

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS ROBERT C. NESBIT

Robert Carrington Nesbit died of heart failure at his home in Olympia, Washington on Monday, January 18, 1999. Bob Nesbit joined the Department of History faculty as an associate professor in 1962. He specialized in the history of Wisconsin and became assistant chairman of the department in 1968 and professor and associate chairman in the following year, holding the latter post until 1980. He retired in December, 1982.

Nesbit was born in Ellensburg, Washington, July 16, 1917, the son of Sidney Shaw and Verna (Carrington) Nesbit. The family moved to Seattle in 1929, where Bob graduated from Queen Anne High School in 1934. He was awarded the B.A. degree by Central Washington State College at Ellensburg in 1939 and briefly taught school until entering the Army Air Force as a private in 1941. He and Marie Richert were married on November 24, 1942. Discharged as a lieutenant in 1946, he entered the graduate history program at the University of Washington, Seattle. Completing the M.A. in 1947, he continued his studies and taught a course in the history of the state of Washington for a time during this process. In 1951 he became the state of Washington's first archivist and during the following six years he also completed his doctorate in history.

In 1958, Nesbit became an administrative assistant in the Washington State Department of General Administration and assistant director and supervisor of purchasing in the following year. Less known was the fact that he served as a speechwriter for Washington state's Governor Albert Rosellini during the years, 1957-1962. He did not, however, abandon his scholarly interests and in 1961 published his revised dissertation, entitled: He Built Seattle: A Biography of Judge Thomas Burke. This book was an insightful study of the economic development of Seattle and its hinterland, "the best work of its kind dealing with the Pacific Northwest to that time."

In the early 1960s, members of the Madison Department of History wished to place a course on the history of Wisconsin in the department's offerings on a regular basis to assist in the preparation of social studies teachers. At the same time, administrators in the University of Wisconsin Extension needed a historian to direct history outreach programs and to supervise history personnel and offerings in the two year centers. Members of the Department of History discerned in Nesbit the needed combination of state history specialist and administrator that met the needs of the two branches of the university. In September 1962, he joined the faculty of the University of Wisconsin on a twelve-month appointment in which the Madison Department of History, University Extension, and its two year Center System were each to claim one-third of his services. As University Extension became increasingly self-contained, the nature of Nesbit's appointments changed. He relinquished successively the chairmanship of University Extension history and the chairmanship of history in the University Center System, moving into the Madison campus faculty full time and becoming assistant chairman and subsequently associate chairman of the Department of History. The major parties in this restructuring approved its results, although job-seeking history graduate students remembered regretfully that Nesbit had hired many from their ranks in staffing the centers.

As he planned an undergraduate course in the history of Wisconsin, Nesbit found no adequate Wisconsin history textbook available. Urged by his colleagues, William Hesseltine and Vernon Carstensen, he decided to write a one-volume history of the state. The administrators of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin were at the time preparing to establish a Wisconsin History Foundation to raise funds to finance the research and writing of a multi-volume history of the state. Nesbit became a member of the Advisory Committee of the foundation and of the Editorial Board of the Historical Society that would

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supervise the planning and production of the series. The development of the larger project facilitated Nesbit's work on his textbook, which was published as Wisconsin: A History in 1973. Reviewers called this book "a model for comprehensive surveys of the history of a single state" and "a book which takes first rank with other state histories." Students even reported that they enjoyed reading it and mature scholars were impressed by its crisp analysis, perceptive insights, and flashes of humor. When an author withdrew from the society's multi-volume history project, Nesbit agreed to write The History of Wisconsin: Volume III. Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873-1893. It too was hailed as an outstanding illustration of state history. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the American Association of State and Local History recognized the quality of his work with awards of merit, and the Wisconsin Library Association included him in its listing of notable Wisconsin authors. In 1986, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin named him an honorary fellow.

His teachers at the University of Washington described Bob Nesbit as "mild in manner yet firm in determination and conviction," as congenial, pleasant, widely-read, and "quite without artificiality but urbane." His colleagues at Wisconsin detected those same qualities and also enjoyed the warm hospitality that Bob and Marie extended to them. In the role of administrator, he appeared to be relaxed but also was committed to getting things right. Merrill Jensen once noted that he was "unflappable" in time of crisis. But the flair with which he scooted his Sunbeam Alpine into parking lot 47 also hinted that here was a free spirit. He had a keen eye for flaws in logic and for the incongruous circumstance. His commentaries in such cases were witty -- sometimes subtly and sometimes pungently. Colleagues scanned each issue of the department meeting minutes expectantly and were often rewarded.

Bob was not afraid to harry senior administrators when he felt strongly. The overpass between Vilas Hall and the Humanities Building remained long closed for repairs and he informed a superior that the pedestrians crossing University Avenue reminded him of barnyard chickens when the farm dog trotted through. Occasionally he could be blunt, once referring to the Humanities Building as a mausoleum and to the Department of History as four long corridors of closed doors. Working in adjacent offices, his editorial colleagues in The History of Wisconsin project learned to appreciate both Bob's abilities and his humor, even when he hung prominently a picture of a lordly lion under vigorous attack from the rear by a presumptuous cub with the caption, "AUTHORS & EDITORS: Series # 6." He once wrote an extended parable, peopled with characters who resembled prominent members of the Department of History. Yet Bob's humor was so apt or gentle that none was resentful. He accomplished the remarkable feat of serving as an administrator of a history department for twelve years without making any enemies. His tact, honesty, and the sense that he was not interested in further promotion had much to do with this result. But if his administrative achievements were impressive, his contributions to his discipline, and to the welfare of students, were much more so. Bob Nesbit made a major addition to the historiography of the state of Wisconsin and the midwest. He understood that good local and state history explained much about human experience, which served as a foundation for the understanding of national and global history. Generations of Wisconsin college and pre-college students have benefited from that insight.

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