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**Joel Tarr: Applied Historian
(Celebrating Joel Tarr's 50th anniversary at Carnegie Mellon)**

On this special occasion, I want to talk about Joel's impact as a historian per se, both scholar and teacher: a historian who not only created several major history subfields whole cloth, but who broke the mold as to how a university-based historian could pursue a productive scholarly career while creating new pathways for historians to become players in the policy research and policy deliberation process.

I didn't know Joel personally, or know much about Joel professionally -- except as a very fine urban political historian -- when I came to Carnegie Mellon to interview for a faculty slot in the late 1980s when I was working in Santa Monica as the RAND Corporation's first fulltime historian. But it took me just a few minutes of study on the plane ride to Pittsburgh to realize, to my amazement, that Joel had already created the phrase that perfectly described my own multiple roles at RAND: "Applied History." The more I read, the more I realized that Joel and his colleague, Peter Stearns, had already institutionalized a doctoral program in Applied History and Social Science that I never thought was possible to convince a History Department to embrace. At the time -- unlike Joel, whose Jersey City roots had made him feel like a cultural outsider during his first teaching jobs in the early 1960s at Long Beach and Santa Barbara -- I certainly wasn't looking for an opportunity to leave sunny California. But after two days on campus I didn't hesitate for a moment to jump at the opportunity to join Joel, Peter Stearns, Dan Resnick, David Miller, and Joe Trotter for the thrill of contributing whatever I could to help build, intellectually and institutionally, one of the most creative interdisciplinary graduate programs anywhere. Thank you, Joel, for helping me, first, to better understand what I was all about as a historian, and second, for mentoring me, invigorating and inspiring me, and smoothing the ride over the past three decades.

Joel trained with three of the most prominent historians of his generation -- Arthur

Link, Ray Allen Billington, and Robert Wiebe – but only after immersing himself at Carnegie Mellon did he begin the intellectual breakthroughs that shaped his distinctive career as a historian.

Joel came to Pittsburgh as an innovative student of boss politics in early 20th century Chicago, Boss William Lorimer in particular, adding novel statistical tools to enrich the historical study of urban political behavior and following creatively in the footsteps of Sam Hays, Seymour Mandelbaum, and Paul Kleppner.

By the time his book on Lorimer was published in 1971, Joel was already moving in very different directions: he was becoming a historian of the city itself, increasingly conceived as a “system” with its own internal dynamics and “metabolism.” That intellectual move, no doubt, was strongly nurtured by Joel’s half-time appointment in the School of Urban and Public Affairs (now the Heinz School), where he taught a key introductory course on urban problems in the graduate program, met new social science and engineering colleagues, and learned to think for the first time about how to put history to use as a problem-solving discipline.

By the early 1970s, Joel had expanded his new approach to the study of cities to embrace the budding subfield of the history of technology, especially city-centered technological networks. In short order, reflecting his growing interdisciplinarity and continual outreach to professional colleagues, he began to work closely with several faculty members in Engineering, both to educate them about technological innovation in the past but also to maximize what he could learn from them, as engineers, that he could turn to his own advantage by inventing brand-new topics to investigate in the history of technology. Among other creations in this especially fertile period of Joel’s career was his innovative and well-funded project in “Retrospective Technology Assessment”.

Finally, during the mid- to late-1970s, Joel began adding another dimension to his intellectual quest, as an environmental historian. Despite initial misgivings about the field, Joel swiftly transformed environmental history by giving it a brand-new twist. Unlike anyone else at the time, he became a historian of the urban environment, focused on issues distinct to the growth processes and technologies of cities in the industrial settings of the East and Midwest rather

than -- the focal point of the first generation of environmental historians – the celebration and preservation of nature and wilderness in the Far West. An environmental history of the city – when Joel invented that approach it almost sounded like a contradiction in terms. But as Joel played it out intellectually, in his own research and that of his many graduate students, it took on a life of its own and produced much of the most vital scholarship in urban and environmental history that has been produced over the past several decades.

“Cities, Technology, and the Environment”: that is the very course that Joel is teaching right now, to both undergraduates at Dietrich College and graduate students in the Heinz School. It perfectly captures the intellectual trilogy that remains Joel’s research passion as a social and policy historian.

I want to say one more thing to help you fully appreciate the uniqueness of Joel’s career as a historian. His CV is unlike any other in the historical profession. This is not just because of Joel’s extraordinary productivity – he has long been among the top contributors to new and significant historical knowledge. Rather, the dozens upon dozens of items on his CV reflect the pioneering, historically grounded, interdisciplinary scholarship that Joel dared to produce at a time when this kind of historical writing was not necessarily well accepted by the mainstream historical profession. And the numerous jointly authored items on his CV, furthermore, reveal Joel’s active collaboration with professionals in other departments without which his distinctive historical contributions would not have been possible.

So much of Joel’s scholarship has been collaborative – with other historians (including his own students), to be sure, but with engineers, policy analysts, practitioners, and social scientists from numerous disciplines. Joel has shaken up what is considered “normal” in the historical profession, where 99.9% of original scholarship, both books and articles, continue to be sole-authored. Even more daringly, perhaps, he has shaken up professional practice regarding where historians might publish their research without jeopardizing their careers, including scientific, policy, engineering, and social science journals; elaborate reports to government agencies and philanthropic foundations; and op-ed pieces galore to convey the insights of “applied history” to a wider audience.

In a word, since coming to Carnegie Mellon, Joel has regularly and boldly breached scholarly conventions. He would be the first to acknowledge that the most distinctive features of his career would have been almost impossible to cultivate elsewhere.

Finally, I want to extend special recognition to the 25 doctoral students in our Department whose dissertation committees Joel has chaired and co-chaired, not to mention the dozens more whose committees he served on and taught.

[The 13 former doctoral students in attendance rise for a round of applause.]

These students' innovative scholarship in urban history, history of technology, and environmental history has, of course, been key in shaping their own distinguished careers. But -- my last but important point -- their combined scholarship has also created a massive intellectual legacy and a permanent salute to Joel Tarr: one of the most influential scholars and teachers that our discipline has produced.