

One thing at a time

Sperry wouldn't let Nobel prize disrupt his camping trip

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OBERLIN — Roger Sperry discovered he had won the Nobel Prize in medicine 2½ weeks ago while camping on an isolated beach beyond La Paz, Mexico.

"We were listening to the news on the radio and I choked on my breakfast when I heard," he said.

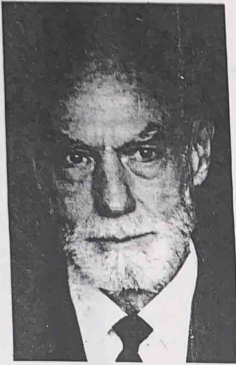
When Sperry and his wife, Norma, didn't return immediately, everyone assumed they didn't know about the prize. But Roger Sperry is simply not the kind of man to let a Nobel Prize ruin a good camping trip.

A professor of psychology at the California Institute of Technology since 1954, Sperry was awarded the prize because of his original research into the different functions of the brain's hemispheres.

NOW 68, Sperry earned a doctorate in zoology at the University of Chicago in 1941. He then spent a couple of years as a research fellow at Harvard. But to look at Sperry's undergraduate work at Oberlin College, not even a top-notch fortune-teller could have forecast such an auspicious scientific career.

Sperry graduated from Oberlin in 1935 with a bachelor's degree in English. He was also an extremely good athlete; along with being captain of the varsity basketball team, he played varsity baseball, football, and track.

His English degree and general liberal arts background have been beneficial to Sperry, but his undergraduate athletics are



ROGER SPERRY

...brain research paid off

almost a source of embarrassment.

"I guess you could say it (a liberal arts degree) helped me to see the 'big picture,' to put things in perspective and to see their humanistic implications," said Sperry. But of his athletic career he remarked, "I have a hard time living it down."

THE SWITCH from English to psychology, the subject in which Sperry received his master's degree from Oberlin in 1937, was made largely under the influence of one man — Professor Raymond Stetson.

An internationally renowned expert in motor phonetics, Stetson was also chairman of the psychology department. Sperry

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became his assistant in the Oberlin Oscillographic Laboratory where they made recordings of the electric vibrations in speech and music.

"Stetson really got me started in brain research and mind-to-brain problems and then gave me a good start in the interpretation of scientific procedures," Sperry said. "I would say the perspective I got from Stetson has never been topped or outgrown."

According to Fredrick Artz, an Oberlin emeritus professor of history, Stetson rarely extolled anyone, but he praised Sperry "to the skies."

HAVING LIVED here seven years, Sperry said, "I enjoyed Oberlin, but I have so many fond memories that I wouldn't know where to begin to talk about them." He last visited the campus in the late 1970's to give several lectures.

Sperry spent most of his twenties in school. "I needed an additional year of study to make the transition from psychology to zoology (his doctoral field)," he said. "I was beginning to be called the perennial graduate student."

Sperry's research at Caltech has demonstrated that the left and right hemispheres of the human brain have different and

sometimes practically independent functions. Much of his research has been done with patients whose brains have been surgically split in order to alleviate a severe form of epilepsy.

Sperry found that the left hemisphere of the brain is the home of logical analysis, mathematical skills, and language and speech. The deciding committee of the Nobel Assembly, in reference to Sperry's work, described it as "the more aggressive, dominant, 'executive' half of the brain."

THE RIGHT hemisphere can only perform simple mathematical functions and understand the meaning of one-syllable nouns, not adjectives or adverbs. But the right hemisphere is superior to the left in terms of spatial perceptions, concrete thinking, and musical interpretation. Sperry once called the right hemisphere "a passive, silent passenger who leaves the driving of behavior mainly to the left hemisphere."

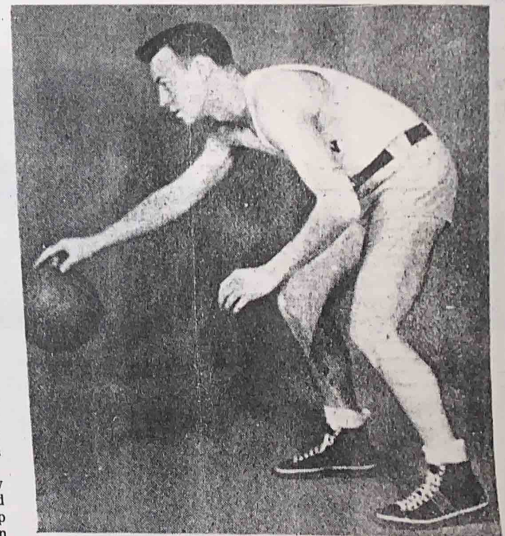
Sperry described his most recent research as "the development of a new technique for lateralizing visual input to the left or right hemisphere," but he added, "I myself am more concerned in recent years with the humanistic and philosophic implications of the mind-brain relationship."

"The great hope for tomorrow lies in a fusion of science and religion, each having to give up some errors of the past. Religion would have to give up its reliance on a dualistic world view and

science would have to give up its materialistic bent and replace it with a wholist-mentalist paradigm."

BORN IN Hartford, Conn., in 1913, Sperry now lives with his wife in Pasadena, Calif. They have two children, Glenn and Janeth, who is a freshman at Oberlin this year.

The Nobel Prize for medicine was divided between Sperry and a pair of researchers from Harvard who have been doing studies on the way the brain processes visual messages. Sperry was given \$90,000, half the total award. He is planning to attend the official Nobel ceremonies in Stockholm, Sweden, the first week of December.



SPERRY WAS captain of the Oberlin College basketball team in 1935.