Dear John,

As you may know, Stanford and the broader geology community lost an influential and greatly admired figure with the passing of Professor Robert R. Compton last year. Bob was a talented scientist, legendary teacher, and generous mentor who started many a Stanford student on the path to a fulfilling career in geology.

I am therefore pleased to share that a group of Bob’s former students and colleagues have chosen to honor his legacy by creating an endowment in his name at the Stanford School of Earth, Energy & Environmental Sciences. Established with a generous lead gift from Brad (’77, MS ’79) and Carol Mills, the Robert R. Compton Field Geology Research Fund will support the geological fieldwork of individual graduate students doing field-intensive studies while pursuing master’s degrees and PhD thesis work.

Robert R. Compton was born July 21, 1922, and grew up in the Los Angeles area, where he enjoyed exploring the desert on family trips. He came to Stanford as an undergraduate, receiving his bachelor’s degree in 1943 and joining the faculty of the geology department the following year. Despite serving in the military from 1944 to 1946, he earned his PhD from the university in 1949.

In 1947, he joined Professor Ben Page in leading the Stanford Geological Survey, the field course that has defined the undergraduate experience of nearly every Stanford geology major. He took over the field course entirely in 1950, breaking in new geologists each year on unmapped regions of California, Nevada, Utah, or Idaho. He liked to tell the story of one trip to Utah, where his students “turned the geology of the Cordillera region upside down...finding fossils where no fossils should be found—in Precambrian Rocks.” Even the U.S. Geological Survey didn’t believe it at first, but came to admire their work.

Bob’s textbook, *Geology in the Field*, remains the definitive “how-to” manual for field-based studies, even now. Revised by Bob shortly after his retirement, it includes his hand-drawn illustrations. Bob eventually stepped back from teaching the field course, but in addition to being a gifted teacher of petrology, he had a special talent for inspiring new geologists in his
Introduction to Geology courses. He was generous with his time, attending to his students in the class, in the lab, and in the field on their individual projects. His students worked hard; each was required to write an original paper based on their fieldwork. But his door was always open.

Painting was Bob’s other passion, one he cultivated with courses at the San Francisco Art Institute and elsewhere. Retiring early in 1981, he became quite a prolific artist, displaying his work in several shows and on his website (www.robertrcompton.com.) Just as he brought the eye of an artist to his geology fieldwork, he brought his passion for geology to his art. Naturally, his most common subjects were desert landscapes and mountain forms. He described the relationship this way:

“These years of geologic studies in the desert led to an understanding and feeling for the landscapes: for their remarkable colors, their structures, and for the broad and deep space around them.”

I hope you will join me in contributing to the Robert R. Compton Field Geology Research Fund in celebration of Bob’s career and his impact on so many of us who, quite literally, followed him into the field.

With regards,

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