

**Stephen Bell**

### **Leo Waibel and the Transformation of Land Use in Brazil**

My main ongoing research objective at present is the preparation of a historical geography of Brazil, 1850-1950. By the end of my chosen period, the seeds of the country's diversification beyond a series of mainly agrarian societies stood evident. The most compelling single reason for ending my study around mid-century is that it was then that geographers and others first saw the potential for cultivating land elsewhere than in portions of the former South Atlantic forest. Brazil's sugar cycle in the northeast, its coffee cycle in the southeast and a part of the south, and its non-Iberian colonization schemes in southern Brazil—leading drivers of the nation's economy until well into the twentieth century—all involved the removal of forest cover. The many grassland ecosystems of Brazil were looked upon with disdain by agriculturalists as places merely to graze livestock. In the years before and after 1950, this began to change. The intellectual history of geographical work relating to changed perceptions of resources provides scope for a series of side projects beneath the main umbrella. My fellowship at the Rachel Carson Center is designed to bring the single most important of these to fruition, a reappraisal of the Brazilian work undertaken by the German geographer Leo Waibel (1888-1951).

In recent years, Brazil seems set to become the world's leading agribusiness power, at least in terms of exports of food products. The changing perception of regional resources, the when and where of this, is therefore something of obvious research importance. The geographer Waibel is surely a key figure in unlocking the development potential of agrarian Brazil, through his concern for breaking what he termed the "spatial cancer" of the separation of cultivation from livestock systems. Following a period of exile from Germany and working in the United States, Waibel spent the years 1946-50 on a mission for Brazil's Conselho Nacional de Geografia, a branch of the country's federal government, significantly spending no less than a half of this time outside of Rio de Janeiro. This portion of his career continues to be judged of immense importance by Brazilian geographers, not least for its role in training a whole generation of significant scholars in research techniques. His work on the center-west of the country focused especially on assessing the nature of the vegetation systems of the cerrado, weighing their potential optimistically for economic development. Waibel headed one of the several commissions sent into the interior of Brazil with the responsibility for suggesting an appropriate location for a new capital—what would become Brasília. But the single most important work for me was his argument, based on fieldwork findings, that non-Iberian European colonization in the south of Brazil had essentially failed. He showed the country why this was the case and what needed to be done to strengthen Brazilian economic development. Waibel held the ambition to write a major work on Brazil, a work that would have synthesized his vast earlier experience of the tropical world. This did not happen, since he died suddenly in 1951, during a visit to Germany made to regulate his affairs following being stripped of his chair and headship of the Geographical Institute at Bonn in 1937.

As with my earlier research, my work at the Carson Center will be heavily involved with the analysis of an international set of primary research materials, including correspondence, field notes, diaries, and photographs.