

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
OTIS ARNOLD SINGLETARY**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Otis Arnold Singletary, professor, history, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM
OTIS ARNOLD SINGLETARY**

Otis Arnold Singletary, retired president of the University of Kentucky, died September 20, 2003, at his home in Lexington. He began his professional career at The University of Texas at Austin in 1954 but left in 1961, after a whirlwind start, to become chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson chose him to create the Job Corps as part of the "War on Poverty." In 1966, he became vice president of the American Council on Education. He returned to Austin in 1968 as Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs in The University of Texas System. Esteemed highly by both Chancellor Ransom and by the redoubtable regent, Frank Erwin, he appeared to many as a likely successor to Ransom as chancellor of The University of Texas System. He chose, however, to accept appointment in 1969 as president of the University of Kentucky. He retired from that office after eighteen years of widely admired service in 1987.

Otis Arnold Singletary spent his early life in Mississippi. He was born in Gulfport on October 31, 1921. His father, for whom he was named, did blue collar work for an oil company. His mother was Mae Walker Singletary. After some time at Perkinson Junior College, he moved on to Millsaps College in Jackson where he was a Phi Beta Kappa student. There he met and, in 1944, married Gloria Walton, daughter of the Reverend and Mrs. Robert L. Walton of Pascagula. Service in the U.S. Navy during World War II interrupted his college career from 1943 to 1946. He graduated from Millsaps in 1947.

Retaining his tie to the navy as a reserve officer, Otis began his professional training in history at Louisiana State University. He earned a M.A. degree in 1949 and a doctorate in 1954. He did much of the reading for his doctorate while at sea serving with the U.S. Navy again from 1951 to 1954, during and after the Korean War. In that same period he taught at both the Navy Supply Corps School in Bayonne, New Jersey, and at Princeton's Naval ROTC Unit. He remained an officer in the naval reserve for many years, retiring as a Commander.

His association with UT Austin began auspiciously. At the end of his first academic year (1954-55) he won an award for excellence in teaching. That same year his dissertation won the Moncado Book Fund award of the American Military Institute, publisher of the journal, *Military Affairs*. In 1957, The University of Texas Press published his dissertation as *The Negro Militia in Reconstruction*. He also won promotion to the rank of assistant professor. At the same time he began his administrative career as associate dean of arts and sciences. In 1958, he won the prestigious Scarbrough Teaching Excellence Award. (Senior Vice President Shirley Bird Perry was among the group of his students who nominated him for that award.) The next year he won promotion to associate professor and received tenure. His outstanding record in the classroom continued as he won teaching awards in both 1959 and 1960. His course on military history was particularly popular. In 1960, he published his second book, *The Mexican War*, a volume in the University of Chicago series on the History of American Civilization. It won an appreciative review in the *New York Times* (May 14, 1960). In the same year he became a full professor and assistant to President Harry Ransom. However, in 1961, he left to become chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He did so despite his rapid rise (from instructor to

professor in six years), despite high praise from President Ransom, and despite rumors that he might become president of the University (*American Statesman*, April 18, 1961).

In those early years in Austin, Otis was a great admirer of Walter Prescott Webb, then and still one of the greatest thinkers ever to be associated with the Department of History. In what many construed as a reckless act for a still untenured member of the faculty, Otis invested a great amount of time in auditing one of Webb's courses. He also travelled with Webb to a professional meeting. He returned quoting appreciatively somewhat earthy similes which Webb had picked up, perhaps invented, during his rural Texas boyhood. A good writer as well as speaker himself, Otis always appreciated felicitous expressions. If they were witty, as his often were, his admiration doubled.

Recognition as a professional historian was also coming to Otis in those early years. His dissertation had won the American Military Institute prize mentioned above. Reviewing the book based on it for the *Journal of Southern History*, Robert H. Woody of Duke endorsed fully the conclusion that the Negro militia served primarily as a "political instrument" for the party in power. Brainerd Dyer of UCLA, in reviewing *The Mexican War*, for the same journal found its treatment of civil-military relations both "fresh and stimulating." The American Historical Association, the premier professional organization in the field, chose Otis to write the essay, *The South in American History*, for its highly regarded series of historiographical essays on various aspects of American history. This essay appeared in 1957 and in a second edition in 1965.

Reflecting his Mississippi background, Otis always identified strongly with the South. In reviewing *An Epitaph for Dixie* by Harry Ashmore, a liberal Southern journalist, Otis noted, quite aptly as subsequent years have proved, that Ashmore was "burying a corpse which is still very much alive" (*American Statesman*, Feb. 2, 1958). Annual meetings of the Southern Historical Association (SHA) always appealed greatly to Otis, at least in his younger days. Many young academics find such meetings a bore, but for Otis SHA was different. He loved the history of the South, but the appeal of annual SHA meetings had social as well as intellectual and emotional aspects. Otis loved to get together with informed and witty people such as T. Harry Williams and Frank Vandiver for free-flowing, uninhibited conversations on topics of mutual interest. Also, Otis always insisted that per capita consumption of alcohol was far greater at meetings of the SHA than at other meetings of professional historians. He did his part to uphold that reputation.

After only three years as head of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Otis took a leave of absence to begin President Johnson's Job Corps. Its aim was to help young people who lived in "debilitating poverty...." It would do so by taking them out of their deprived environments, relocating them to more salutary circumstances, and providing them with "educational and vocational training needed to improve their employability." (The quotes are from the first page of *The Job Corps: A Social Experiment That Works* by Sar A. Levitan and Benjamin H. Johnson, published by Johns Hopkins University Press in 1975.) Like other components of the "War on Poverty," the Job Corps was quite controversial. One critic complained that it cost more to train someone in the Job Corps for a year than it cost for a year at Harvard. Characteristically, Otis promptly offered to pay a year's expenses for any Job Corps trainee who could win admission to Harvard. None did (Sar A. Levitan and Garth L. Mangum, *Federal Training and Work Programs in the Sixties*, Ann Arbor, 1969, p. 179).

President Johnson was quite interested in the progress of the Job Corps. Early in his own career, he had served as a regional administrator of Franklin Roosevelt's National Youth Administration which had a somewhat similar mission. Consequently, Otis would on occasion receive a phone call, sometimes a very late phone call, from the President who had a query about the agency. Once, while a guest at the LBJ ranch, Otis was the recipient of one of the tongue-lashings for which LBJ was famous. He later expressed undying gratitude to Mrs. Johnson for rescuing him, ever-so-tactfully, from the tirade.

When Otis left the American Council on Education in Washington to return to Austin in 1968, he came sharing the expectation of many informed people that he was the heir-apparent to his former mentor, Chancellor Harry Ransom. Both Ransom and Regent Frank Erwin, the two who then wielded greatest influence in the affairs of the University, had very high regard for him. So did the man for whom Erwin was something of a local intermediary, the President of the United States. Tending to support the belief that Otis was chancellor-in-waiting is the fact that the man who replaced him as Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, Charles

A. LeMaistre, did in fact succeed Harry Ransom. He became chancellor of The University of Texas System in 1971 after Ransom's retirement in 1970. What got in the way of these high expectations for Otis was that he and Frank Erwin, despite their close friendship, had very different ideas as to how to run a university. Frank Erwin was then approaching the pinnacle of his influence in the affairs of The University of Texas, both at the system level and on the Austin campus. Otis left Austin and Texas, both of which he loved, because he realized fully that whoever held even the highest office in The University of Texas System, at that time and for some time in the future, would be in fact a subordinate of Frank Erwin. Privately he used a less genteel expression than subordinate and gave that as his reason for accepting the offer to head the University of Kentucky.

The Singletary presidency at Kentucky began less auspiciously than had his career in Austin but ended with great respect. Student protests against the war in Vietnam were at a high point when Otis assumed office at Lexington in 1969. Fortunately, Otis had thought a lot about such matters. Indeed, while still at the American Council on Education, he had written a pamphlet titled "Freedom and Order on Campus" (*American Council on Education*, 1968). Its thesis was that "administrators must value justice as well as order." That attitude apparently helped him weather some early storms, but after Ohio national guardsmen killed four students at Kent State in 1970, outraged Kentucky students burned the ROTC building.

After Vietnam era protests subsided, Otis typically had a very good rapport with students. His four teaching awards in six years at Texas foreshadowed such a development. One story from those years reflects the often jocular nature of his relationship with students. Ridiculing as myth the stories of how tall Texans were, Otis asserted that without those high-heeled cowboy boots and the high-crowned Stetsons, Texans were no taller than anybody else. His six feet, two inch stature seemed to reinforce his point. Far more than most administrators, Otis enjoyed talking to students and did so often and at length. At Kentucky, he was known also as a soft touch for students strapped for money. He often lent them money from his own pocket. His wife, Gloria, shared his benevolent feelings. One wintry night when Otis was out of town, student protesters besieged their residence. Calling their attention to the cold, Gloria invited them in for warmth and refreshments. They accepted. When campus authorities phoned to tell her that the protesters had gone away, she was able to tell them where they were. The authorities were shocked; Otis was not.

Two other factors helped Otis in his relationship with students. One was his love of sports. An avid golfer, hunter, and fisherman, Otis loved sports in general. He was so conspicuous as a supporter of athletics at Kentucky that he earned the nickname, "Dr. Jock." The other factor was his good looks. In addition to all his other attractive attributes, Otis was remarkably handsome. Had he not chosen first history and then administration, he had one of the major qualifications for a successful career in Hollywood.

With the end of the war in Vietnam, Otis was able to turn more of his attention to the matter highest on the agenda of every university president, getting money. In Kentucky, as across the nation, state funding for higher education was then declining. His altogether typical observation on this was that he was engaged "in a conspiracy to give Kentuckians a better university than they were willing to support" (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 23, 2003). Testifying that his conspiratorial efforts occasionally met with some success are at least two significant facts. Library holdings doubled in his administration, and the campus is dotted with buildings dating from his tenure. Indeed, his memorial service took place in one such building, the Singletary Center for the Arts. There one well informed memorialist asserted that his administration had been the "most progressive and important in this University's history" (*Lexington Herald-Leader*, September 23, 2003). Its eighteen years had also been among the longest among university presidencies, lasting three times the average tenure for a university president in the United States.

Surviving Otis after he lost his ten-year battle with prostate cancer are his wife, Gloria, their three children, Bonnie, Scot, and Kendall, as well as their respective spouses, four grandchildren, and four great grandchildren.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Philip L. White (Chair), Norman D. Brown, G. Howard Miller.

Professor White would like to thank those who provided helpful information: Gloria Singletary, Elizabeth and H.S. ("Sonny") Wallace, Jr., Shirley Bird Perry, William S. Livingston, Art Dilly, Ralph L. Elder of the American History Center, and Nancy L. DeMarcus of the University of Kentucky Library.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on March 30, 2004. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>.