

IN MEMORIAM
WALTER VARIAN BROWN

Walter Varian Brown was born April 3, 1913, in Leicester, Massachusetts to Frederic Kenyon Brown and Ethelind Cartland Knight Brown. He was the fourth member of a family consisting of four boys and one girl. Two of his brothers are deceased. The third is retired. His sister has been a missionary in India for forty years and is still active. There is much in his heritage to explain the uniqueness of Walter Brown in making contributions to The University of Texas and its constituents.

His father was born in Oldham, England, and came as a boy to work in the cotton mills of New Bedford, Massachusetts. He ran away to a religious school in the West and then returned to work his way through Bangor Seminary. For a long time he preached in the Congregational Ministry in rural New England, but with some credit from his work at the seminary ultimately earned a degree at Dartmouth. He was the author of several books, the remarkable range encompassing his experience in the disintegrating mill industry in New England and his concerns for his church. His mother, a member of an old Maine Quaker family, was graduated from Mt. Holyoke (then Mt. Holyoke Seminary) and made the very unusual move of becoming a teacher in a Negro school in the South, from which position she ultimately returned to work as a home missionary in rural communities in Maine. She, too, was a writer. For some time the family lived on a farm in Brattleboro, Vermont, and supported themselves by a unique combination of hard farm work and writing.

Walter Brown attended the Leominster, Massachusetts, high school, but ultimately made a change and was graduated from Worcester Massachusetts Academy. He received his Bachelor's degree from Brown University in 1937 and his master's degree in 1939. On July 3, 1938, he married Helen B. Murray from Hanover, New Hampshire. Then following family pattern, he moved south and received his Ph.D. from Duke in 1943. Subsequently he served in the Navy,

first as an ensign and then as a Lieutenant JG on destroyers and mine sweepers in the Pacific for over two years.

After World War II, he went to Harvard to pursue a refresher course under Professor Karl Sax, one of the world's most renowned cytogeneticists. He was invited to The University of Texas, where he was first appointed in 1947, because of his unique training in cytogenetics and because he had already been conspicuous as possessing a tremendous body of knowledge of grasses, a base from which he was ultimately to become a worldwide authority. Thirty years ago the question of improving the grasslands of Texas waxed much more important than it does in the present increasingly technological society. But Dr. Brown's skill at resolving certain basic problems did much to allow the University to contribute to an important sector of the region's economy. His interest in the grasses was, however, only a small part of the botanist he was and an even smaller part of the colleague he was. His ability to adjust to the Texas scene after spending his early years in the very different environment of New England was amazing. This necessitated not only the botanist dealing with a wholly new flora but the New Englander living in a vastly different kind of country, different not only physically but historically, in social structures, and frequently mores. But adjust he did. As the group of which he was a part grew, so did differences of opinion and without his stabilizing influence it might well not achieved the solidity which has come to prevail.

While possessed of a broad modern knowledge of plants, he had an underlying dedication to plants that characterized an earlier group of scientists who would now be known as natural historians. Wherever he went, he collected and analyzed the characteristics of all sorts of plants. He once filled out a form stating that he had no hobbies, but this was a hobby of an advanced sort, which satisfied his curiosity even though he did not pursue specialized studies of many of the materials he collected. Frequently the entrance to his office was in many ways more dependable than the calendar, for he would assemble and display whatever was flowering at the time -- frequently with a carefully worded description of it. It always seemed that this practice revealed

some very special meaning of the coming of spring to Dr. Brown. For year after year spring appeared in these little demonstrations and progress through the successive phases frequently before the rest of us were aware of what was happening. Perhaps it was only the coming alive of the world of plants to which he was dedicated, but there was some significance, which he never commented upon. Being both a specialist and man broadly interested in the world about one is difficult, but he managed it, and the only complaint he ever made as illness advanced upon him was that his efforts in collecting and displaying things for other people's edification was becoming limited.

Throughout a long career, he maintained a dedication to students at many different levels and he would literally spend hours advising them! The extent to which his advice went beyond matters in which he had a particular interest was impressive. In fact it frequently reflected a feeling on his part that students should benefit by several experiences that he had missed. This attitude coupled with his long association with the Department of Botany and its problems brought him more than his share of the chores. He supervised moves, chaired committees with different assignments, and only a year or so ago contributed a history of the department that was so foreign to his roots, but consistent in occupying his thoughts. He performed the unique as well as the routine with fairness. He worked methodically, though sometimes with an air of casualness that left others unaware of the extent of what he was undertaking until he had completed the task. One of his unique accomplishments deserves comment --he is the only member of the faculty wittingly or not trained a student to the point of pursuing his further studies in a monastery and ultimately becoming a full-fledged Monk.

Professor Brown's presence not only added knowledge and competence in an area very important to Texas but in time it extended the University's reputation in a critical field in which it should have been interested long before he arrived on the scene. As is probably true of most individuals who we caught too young by an illness that destroys them, he has left for further exploration a rich vein of material which he collected and analyzed but never had the opportunity to

bring to final interpretations in publications. Fortunately for the area of interests, he also trained and supervised a large number of students now spread over the country to which his partially completed materials have been selectively directed in the hopes that many of his ideas may yet be further developed and broadly established.

People are often impossibly advised to select their ancestors carefully. They ought with equal seriousness be advised to select background environments with certain particular characteristics. Coming to Austin as he did at a time when The University of Texas was very seriously to emerge from an image that always conjured Walter Prescott Webb's description of Texas at the height of its frontier days, he added something unique and almost foreign. He imposed upon his department and larger segments of the University a stern New England dedication, which was not always readily understood and not always graciously accepted. But his heritage had built into him forthrightness and a perseverance that usually made some parts of this dedication prevail. He was buried in a cemetery where his and his wife's ancestors going back to the Civil War rest. Walter Brown followed his mother's pattern in coming from a region of one climate and character to another vastly different to make significant contributions to its welfare. But in the end he returned home.

He is survived by his wife, Helen; a daughter, Catherine Good of Arlington; and a son, Stephen, of Austin.

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting Professors W. Gordon Whaley (chairman), Harold C. Bold and B. L. Turner

Distributed to members of the General Faculty on November 4, 1977.