IN MEMORIAM

HENRY JOHN OTTO

When Henry John Otto died in Austin on August 5, 1975, a highly distinguished career spanning a half century of service to American education ended. Respected throughout the nation as a scholar, writer, and consultant in the field of elementary education, his contributions advanced educational practice immeasurably.

He was born in the obscure village of Brownton, Minnesota, on March 20, 1901. The man who did so much for elementary education started his own schooling in a forlorn little one-room rural school, and he learned to read in German rather than English. Whatever limitations there might have been in his early schooling, they were overcome. He went on to graduate from Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1923, with a B. A. degree. He earned an M. A. degree from the University of Minnesota in 1927 and a Ph. D. degree from the same institution in 1931.

Otto's career in teaching started in 1923 in Long Prairie, Minnesota, where he taught science and mathematics in a small high school for two years. He then moved to Buffalo Lake, Minnesota, where he was superintendent of schools as well as part-time teacher in the high school from 1925 to 1928, and then entered upon a career in the field of higher education.

The years 1930 to 1934 were spent at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, as an assistant professor and later an associate professor of education. From 1934 to 1942, he served as a consultant on education for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Then, on February 1, 1942, he joined the faculty of The University of Texas at Austin as Graduate Professor of Elementary Administration and Curriculum. He retired on September 1, 1969, and held the rank of Professor Emeritus until his death in 1975.

During his tenure at The University of Texas, Dr. Otto was in great demand as a consultant and visiting faculty member. His regular duties always had priority, but he taught during summer sessions in fifteen states, including assignments after his retirement at the University of Hawaii, the University of Minnesota, and Alaska Methodist University in Anchorage.
Always abreast of his field, on August 1, 1975 -- just four days before his death -- he sent a letter solicited for a Bicentennial newsletter for retired teachers, closing thus: "... to those who have been my students, may I say I had much pleasure in teaching you. I hope you have forgotten what I tried to teach you because things have changed so much." Dr. Otto never feared or resisted change; rather, he taught that change should be planned, constructive, and orderly.

His colleagues found it difficult to complain of being overworked when there was a Henry Otto around, simultaneously serving as a member of two departments and chairman of one of them, as graduate adviser, as a member of the College of Education Administrative Council, as chief recruiter, and as a prolific researcher and writer. The appended list of books, monographs, journal articles, films, and reviews produced by Henry Otto over a forty-year period speaks for itself. And there was always a stamp of quality on what he did; for example, there were no duds among the 67 dissertations written by students under his supervision.

Otto's leadership was responsible for the establishment of several outstanding elements of the preparation program for teachers, supervisors and administrators at The University of Texas. He established the Bureau of Laboratory Schools, which has produced more than twenty quality publications. He supervised a research and demonstration program at Casis Elementary School in Austin from 1946 until he retired. In 1962, he set up a unique Residential Year Program for training school administrators and supervisors which included a full-time internship of one semester. He enjoyed stimulating innovations, and he loved teaching, research, and writing. But administrative "ant work", as he called it, was distasteful. He never neglected it, but he disposed of it so systematically and efficiently that it didn't overwhelm him.

Dr. Otto provided significant leadership to and through other organizations. He worked actively with the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association from the time he first came to Texas in 1942, when TEPSA had only 50 members, and contributed much to that organization's development and growth to its present membership of more than 2200. He wrote the criteria for evaluating elementary schools in Texas several years before the Southern
Association of Colleges and Schools developed its criteria for the Region. This Association later gave him an Honorary Life Membership "for his long and distinguished service to education and for his many contributions to the Association."

Publications by Dr. Otto profoundly influenced the shape of elementary education in the entire nation. Textbooks he authored became the authoritative works for graduate professional training in the field between 1945 and 1965. Reports of his research were cited frequently as elementary education was being reformed during these decades. Few, if any, other writings had the pervasive authoritativeness accorded to Henry Otto's pronouncements by those devoted to elementary education.

Though unsought, many honors came his way. He has been listed in Who's Who in America since 1942, in Leaders in Education since 1934, and in International Blue Book since 1945. One of the greatest satisfactions of his life came in 1951, when the University of Minnesota, his graduate alma mater, gave him its Outstanding Achievement Award.

Students and faculty members at The University of Texas held Dr. Otto in awe. His businesslike, no-nonsense, directly-to-the-point manner did not exactly invite the banter and back slapping that characterize some relationships. He was highly organized, systematic, task oriented, and productive, and for those qualities he was highly respected and admired. The respect and admiration were mixed with affection, however. Few professors have established the permanent close ties with graduate students that Henry Otto enjoyed. His nephew, Dr. James Fillbrandt, who received his Ph. D. degree from The University of Texas, wrote to Mrs. Otto upon learning of Henry's death: "Henry Otto was the exemplar of what Americans of his generation and heritage were supposed to be. He rose from roots that were planted by immigrant, German, dirt farmers. He overcame mediocre early schooling to earn a doctor of philosophy degree and to help lead the nation in the improvement of schools . . . . He was an intellectual in the strictest sense, i.e., he trusted learning and the scientific method and he applied both in the solution of his problems, whether they concerned the best reporting methods for elementary school students or the most successful way of collecting lost
golf balls on his favorite course."

There was another side of Henry Otto, however. Those who knew him well relished his humaneness as much as they admired his intellect. He loved adventure, as he revealed early in a "bumming" trip that he and a friend took across the country to California when they were boys, riding the rails, hitch-hiking, and getting there as best they could. Later in life he was an avid golfer, and although his scores never matched his zeal for the game, he thoroughly enjoyed the challenge. Although integrity is probably the word that best captures the essence of Henry Otto's character, those who knew him best would insist that his primary motivation was that of helping people.

Otto was always proud of his family. His two sons have both done well -- Gordon as a department chairman in econometrics at the University of Houston, and Byron as an attorney in Austin. The mother of Gordon and Byron, to whom Otto was married in 1932, was the former Mildred Alice Wagner. She was a delightful person who made the kind of home in which Otto's many gifts could flourish. She died in 1958, and in 1963 Otto married Cecelia Henderson, a talented and charming lady who provided love and care for him in his last twelve years of life.

When he decided to retire, Otto wrote a letter to the departmental chairman, in which he said, "In a real sense I have never worked for the University. I have worked for the improvement of public schools and the preparation of people who could effect the improvements. My mission has been the development of others who would be in positions to lead schools toward excellence. I hope that my 67 doctoral graduates have caught the spirit and will carry on." The fulfillment of Henry Otto's hope, in the work of his students and in the improvements he stimulated in schools, is the monument to his memory that would have pleased him most.

Kenneth E. McIntyre, Chairman
L. D. Haskew
Clyde I. Martin
James G. Unstattd
Lorene L. Rogers  
President  
The University of Texas at Austin  

John R. Durbin  
Secretary of the General Faculty  
The University of Texas at Austin  

This committee consisted of Kenneth E. McIntyre (Chairman), L. D. Haskew, Clyde I. Martin, James G. Umstattd.