

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

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS WILMOTT RAGSDALE

Wilmott Ragsdale, professor emeritus of journalism and mass communication, died in Tacoma, Washington on January 16, 2009, at the age of 97.

Ragsdale grew up in Washington State. He quit college to work a number of jobs, including a logger, merchant seaman, oil rigger, miner and gardener. In 1937 the Trans Radio Press in Phoenix employed him to write advertising copy. He quickly became a reporter for the news agency. After brief assignments in Chicago and Hartford, he was transferred to Washington, D.C., where *The Wall Street Journal* hired him to cover the State Department. In 1942, Ragsdale joined the staff of Time-Life. He spent much of World War II reporting from Europe; he witnessed the second day of the landings at Omaha Beach. Following the war, Ragsdale returned to Washington State and earned his BA in English at the University of Washington. He received an MA in literature and philosophy from Johns Hopkins University. He lectured on journalism at the New School in 1951-52, then became associate professor of English at Grinnell College. He moved to New York to be an editor at *Newsweek* in 1957, then to Thailand in 1958, where he worked for the Asia Foundation and established a journalism program at Thammasat University.

In 1960, Ragsdale joined the University of Wisconsin journalism faculty as associate professor. In short order, "Rags" became the school's most popular instructor. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to consider him the most charismatic teacher in the school's hundred-year history. Among colleagues not known for their fashion sense, he stood out. Although the son of a drug store owner, Rags dressed like an English country gentleman. He favored tweed jackets and sported a bushy mustache. More importantly, despite his remarkable personal history, he had a gentle pedagogical manner. He wore his experiences as a war correspondent lightly. His passion was for great writing. His "Literary Aspects of Journalism" class became his signature course, perhaps the most popular — certainly the most memorable — of those offered by the department in the 1960s and 1970s. More than one student changed their majors to journalism after encountering Rags in this class. He received the university's Distinguished Teaching Award in 1978.

Ragsdale was a demanding editor, a quality most evident in his graduate seminars in specialized reporting. His seminars produced a generation of reporters and editors at the nation's leading newspapers and magazines. One earned two Pulitzer Prizes, another became managing editor of *The New York Times*. "Rags was tough without being rigid," wrote Patricia Wells of *The Times*. "He got students to produce their best not for a good grade or simply to please him, but to grow as reporters and writers."

Twice Rags took leaves to establish journalism programs, at the University of the Philippines and the American University in Cairo.

Retiring in December 1981, Rags moved back to Washington State and taught part-time at the University of Puget Sound for eleven years. He traveled extensively and fearlessly. At age 85, he climbed the 13,455-foot Mount Kinabalu in the Malay Archipelago.

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