

Eleanor Emerson

June 1, 1896 — December 7, 1978

By the time that Eleanor Emerson joined the faculty of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations in 1946, she had already spent over a quarter century working in the interests of workers and their organizations. She continued that career during the years of her association with Cornell until her retirement in 1964.

Born in Buffalo, New York, Miss Emerson graduated from Vassar College in 1918. Her first job was a director of the Industrial Service Center in Bridgeport, Connecticut, a community center for industrial war workers which continued to operate after the war under the auspices of the Young Women's Christian Association. Following a year as a teacher of history and English at the American Junior College in Athens, Greece, Miss Emerson returned to Buffalo as director of the Urban League Memorial Center from 1926 to 1928. For the next six years she served in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, as YWCA metropolitan industrial secretary, a job that brought her into increasing contact with trade unions. In 1934 she was asked by the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction to supervise the establishment and development of a program of worker education throughout the state, a program that reached tens of thousands of employed and unemployed alike and that also offered employment to large numbers of unemployed teachers. During the war Miss Emerson worked for the National Labor Relations Board, the Division of Labor Standards of the United States Department of Labor, and Rockwell Manufacturing Company as a plant director of labor relations.

The extension program of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations was just getting underway when Eleanor Emerson was appointed in 1946 as assistant professor and extension specialist. Drawing upon her considerable organizational and administrative skills, she contributed importantly in those early years to the formulation of extension division policies, to the forging of links with the labor and management community, to the recruitment and training of extension teachers, and to the development of educational resources in support of the teaching program. The early skepticism and suspicion of the labor movement about the school and its role increasingly gave way as trade unionists around the state came to know and trust Eleanor Emerson. She took the lead in the establishment of an advisory committee on labor education, an important step in gaining union support for the school. She became the school's statewide specialist in labor education, counselled district staff on labor programming, and initiated a large on-campus program of union conferences.

Recognition of Eleanor Emerson's contribution both in and out of the University came with her appointment as professor in 1959 and in 1961 with her selection as secretary of the Adult Education Association of the United States. In 1960 she served as the school's acting director of extension.

Although the foregoing recitation touches upon some of the events in Eleanor Emerson's career, it fails to convey the enormous respect and affection with which she was regarded by those whom she encountered, even the tough-minded, unsentimental among us. This response was engendered by a deep sense of caring coupled with her perceptive intelligence and high standards. She was gentle, yet strong; kindly, yet demanding of the best of each of us. It was not uncommon for Miss Emerson to be mistaken at some large public event for Eleanor Roosevelt (a matter of some amusement and occasional embarrassment to her) and indeed there was some striking physical resemblance to that other great lady. The resemblance, however, would seem to go beyond outward appearances, for the two women shared many other characteristics, among them graciousness and stubborn determination.

A tribute to Eleanor Emerson by one of her colleagues sums it up very well: "Fond as she was of the school and its faculty, however, Eleanor would probably want to be remembered most by the thousands of workers and trade union leaders she taught and counseled over a career that lasted more than forty years. They were the ones who mattered."

George W. Brooks, Alice B. Grant, Ronald Donovan