MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS GERALD W. LAWTON

Gerald Lawton was born on October 22, 1906 on a farm in central Wisconsin, one of five children. He died on November 4, 1998 and is survived by his wife of 62 years, Louise, a daughter, Carol Ekstrom, Memphis, Tennessee, and two grandchildren, Roger Ekstrom, Memphis, and Ingrid Ekstrom, a hydrologist, Seattle, Washington.

Gerry received a degree at the State Teachers College in Stevens Point, and upon graduation taught in a one-room schoolhouse in northern Wisconsin. During severe winter weather, he would ski several miles to school every day. He then went to Milwaukee to attend Marquette University, where he received a BS in 1931 and an MS in 1933, both in chemistry. Gerry met his wife, Louise, who became a prominent collage artist, while at Marquette. From 1933 to 1936 he was a chemist for Cities Service Oil Co., and from 1936 to 1938, a research chemist for Kolmar Laboratories, both in Milwaukee. For the next seven years, he pursued an academic career as assistant professor at Marquette. Gerry then came to Madison as a public health engineer for the Board of Health. During his tenure there, he began work on his Ph.D. in sanitary chemistry at the UW. He received his degree in 1953, with a dissertation on the determination of fluorides in water.

Lawton received his first appointment at the University of Wisconsin in 1950 as an associate professor of civil engineering in the College of Engineering. In 1961, he accepted an appointment as chief of the Environmental Health Section of the UW State Laboratory of Hygiene and joined the Department of Preventive Medicine, Center for Health Sciences, as associate professor. In 1966, he became acting chair of the department for two years. In June 1972 he completed his career at the UW at the rank of full professor.

During his long career, Lawton made many significant contributions to the field of water chemistry and environmental health. Early studies with colleagues at the State Laboratory of Hygiene established recommended levels of fluoridation for water supplies for control of tooth decay. A major focus of his research concerned developing effective methods for digestion of sewage, industrial wastes, and dairy wastes, and the beneficial effects of diverting these wastes from recreational lakes. Other studies focused on control of pollution in recreational waters and the effects of detergents in surface waters.

In the arena of personal health, he led one major study which identified drinking water as a potential source of sodium. He also showed that beverages produced from water with high sodium content could also have an adverse health effect. These investigations alerted Wisconsin physicians to this issue in managing their cardiac patients. Another investigation demonstrated that groundwater could be a source of nitrates that can be a potential health problem for infants if the groundwater seeps into private wells.

Lawton was active in extension teaching for water works operators. Yearly courses were held in conjunction with the League of Wisconsin Municipalities and the Wisconsin section of the American Water Works Association. He also conducted a survey course in which medical students during their summer break visited various public health facilities. Here they learned about how water works, sewage treatment plants, local health departments, and the functioning of other public health agencies. This experience gave the medical student an appreciation of the importance of these governmental agencies.

Dr. Gerald Lawton left an impressive record of achievement that has been carried on by his successors at the UW Wisconsin State Laboratory of Hygiene Environmental Health Section.

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