REMEMBERING LEO

BY JEROME H. FRIEDMAN

Stanford University

Leo Breiman was a unique character. There will not be another like him. I consider it one of my great fortunes in life to have know and worked with him. Along with John Tukey, Leo had the greatest influence on shaping my approach to statistical problems. I did some of my best work collaborating with Leo, but more importantly, we both had great fun doing it. I look back on those years when we worked closely together with great fondness and regard them as among the happiest and most fruitful of my professional career.

I first met Leo at an Interface conference at UCLA in 1974. He gave a talk on nearest neighbor methods for classification. I had been working in computational geometry using k-d trees to develop fast algorithms for finding nearest neighbors. I mentioned this to Leo and he seemed quite interested. It was clear even from that brief encounter that our interests coincided and that we shared a common approach to statistical problems. At that time Leo was working as a full-time statistical consultant in industry having resigned his professorship at UCLA. After a brilliant career as a mathematical probabilist he had totally changed his professional direction to applied statistics.

After that I had no contact with Leo for almost two years. In 1976 while visiting CERN in Geneva I received a letter from Leo (there was no email then) inviting me to give a talk at a conference he was organizing on "Large and Complex Data Sets" to be held in Dallas in 1977. Although this topic was at the time far outside the mainstream of current statistical thinking, he was able to persuade (no doubt with difficulty) the ASA and IMS to help sponsor it. Leo was a visionary. He understood the need for what became known as data mining decades before the name or discipline became fashionable. It was Leo's hope that the conference would serve as a catalyst to move the statistical community in this direction, at least a little. Although it took many years for this to happen, it was Leo who started the process and he was a driving force for moving it forward throughout.

I got to know Leo better at the Dallas conference. One evening while I was relaxing after having finished giving my talk, I saw Leo walking down a hallway. He approached, handed me a stack of transparencies, and asked me to present *his* talk the next morning. He had to unexpectedly return to Santa Monica to address a committee of the Democratic Party. Leo was a candidate for the Santa Monica school board and needed their endorsement. After some hesitation I agreed. Instead