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

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS GRANT COTTAM

Grant Cottam, plant ecologist and professor emeritus of botany, died Wednesday, May 13, 2009, at the Sebring Assisted Care Residence in Madison, Wisconsin. Professor Cottam was born in Sandy, Utah, in 1918, to a prominent Utah family. His interest in ecology was stimulated by childhood experiences hiking and camping in the western mountains and by his father, who was a professor of botany and an outspoken conservationist opposed to the destructive land use practices prevalent in the West. After obtaining a bachelor's degree at the University of Utah in 1939 he entered graduate school at the University of Wisconsin in 1940. Like many of his generation, his schooling was interrupted by World War II. He served with distinction in the U.S. Army in the Pacific Theater, earning a Silver Cross, a Bronze Star and a field promotion to captain. After the war, Grant, with his wife Diana, returned to Wisconsin where Grant completed his PhD degree in botany in 1948 working with John T. Curtis. After graduation, he accepted a position at the University of Hawaii but was called back by an offer of a professorship in Madison to work with the growing program in plant ecology led by Professor Curtis. He advanced through the ranks and retired as full professor in 1986.

Grant was an important member of the plant ecology group, dedicated to rebuilding the understanding of vegetation around the continuum concept put forward earlier by Henry Gleason. To demonstrate the utility of this then-untested idea, it was necessary to gather large amounts of quantitative data from all over the state. To do this with limited funding in a reasonable time, it was essential to have efficient sampling methods. It was in this area that Grant first made his mark, devising several "distance-based" sampling methods that Curtis' students used to carry out the forest surveys. His most widely accepted technique, the "quarter method" is still in wide use today. Working along with Roger Bray and John Curtis he also participated in the early explorations of multivariate methods for analyzing complex sets of continuously varying data (then known as "community ordination"). Grant was a key player in raising the national and international profile of ecology at the University of Wisconsin, with the "Wisconsin School" of ecology becoming a recognized center of excellence. After the untimely death of Curtis, Grant provided the steadying influence as the plant ecology program added faculty and expanded its range of interests. He published many papers, was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1954-55, and received many NSF and other research grants during his career.

Grant directed 27 doctoral theses and 15 master's theses at UW-Madison. He influenced innumerable undergraduates who took the plant ecology, then-general ecology, course he regularly co-taught up to retirement. To teach the quantitative methods he and others developed, Grant created the graduate "Ecological Methods" course. It was considered essential to any aspiring field ecologist. Each year, Grant, who was an enthusiastic photographer, would assemble the class in the Arboretum prairie for a picture, and the collection of these is a visual chronicle of the many students who went on to make their own contributions to ecology. In the late 1970s Grant and one of his recent PhD students, the late Virginia Kline (UW-Arboretum), developed the popular undergraduate course "The Vegetation of Wisconsin," which they co-taught until his retirement.

Students who passed through the plant ecology program were imbued by him with a sense of history and continuity. Grant traced his intellectual lineage not just from Professor Curtis, but also through his father to his father's major professor at the University of Chicago – Henry Cowles, considered one of the founders of North American ecology. In this way, all of Grant's students could claim to be part of the march of history and pass along to their students something of this same sense.

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Grant occupied key administrative positions on campus. He served twice as chair of the botany department. He was the academic chair of the then-Institute for Environmental Studies (now the Nelson Institute) from 1974-78 and directed the former Center for Biotic Systems of the institute from 1969-1977. He was closely involved with the UW Arboretum for most of his career. After Curtis' death, Grant took over much of the work in overseeing its development, serving as chair of the Arboretum Committee from 1961 to 1970.

His conservation activities extended beyond the campus. He was early a trustee of the Wisconsin chapter of the Nature Conservancy, helping to guide that organization to the prominence that it has today. During the 1970s, he chaired the Governor's Coordinating Committee for the Kickapoo River and the Nelson Institute's Lake La Farge Project, a series of impact studies of a large dam-building project on the Kickapoo River in western Wisconsin. In the 1970s, damming of rivers was still seen by many as responsible stewardship, and to oppose it called for determined advocacy and command of the science. Today the Kickapoo Reserve and the river that flows through it are considered one of the great natural resources in southwest Wisconsin and a model of culturally and ecologically sensitive management.

This recitation of facts does scant justice to his unique personality. Despite the pipe and tweedy sport coat, Grant was the antithesis of a pontificating academic. He was fond of limericks and was inordinately proud of one exchange debating the gender appropriate for the ecological niche. This poetical point-counter point, which involved two graduates students (one on each side of the gender issue), has been published in at least one academic journal and again in a recent scholarly book. He delighted in mock (to him, not always perceived that way by terrified students) verbal attacks and challenges often beginning with "So hotshot ...." His wearing of bowties, presumably adopted at a time when this was not remarkable, came to be one of his signatures. He inspired great loyalty among his students, though as with any strong personality, there were some who were not charmed by his eccentricities. He played an important role in the evolution of ecological science internationally, nationally, and at the University of Wisconsin. While some of his own students have themselves already retired, the remainder and his grandstudents are a multitude spread throughout the nation and the world in the field of ecology. Three, Evelyn Howell (Landscape Architecture), David Mladenoff (Forest and Wildlife Ecology), and Paul Zedler (Nelson Institute) are current UW-Madison faculty members.

He is survived by his children, Cynthia, Richard, Dan, Margaret and Liatris; and 6 grandchildren.

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