

Vernon Jensen

July 10, 1907 — September 27, 1998

His students knew Vernon (“Pete”) Jensen as a teacher-writer, but there was much more. He was also a staunch family man, father of four (Vernon Jr., Karen, Linda and Margo), active in his church, a dedicated floriculturalist and an active athlete well into his sixties. The Fall Creek Drive residence which he and his wife, Esther, called “home” was a welcoming location for many students, especially when Linda and Margo, the Jensen’s ice-skating twins, were at Ithaca High School and, later, at Cornell. Whether it was black-eyed susans, fritillarium imperialis, meadow rue or wood hyacinth, floriculture was a consuming hobby. The child of Danish immigrants who came to the Great Salt Lake Basin as Mormon converts, Pete was active in the Ithaca Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and a long-time teacher in its Adult Gospel Doctrine class. A varsity baseball player as an undergraduate at Brigham Young University, he starred in faculty-student softball games.

Pete received his Bachelor’s degree in American History in 1932. He learned through personal experience about unemployment during the Great Depression when the only paid work available was as a substitute teacher in his hometown Salt Lake City public schools. Pete and Esther, who had married when he was still in college, decided that he would enter the Master’s degree program at the University of California at Berkeley; that seemed to be all they could manage. Pete excelled there with the assistance of Professor Charles Gulick whom Pete fondly remembered as a “wonderful mentor.” When Pete told Gulick he could not continue his studies because he had a wife and child to support, Gulick arranged to have the university provide the financial support Pete needed. Pete often recalled: “that’s when I was launched in pursuit of a Ph.D.” Pete also remembered his fellow graduate students as an exceptionally “illustrious crowd” that included Clark Kerr, John Dunlop, Lloyd Fisher, Sam Kagel, George Hildebrand, and Arthur Ross.

While working on his dissertation, Pete accepted a one-year appointment to teach economic history and labor problems at the University of Colorado. The one-year assignment lasted nine years from 1937-46. During these years, Pete received his Ph.D. degree in 1939, and became a consultant to the National Defense Mediation Board in 1941. During the war, he served as a public panel member, mediator and arbitrator for the National War Labor Board (NWLB) and Wage Stabilization Director of the NWLB’s Ninth Region.

While working for the NWLB, Pete learned about a newly established School of Industrial and Labor Relations from Phillips Bradley, a touring member of New York State’s Joint Legislative Committee on Industrial and Labor

Conditions (the “Ives Committee”). This committee, chaired by the Leader of the New York State Assembly, Irving M. Ives— who became the School’s first Dean in 1945—played a key role in the creation of a state-supported School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. At Bradley’s urging, Pete applied for a professorship and joined the School’s faculty in 1946. As Pete was fond of saying, “The future of the School was subjected to five days of discussion.”

Pete’s first book, *Lumber and Labor*, was published in 1945 and was reprinted in 1971 by Arno Press and the *New York Times* in their series “Classics in American Labor.” In 1950, Cornell University Press published *Heritage of Conflict-Labor Relations in the Nonferrous Metals Industry Up to 1930*. Greenwood Press reissued *Heritage of Conflict* in 1968 in its important series “The Making of Industrial America.” In 1954, the ILR Press published the second volume, *Nonferrous Metals Unionism, 1932-1952*—a masterful description and analysis of Communist infiltration and capture of the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers (formerly the Western Federation of Miners) and the subsequent expulsion of the union from the CIO. Other important books include, *Hiring of Dock Workers and Employment Practices in the Ports of New York, Liverpool, London, Rotterdam, and Marseilles*, published by Harvard University Press in 1964, and *Decasualization and Modernization of Dock Work* in London, published by the ILR Press in 1971.

In 1973, the same year that the Cornell University Trustees elected Pete, Professor Emeritus, Cornell University Press published his *Strife on the Waterfront: The Port of New York Since 1945*. One reviewer’s comments provide insight into not only the importance of that book but also into Pete’s approach to scholarship:

“Strife on the Waterfront is a first-rate account of labor-management-government relations; it is not a narrow study in labor economics...The author is concerned with humanistic and institutional as well as economic and political facets of the industry.”

Pete became Associate Dean in July 1965 at a time when the faculty again was seriously disputing the ILR School’s future direction. He maintained steadfastly that neither unionism nor collective bargaining should be written off because collective bargaining is a basic democratic institution based on the rights of individual workers in a democratic society. He wrote:

“It was my belief from the beginning that it was intended by the framers of the School, and as it was embodied in the legislation creating the School, that collective bargaining was to be the heart and soul of the School.”

We who were colleagues are honored to prepare these all too brief comments about one of the ILR School’s most distinguished professors. We remember him as a towering volleyball player who loved to needle the graduate

students on the other side of the net when he would spike the ball. We also remember him as the Dean who told one of us that the faculty had recommended tenure (and with that wry grin on his face, added that the faculty was not infallible) and another of us when newly arrived and frustrated and disillusioned about the inability to find suitable housing, “to keep in mind that sooner or later everyone who moved to Ithaca finds a place to live. We haven’t lost a faculty member yet because he couldn’t find a place to live.” He was the Dean who raised hell with a colleague who had the audacity to paint his own office something other than institutional green (one of the very best confrontations in ILR School history) followed, wonderfully, some months later by a wastepaper basket fire in that same office (replete with trucks and sirens) caused by cigar ashes flicked by that same colleague who had to suffer the wrath of Pete once again.

In an era of too many entrepreneur-academics, Pete’s selfless dedication to the School, his love of teaching and scholarship, and his genuine concern for his colleagues’ welfare stand out as the standard of what a distinguished professor and administrator should be.

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