By Ted Gup

Adventures (and misadventures) of Watson Fellows

They can go anywhere, and this little-known foundation will foot the bill. It may sound like gallivanting, but grueling is more like it

Michael McGuire / Courier Gazette

While other seniors at Pitzer College in Claremont, California, fretted about the job market, typed up résumés or flipped through catalogs for graduate school, Gail Horwitz had her eye on a bigger prize. She had stumbled across a fellowship program—"the Watson," it was called—that each year sends several dozen graduates anywhere in the world in pursuit of their dreams. Horwitz, a waifish figure all of five feet tall and 100 pounds, is an altruistic spirit who devoted her high school summers to digging latrines in remote villages of Ecuador and the Dominican Republic, and who later worked with Chicago's inner-city youth. She drafted a fellowship proposal outlining how she would work among leper colonies in Nepal and India, and examine the effects of isolation on the healthy children raised in those colonies.

About that same time, David Casagrande was busy at Wesleyan University, in Middletown, Connecticut, cobbling together his own proposal for a Watson fellowship. His interest was in developmental economics, but his passion was coffee. The grandson of a Brazilian coffee trader, Casagrande wanted to work on a Costa Rican plantation, then move on to Ecuador and finally to Papua New Guinea, studying the international coffee trade around the world.

Bobby Zirkin was a senior poli sci major at Johns Hopkins University. An incurable gym rat, he saw the Watson as a chance to pursue his one abiding love, basketball. His vision of the perfect year was to jet about between London, Brussels and Rome, trying to persuade Western Europe's colleges that what they really needed to do was organize the Continent's first international collegiate basketball league—the European Union's answer to the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

Heather Tarpley, a biology major at Davidson College, in Davidson, North Carolina, wanted to go into veterinary medicine—not to treat dogs and cats but wildlife. Her Watson fantasy was to disappear into the bush of Kenya, Madagascar and Australia for a year to study owls.

In the spring of 1993, these four dreamers received the long-awaited letters (postmarked "Providence," fittingly enough) granting their wishes. "I can't believe they're letting me get away with this!" marveled Tarpley as she packed her bags. "I feel almost guilty."

Unique among fellowships, the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship last year celebrated its 25th anniversary. Although it has dispensed some $17 million to 1,700 grateful college seniors, it remains little known. The Watson is content to go quietly about its business while the Rhodes, Guggenheim, Fulbright and MacArthur programs garner all of the attention. Unabashedly eccentric, it revels in taking risks as an expression of its faith in the young. Most prominent fellowships reward scholarship and stratospheric grade-point averages. The Watson recognizes creativity, resourcefulness and, above all, personal passion—the "fire in the belly," as foundation patron Tom Watson jr. put it. And, beyond quarterly updates and a final report, the foundation asks virtually nothing of its fellows in return. Here's the check, now be gone.

Himself a Watson Fellow in 1972, the author (left) got his lost passport back thanks to Robert Crooks.

Watson Fellows have been dispatched to the very edges of the world in pursuit of everything from voodoo to vampires, tarot cards to tango, cake decorating to stand-up comedy. One blithe spirit spent a year traveling through Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia and Paraguay on a cross-cultural study of shoeshine boys. Several fellows have retraced the voyages of Charles Darwin. Another fellow had the chutzpah to go to Italy and redesign the French horn. This past year's adventurers, numbering 65, are chasing all manner of dreams, from studying the native ponies of the North Sea Islands to examining the role of drumming in Mali as a way of passing cultural heritage on to children.

I can't help but be a little envious. In 1972, I too was a Watson Fellow, about to embark on my own inspired if

Thomas Watson jr., who started foundation, was happy to be alive after surviving a scare in his old biplane.

Photographs by Bruce Caines

Fred Fenton studied wildlife in South America in 1977 (above). Today, after a detour in law, he's pursuing a career in medicine.

somewhat harebrained scheme. Back then, as a senior at Brandeis University, I was devoted to two things—writing and manual labor. From summer jobs as a jackhammer operator, dress cutter and dishwasher, I had come to appreciate the satisfaction of working with my hands and the street wisdom of those with whom I labored. It was a welcome balance to the rarefied air of academia. As I was a classics major, my readings had been firmly anchored in 2,000-year-old literature and history. So my senior year, after spotting a notice on a campus bulletin board, I sent in my Watson application.

I imagined myself as an itinerant laborer and writer in Italy and Greece—the revered seats of antiquity—and in Ireland where, as a junior, I had studied at Trinity College. I proposed to follow the harvests of salmon in Ireland, grapes in Italy and olives in Greece, then chronicle my odyssey in poetry and prose.

My first attempt at a fellowship year was a bust, but it did have its moments. I recall standing in the rain on a road outside Dublin, my thumb outstretched, seeking a ride to virtually anywhere. A tiny Austin Mini stopped and took me in. The driver was a farmer from the west—Ballybunion, County Kerry—who was on his way home, having left his ailing mother in a Dublin hospital. He and his three brothers, he said, were in need of help—cleaning, cooking, farm chores. I jumped at the opportunity. A few hours later I was employed by the brothers O'Neil, living in a pup tent on the edge of a dizzying precipice that faced west toward America, and walking through dew-wet grass in rubber boots stuffed with hay to absorb the moisture.

As it turned out, I was not able to write much. My fingers were swollen and bandaged—nicked from unrolling bales of barbed wire—and by evening, I barely had the strength to blow out the lantern that hung by my tent. A few weeks later I told the O'Neils that I would be returning to America. I needed time to recover and get my bearings. It was a Sunday morning, and we packed ourselves into that tiny Mini, they on their way to mass, I on my way to Shannon Airport. When we came to the main road, one of the brothers pressed something into my hand as I was stepping out of the car—a wad of wrinkled bills. I tried to refuse it. They had so little money. For weeks I had seen no meat on the table, not even a rasher of bacon. Still, they insisted—and then sputtered off to church.

I returned to this country discouraged and disoriented. I telephoned the Watson's then director, Dan Arnaud. I apologized for bailing out after only a few months and offered to give back the money. Instead of chastising me, he invited me to Providence to spend the evening. That night, over a bottle of chianti and talk of Catullus (he had taught classics), I resolved that I would defer my Watson for a year and then try it again, which I did. The next time around I accomplished what I had set out to do. I worked, I wrote, and in the end I discovered how I would make a living.

Set up to honor the memory of the late Thomas J.

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Watson sr., IBM's visionary creator, the Watson Fellowship applies no financial criteria to candidates. They may be wealthy or poor. The modest amount—$15,000 for single fellows, $21,000 for those accompanied by a dependent, and all of it taxable—is intended to ward off opportunists seeking a cushy postgraduate tour. Situated on Angell Street—after moving from, honest now, Benefit Street—in Providence, Rhode Island, the Watson foundation is one of the leanest of charitable organizations: a former fellow serving as director, who sits for a two-year term, and an assistant director. The endowment's trust is more than $40 million.

Grant stipulations are few: don't return to the United States during the fellowship year and don't affiliate with organizations. The latter restriction is intended to preserve the freedom of fellows to follow up on serendipitous possibilities; it has the side benefit of forcing them to develop self-reliance. To be eligible, candidates must be seniors at one of 50 participating colleges and universities. The schools selected are among the top-ranking liberal arts institutions but small enough to know each student. The list includes Amherst, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Swarthmore, Oberlin and Rice.

Each year approximately 900 seniors apply. Colleges screen the candidates' proposals and conduct in-depth interviews. The nominees—some 180 in all—are then interviewed by the Watson foundation director or outside alumni interviewers.

The occupations of former fellows are as diverse as the projects they pursued. Count among these six farmers (three of whom note they are organic farmers), a candle designer, a commercial fisherman, a boat builder, "an entrepreneur and dream healer," a tutor to the royal family of Jordan, an opera singer, a mountain-climbers' guide, a designer of "virtual reality" equipment, and a smattering of priests, rectors and pastors. Fellows have made their presences felt in the arts, education, medicine and social work. They write for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, the *Irish Times* and the *New Yorker*. Add to this motley collection a judge, a division chief of the World Bank, the president of Scripps College, a commissioner of the New York State Tax Tribunal and, oh yes, a guitarist for the B-52s.

To outsiders, it may sound like a boondoggle, but most fellows work long hours and endure profound bouts of loneliness, self-doubt and disorientation. I know I did. Many express a sense of guilt that they are

Retracing Darwin's voyage during his Watson year, Jim Affolter took a side trip in Peru's Andes. Currently he is research director at Georgia's Botanical Gardens.

An ocean-liner buff, David Powers set sail for England on the *QE2* (above) at the start of his fellowship year. Combining vocation and avocation, he now works for Cunard.

not living up to the foundation's expectations, to which foundation directors respond reassuringly, "We have no expectations." Fellowship years are often punctuated by crises, some demanding midcourse corrections.

Even my second attempt was not calamity-free. I shall never forget the train ride I took from Venice on my way to London. I reached Milan easily enough, chatting with a British traveler who sat across from me. His name was Robert Crooks. Arriving in Milan, I thought that if the stopover was long enough, I would grab a bite at the station, then reboard. The conductor assured me there was time—at least that's what I could swear he said.

I got off the train, purchased an apple from a vendor and returned to track seven. But the train was gone—and with it my backpack, passport, manuscripts and clothes, and $5,000 in travelers checks. Worse yet, it was an express. Next stop, the English Channel. I had the equivalent of a quarter in my pocket, no identification and no train ticket.

I sought out the first person I saw in uniform, who assured me—at least I thought he did—that my train had been switched to track six and was just now pulling out. I hopped aboard, enjoying a moment's relief—until I realized it was not my train. I was bound for Germany.

Over the next two days and nights I jumped on and off innumerable trains, begged for food and hid in darkened lavatories, having unscrewed the light bulbs, until the conductor had made his rounds checking for tickets. Three days later I reached the Channel, utterly exhausted. There, waiting at the station, was Robert Crooks. He had gone through my pack, seen my ticket to London and decided to wait for me—with all my belongings intact. I have a photograph of the two of us standing together, with me gratefully displaying my lost-but-found passport (p. 69).

Such harrowing experiences are commonplace among Watson Fellows. Fred Fenton studied electric fish in South America. The first crisis came early: he was mistakenly arrested by the Venezuelan secret police, dragged from a restaurant, knocked down, thrown into a truck and strip-searched at gunpoint. He was released the next day without explanation. Later, while wading in a tributary of the Oronoco River, Fenton stepped on a freshwater stingray. It felt as if someone had shoved a nail into his foot. The wound festered, and Fenton became delirious. Eventually the injury caused him to cut his fellowship year short. Recently, after a detour as a lawyer, Fenton graduated from medical school.

Roy Hodges, a 1987 fellow and graduate of Johns Hopkins, was arrested and jailed after he was involved in a car accident in the United Arab Emirate of Sharjah. His cell was so small that only half of the 30 inmates assigned to it could lie down at any one time. No one else spoke English. Within hours, Hodges had been befriended by several inmates, who shared their yogurt with him. He, in turn, taught them to sing "American Pie." Hodges was released the next day after paying a fine. "Spending that night with those guys gave me a real insight into human nature," he says. "My whole Watson was like that." Hodges' project

In 1987 Roy Hodges took a swim with a trio of Arab boys (above). Currently he works as a building consultant for a Saudi ministry.

was a study of the impact of technology on desert communities. His current job has him working with a Saudi Arabian ministry on the environmentally sound construction of a new building.

Many Watson projects lead to careers. At the age of 8, David L. Powers sailed from England to the United States with his family aboard an ocean liner, the *Empress of Canada*. "I can still clearly remember it," he says. "The waves, the storm—and here you are in this huge floating hotel in the middle of the North Atlantic." Ocean liners became something of an obsession with him. In 1983, as a senior at Colby College in Maine, he applied for a Watson, proposing to examine the significance of ocean liners in maritime history. "It just clicked," says Powers. "I knew this would be perfect." He spent the next year touring European maritime museums and shipyards. Today, he's international sales account manager for the Cunard Line and is completing a book on ocean liners.

Twenty years ago, Jim Affolter was a senior at Williams College, in Williamstown, Massachusetts. "I had this epiphany of retracing Charles Darwin's voyage," he recalls, "and as soon as I had the idea, I had this feeling it was going to happen—like a piece of the puzzle had fallen into place." By ship, by boat, by plane, by thumb, Affolter retraced Darwin's journey, from the Falklands to Tierra del Fuego to the Galápagos Islands—all courtesy of the Watson. After his South American trek, he spent months in the Darwin archives at England's Cambridge University, holding in his hands Darwin's handwritten journals and correspondence. The year emboldened Affolter to pursue his own interests in natural history. He went on to get a PhD in botany and is now director of research at Georgia's State Botanical Gardens, at the University of Georgia at Athens.

Patrick Irwin graduated from Iowa's Grinnell College in 1977, then spent his Watson interviewing expatriate jazz musicians in Europe—men like Dexter Gordon, Mal Waldron, Steve Lacy and the avant-garde composer John Cage. "I went over as a writer and a historian," Irwin recalls, "but being in the presence of those musicians made me realize that's what I was, too. I'd been playing music all my life but didn't think I could do it professionally." Today he plays guitar and keyboard for the B-52s.

Then again, there are those whose fellowships bear little connection to their subsequent careers. In 1975 Andrew B. Zimmerman was an English major at Haverford College, in Haverford, Pennsylvania. He spent his Watson traveling with European circuses and writing a novel. Today he works in New York City as a partner at Coopers and Lybrand, the management-consulting firm. William Fischer was a philosophy major at St. John's College in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but his Watson project was a study of the evolution of the medieval sword. After

that, he worked with computers at the Los Alamos labs and is now pursuing a PhD in molecular biology.

It is one of the abiding ironies of the fellowship that it embraces eccentricity and yet memorializes a man who is remembered for his orthodoxy. It was Tom Watson sr. who instituted the notorious IBM dress code requiring stiff-collared white shirts—a code that endured for 30 years until his son repealed it after a physician cautioned that the collars might restrict circulation. The junior Watson helped make IBM one of the world's most profitable corporations; he also served as U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union during the Carter Administration and as a Smithsonian Regent from 1967 to 1979. His father, who extolled discovery, had helped underwrite Adm. Richard E. Byrd's South Pole expedition.

It is no accident that fellowships sometimes go to students with mediocre grades. "I was a terrible student," Watson, a graduate of Rhode Island's Brown University, told me shortly before he died last December. "I couldn't take that stuff off of the page and get it into my head. I took American history three times at Brown."

Watson seemed unfazed that no former fellows are in Congress or working as senior officials at the White House. "Whether or not they go into government does not mean a hill of beans to me as long as they're useful citizens," he said. Nor did he feel the need to defend quirky projects. "There's a fine line between eccentrics and geniuses. If you're a little ahead of your time, you're an eccentric, and if you're too late, you're a failure, but if you hit it right on the head, you're a genius. So I have never worried much about eccentricity."

The foundation's first director, Robert O. Schulze, had been a dean at Brown. Watson credited him with translating a raw idea to invest in youth into a concrete plan of action.

In some ways, the circle Watson and Schulze began was completed with Tori Haring-Smith, a former Watson Fellow who now teaches English and theater at Brown. When Haring-Smith was growing up in the Midwest, her mother read to her from an obscure book by John Sack entitled *Report From Practically Nowhere.* It was about a journalist's travels to the 13 smallest countries in the world. The stories left an indelible impression. In 1974, as a senior at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia, Haring-Smith proposed to the Watson foundation that she be allowed to visit those same countries. "I wrote down the one thing I had always wanted to do and I did it. How incredibly magnanimous to say, 'You don't have to give anything back'—to say, 'I invest in you.'"

The smallest country in the world when Sack wrote, Haring-Smith recalls, was the Sovereign Military Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Rhodes and Malta—S.M.O.M., for short—a nation so tiny it existed within a three-story building in downtown Rome and had room left over to rent out the first floor. Only three people lived in the country: the president, the secretary and the treasurer. Other nations were not so easy to reach. When Haring-Smith was a mere 30 miles from the Lilliputian former

Tori Haring-Smith, an aficionado of tiny countries, visited palace of Swat (above) in 1974. Now a professor at Brown, she likes exploring another small place, Nantucket.

nation of Amb in the Himalayas, the Tarbela Dam flooded the country and relegated it for a time to the bottom of a lake. Haring-Smith was barred from visiting another minuscule nation on her list. Athos, an autonomous theocracy in Greece, turned out to be an all-male monastic community that prohibited women.

The difficulties she encountered on her journey to "practically nowhere" taught Haring-Smith a lot about resourcefulness. "I have a feeling you could put me anywhere on this globe and I would find a way to survive," she says. "I don't think I had that at all before I left."

More than 20 years have passed since I set out on my Watson odyssey. That's time enough to come to some conclusions. Much of what I learned about Ireland, Italy and Greece has dimmed, and the year's crises long ago lost their threatening edge. Still, much remains: the craving for exploration, the willingness to take risks, the belief that setbacks may be opportunities in disguise. In a sense, my Watson year became the model for my life. As a journalist, I have continually sought out what might be called mini-Watsons—self-contained projects that enable me to learn about the world and myself. In recent years I have tagged polar bears off the Siberian coast, tracked the illegal trade in ivory from Nairobi to Tokyo, crawled on my belly through West Virginia coal mines and visited remote mountain villages along the Burma-China border. Each episode has been grist for a story. More important, each has allowed me to experience again the exultation of discovery that I first encountered as a Watson Fellow.

Pat Irwin, guitarist and keyboard player with the B-52s, spent his Watson year conducting interviews in Europe for a book on expatriate jazz musicians. That convinced him he could become a professional, too.