

IN MEMORIAM
JOHN GRIER VARNER

With the death of Professor Emeritus John Grier Varner on September 13, 1978, the Department of English lost one of its most richly human members. Jack, as his long-time associates called him, had a talent for friendship. He inspired not only respect but also affection and enduring loyalty in a wide circle of Austinites representing both town and gown. "More than anything else," Professor Emeritus Archibald A. Hill has commented, "he was characterized by an unusual human warmth--a warmth that meant that when he had once made a friend, the relationship continued over many years. Among his surviving colleagues there are at least two who remember him more than a generation ago as a student at the University of Virginia, and for whom the world will be a colder place without him." He was a long-time member of the Texas Institute of Letters and, until his declining health limited his activities, a popular member of the Headliners Club of Austin. He is survived by his wife, Jeanette Johnson Varner, and two sisters, Miss Cornelia Varner of Denton and Ms. Katherine Varner McNeil of Corsicana.

Born on March 30, 1905, in Mount Pleasant, Texas, Jack grew up in Denton, where his father was a Presbyterian minister. He took his B.A. degree at Austin College in 1926, and for four years taught in boys' preparatory schools in Mississippi and Tennessee. In 1930 he entered the University of Virginia with a service fellowship and taught Freshman English while doing graduate work. Humorously called Cactus Jack by some of his intimates, he was actually one of the least provincial, most cosmopolitan of the students in attendance. As a prep school teacher he had made several summer tours of Europe with groups of students, he had studied German one summer in Heidelberg, and he was an accomplished musician, having studied organ in Dallas and New York. Thus he was able to supplement his University stipend by serving as organist and choirmaster of one of the Episcopal churches in Charlottesville.

He took an M.A. in 1932 and finished his course work for the Ph.D. before accepting a

position as Assistant Professor of English and Director of Musical Activities at Washington and Lee University in 1938. Under his direction the student choral group was so successful that it twice appeared with Fred Waring's orchestra, once in Washington and once in New York, and later performed with several other college groups in Carnegie Hall. He had already begun his scholarly career by editing Edgar Allan Poe and the Philadelphia Saturday Courier, a first edition in book form of five of Poe's earliest tales. He was also to publish later a series of articles on some of the women literary figures associated with Poe (Sarah Helen Whitman, Maria Gowen Brooks, Frances Sargent Osgood, for example). In 1940 he completed his dissertation on the feminist, poet, and essayist Sarah Helen Whitman, and received his doctorate from Virginia.

In 1943, knowing Spanish as he did, he offered his services to the United States State Department for the duration of World War II. For three years he was in Latin America, first as director of the Cultural Center in Caracas, Venezuela. During this time he and his wife published a little book for students of English, Gramática de Inglés para Venezolanes y Vocabularios Útiles, and he traveled extensively, lecturing to school groups. In 1947 he became a cultural attaché to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, and in the fall of the same year he accepted a position as Visiting Associate Professor of English and Director of English for Foreign Students at The University of Texas at Austin. So well was his work thought of by the State Department that shortly after coming to Texas he was invited to undertake a series of lectures on American literature in Central and South America, and a few years later he went south again to lecture in Mexico City.

Coming to Texas was coming home for Jack, and he settled down for a permanent career here. For several years, under Dean L. L. Click, he served as an assistant dean in the College of Arts and Sciences. Mainly, though, he and his wife were busy translating and editing the first literary classic of the New World, Garcilaso de la Vega's account of the DeSoto expedition. The Florida of the Inca (1951) was the first publication of the reorganized University of Texas Press. Frank Wardlaw, first Director of the Press, recalls: "I was searching for a truly superior book when Jack came into my office bearing the typescript of the Florida. I read until four o'clock the

next morning and was so excited I could not sleep. The book made the cover of the Saturday Review and the first page of the London Times Literary Supplement. It was a History Book Club selection."

In 1954, with a grant from the American Philosophical Society, the Varners went to Spain to begin research for a biography of Garcilaso de la Vega. There Jack was able to collect several hundred documents, and during his stay he was elected to membership in the Real Academia de Ciencias, Bellas Letras y Nobles Artes de Córdoba. In his own country he was already included in the National Dictionary of Latin Americanists, a publication of the Library of Congress, as well as in the Directory of American Scholars.

Along with his teaching the research for his biography continues for some years, interrupted by a long period of ill health. Finally, in 1968, he brought the ambitious undertaking to a successful conclusion. El Inca: The Life and Times of Garcilaso de la Vega, published by The University of Texas Press, is not only the absorbing life story of the son of an Inca Princess and a Spanish conquistador but also a distinguished contribution to Americana.

Although the state of his health led him to retire from teaching in 1972, Jack continued his scholarly work at home, and at the time of his death he had finished a draft of another book, The Dogs of the Conquest--an account of the Spaniards' use of dogs in their conquest of the Indian empires of America, which his wife plans to put in final form for publication. So in the end he may go beyond the appraisal expressed by Professor Emeritus C. L. Cline when the second book was published: "Not many of us leave two noteworthy books behind us at the end of our careers, as I believe Dr. Varner is doing--books which will reflect credit upon the Department of English and The University of Texas."

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a Special Committee consisting of Gerald Langford (chairman), John A. Walter, and Edwin T. Bowden.

Distributed to members of the General Faculty on March 2, 1979.