Letters

North Dakota Geological Specimen in Nanking

That the Nanking University geology department has among its "relics of pre-1949 days" a rock specimen labeled "Ordovician Sandstone, North Dakota" is of considerable interest for several reasons. (See Oldham's article, "Science in mainland China: A tourist's impression," 12 Feb., p. 7.) The Ordovician is not known to crop out in North Dakota, but in the extreme northeast corner of the state it does come fairly close to the surface. If the specimen is from an outcrop, it could represent a find of considerable significance, a locality where the bedrock pierces an overburden of some 200 feet of Pleistocene glacial till. On the other hand, if the rock sample is from the subsurface, it is either from a mine or a deep well, and presumably from a well core rather than the ordinary cuttings of drill tools.

Since there are no mines or deep excavations in the northeast part of North Dakota (and elsewhere the Ordovician is at depths as great as 16,000 feet) it follows that the chip seen by Oldham must be from a deep well core. Prior to 1949 there were only a few wells in the state which had penetrated to the Ordovician, and most of these were either deep water wells or the sort of promotional oil tests drilled with marginal financing. In neither of these circumstances is it normal to core; this is a costly and time-consuming operation. There were, however, in 1949 a scant half-dozen deep oil tests which had been drilled by major firms and which possibly had been cored in at least part of the Ordovician. When a company goes to the trouble and expense of drilling and coring in a region as remote from oil country as North Dakota was in those days, it is not customary for them to release the data paid for so dearly; rather the well becomes a "tight hole" from which only the most skillful spies can obtain information.

The fact that Nanking University should not only have had access to the data from such a well but have actually secured a piece of the core already labeled, albeit in English, speaks rather highly of their collecting abilities. It is to be regretted that the label was no more precise, however, for a cardinal rule in labeling geologic materials is to record as accurately as possible the geographic as well as the stratigraphic location.

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Opening Government Records

A bill has recently been introduced in Congress which should be of concern to scientists and others doing research under federal sponsorship or for federal agencies. It is H.R. 5583, introduced by Congressman Patten and referred on 1 March 1965 to the Committee on Government Operations. Its purpose is "to amend section 161 of the Revised Statutes with respect to the authority of federal officers and agencies to withhold information and limit the availability of records," and it proposes that "every agency shall . . . make all its records promptly available to any person." The only exceptions permitted would be related to "national defense or foreign policy," "internal personnel rules," matters "specifically exempted from disclosure by statute," "trade secrets," internal communications concerning "matters of law or policy," private "personnel and medical files," "investigatory files compiled for law enforcement," and matters concerning "supervision of financial institutions."

There is no provision for, and probably no thought of, the protection of research done by employees of the government or by independent researchers for the government. These are some of the abuses that such an "open" system might be subject to:

1) An agency undertaking a concentrated research program could be plagued by public requests for items of information, to be supplied immediately and out of context, until it had lost much effectiveness while becoming an answering service. Cancer research, to take an obvious example, would be subjected to the pressure of such public curiosity.

2) People working on the fringes of scholarship could use major research projects as sources of information for their own work. Thus material gathered and organized at the taxpayers' expense could be tapped by someone wanting the government to "write his book for him" or at least do his legwork.

3) The results of research could be sought by the press, or anyone else who might publish it, before the researcher was certain of his conclusions. Not only might the researcher fail to receive professional credit for his work (the right to publish, subject to agency approval, would become meaningless), but undigested and erroneous information could be released. The researcher would be superfluous except as a gatherer of facts.

While it seems certain that most agencies authorizing research would find various defenses against such intrusions, these are likely to be costly in time and effort. It would be better not to open the floodgates in the first place. At present I do not know what purposes the bill is supposed to serve; sometimes economic pressures (perhaps patent interests) dictate such moves. It is not likely that it is *intended* to hamper federal science. From personal experience, however, I can predict that exactly such interference will be a side effect. . . .

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Educators as Such

In his report on the establishment of a National Academy of Education (News and Comment, 9 Apr., p. 202), John Walsh makes such questionable comments as that the charter members "are known in the academy community as psychologists, historians, or economists, rather than as educators with a capital 'E,' " and that they do not include "any representatives of the pro-