (and Svend’s long-time partner John McCollum, who had moved from UDel to teach English at the high school where Emma’s children attended!) would celebrate holidays and birthdays and kids’ graduations. Sometimes the Danish cousins came to join the family fun, too.

When Svend became ill and retired from “professoring” in the mid-nineties, Emma and her husband, along with friends and colleagues from UDel and the “African studies circuit” created a “Circle of Care” to support him with meals, transportation, entertainment, research assistance (Svend never stopped writing!)—even managing his finances for several months as his liver was failing, and finally shut down completely for a few days….

But Svend bounced BACK! And the “Circle of Care became a high-spirited monthly supper club for more than a year, in the capacious Lansdowne home and garden where Svend had made his home since 1987 when he moved there to be close to Emma and her family—which had now merged into Svend’s family.
The “supper club” and other gatherings were great fun, because Svend knew how to love: he loved people, ideas, conversation, and food—and for him the combination was explosively energizing. With John McCollum, he held frequent dinner parties—under the watchful eyes of Svend’s collection of Yoruban masks which hung on the dining-room walls. To be precise, Svend and John hosted those dinners only when they were not zipping about the globe, enjoying art and music and bookstores in Europe, West Africa, Asia, South America, the Caribbean, and various parts of the U.S. While retaining their home base in Lansdowne, they bought a house in Kenya to which they made periodic for several years, then sold at a discount to a heritage organization in Lamu. They bought a house in Florida, which they rented out to their friends when they themselves were not entertaining in it. They sold that, and bought a cottage in northern Pennsylvania, which they stocked with firewood and CD’s for quick getaways. When John died at the end of 1996, after a short but intense illness during which Svend was his attentive care-giver, Emma helped a devastated Svend spend many months sorting through John’s rich collection of books and art, to find perfect homes for each orphaned artifact.

Then Svend turned his attention to lovingly guiding his mother through her final illness, learning how to take an old lady shopping for clothing and jewelry and underwear, and how to discern the foods and activities that would give her the most comfort. After her death, a saddened Svend once again distributed orphaned artworks: this time from his mother’s oeuvre. Then, as Emma’s husband’s health began to falter, Svend was a consistent support, assisting with practical tasks, and being a frequent and loyal dinner guest.

And it is true: “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.” By the early 2000’s, when Svend was ready to open himself to a new love, a mutual friend introduced him to Reuben Amollo and a whole new adventure began! With Reuben there was opera and travel and laughter, and an introduction to Reuben’s amazing skill at clothing design! Svend—the artist’s son—loved to watch Reuben work, and delighted at the beauty Reuben creates with his agile mind and his deft hands. The couple bought a co-op apartment in New York, so that Reuben could be close to the fashion district. Discovering that the coop community was in need of direction and management, Svend took over an
officer’s role, arranging for deferred maintenance, and cleaning up economic records that had been “casually” managed. Soon, however, the new couple sold

When Svend and Reuben married in New York in 2013, Emma hosted a reception in Lansdowne to celebrate this joyous event.

the New York apartment, and returned full-time to Lansdowne, where friends and music and Reuben’s basement studio co-existed with the scholar’s research and writing.
But, Svend, the intellectual man, now fully retired from “professoring,” needed new projects to feed his lifelong desire to make the world a better place. So he teamed up with historian George Tyson and the St. Croix Heritage Society to petition the Danish government for a grant to digitize the slave records from the Danish colonial era in St. Croix, so that modern-day St. Croix residents (and other researchers) could gain access to their heritage, which might be lost forever since they are written in an archaic Danish format that few modern researchers can read. As a result of this collaboration, and many hundreds of hours of labor from Svend’s friend and technical wizard Aswani Kidake, thousands of never-before-accessible demographic materials are seeing the light of day. And the project in St. Croix gave Svend yet another opportunity to nurture—and to be nurtured by—a community. As a result of his many visits to St. Croix, deep friendships grew with historian friend George Tyson, with Heritage Landmark Director Sonia Dow, and with many others, as Svend glowed with the excitement of seeing historical justice done.

Marriage well-suited Svend, and his final years were blessed by the companionship of his loving and loyal soulmate. Even amid innumerable doctor visits and hospital stays, Reuben and Svend enjoyed movies and theatre, and long laughter-filled drives; and even after he could no longer enjoy food, Svend still enjoyed “dinner” with friends!
Out to dinner with a Danish friend.

Despite increasing physical challenges and pain, Svend dedicated himself to one last “community-building” project: the little school that is under the care of Lansdowne Friends’ Meeting. Svend admired the school’s mission to be truly culturally-diverse, truly economically-accessible, and expansively creative in its curriculum. So he threw himself into assisting with the economic, physical-plant, and personnel “makeover” that Lansdowne Friends School (LFS) required in the wake of the widespread economic turmoil of 2008. Hundreds of hours of committee-work—some of it literally held at his sick-bed side—allowed Svend to be among the team of “midwives” who attended the rebirth of LFS.

A long and fertile life, lived to its fullest. Svend, your spouse, your family, and your multiple communities will miss you, but will take comfort from the fact that you’ll be “making community” in some other corner of the universe!
Among his numerous scholarly publications on Liberia are:


2. *A Standardization of Liberian Ethnic Nomenclature*, Institute for Liberian Studies, 1979


6. A number of unpublished manuscripts including “A Biography of Edward James Roye”, Fifth President of Liberia.

7. Liberian Studies Monograph Series.


9. *What Liberians Call Themselves and Each Other*, Depauw University, African Studies Center, 1970

10. More than two dozen other articles related to Liberia for numerous publications
I am honored to speak on behalf of the Anthropology Department at the University of Delaware, at this celebration of the life of our colleague, Dr. Svend Holsoe.

Svend and I met quite inauspiciously. I literally bumped into him as I rushed in to begin my interview for an assistant professorship in Anthropology at Delaware. He was my first appointment, for which I am forever thankful. Svend spoke with passion about his work and was sincerely interested in learning about mine. We had an engaging conversation rather than an ‘interview’, which allowed me to relax and realize that I wasn’t facing a day of questions about the differences between Levi-Straussian and Geertzian theory.

That meeting set the tone for your working relationship over the 6 years that we were colleagues in the Department. Svend mentored and supported me generously as I worked toward promotion and tenure, giving excellent advice and helping keep things in perspective. I echo what I have heard and read repeatedly as we remember Svend, that he was a good and generous colleague.

Svend had joined the Anthropology Department in 1970 to help develop a graduate program in comparative, historical, sociocultural anthropology of Latin America and Africa. During his quarter-century tenure in the Department, Svend modeled interdisciplinary scholarship. He was at once ethnohistorian, ethnographer, archivist, multilingual linguist, bibliographer, and advocate. With these skills, and an intellectual humility uncommon in academia, Svend worked for the future, not his own aggrandizement. The result is the extraordinary Liberian archives he assembled and donated to Indiana University for preservation, to ensure future scholars and others who care about Liberian and African Diaspora history would have a record to return to, ask new questions of, and reassess previous interpretations, including those of his own scholarship on the Vai, Manding, and Kpelle peoples.

Through his teaching, Svend introduced thousands of undergraduate students to anthropology, to understanding all cultures on their own terms, and to respecting human differences and diversity. For most, early in their undergraduate careers, anthropological perspectives could shatter what they thought they knew about
themselves and the larger world. Svend helped them expose their ethnocentrism, and come to terms with the fact that everyone thought their culture was ‘better,’ which by definition meant they didn’t agree that the students’ culture was.

When I met Svend, he was immersed in the study of Danish imperialism in the Caribbean, specifically plantation society and African enslavement in the Virgin Islands. I remember well his excitement and absolute delight when he discovered that the records existed for him to trace individual African people from their homeland to a St. Croix plantation and to their descendants today.

He was founding member of The Virgin Islands Social History Associates, an educational organization established to research and document the social and cultural history of the islands. One of Svend’s primary focuses was the St. Croix African Roots Project, which completed micro-studies of the St. Croix population over the course of the more than 175 years of Danish Rule. The project’s purpose, “to give identity, humanity and agency to enslaved and otherwise marginalized individuals who have hitherto been seen as silent objects of history,” captures Svend’s life purpose as well.

Svend’s life and work were guided by a deeply held belief that everyone has a right to know her past, because it makes her who she is. That knowledge can be liberating, and it can help empower those who have been ‘silenced.’ Today the Anthropology faculty is recommitting to a founding premise of the Department, that anthropologists can make a difference in the struggle for social justice. That is Svend’s legacy at the University of Delaware and beyond.

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