

# Arthur H. Peterson

*December 12, 1910 — November 24, 1988*

Arthur H. Peterson came to Cornell in 1932 as a graduate student. He left Cornell in 1977 as controller emeritus and professor of business administration, emeritus. When he joined the Cornell administration in 1939, he was charged with setting up a central business office for the statutory colleges. His title then was assistant to the treasurer. Subsequently, he became bursar, director of finance, controller, and, in 1976, was named university treasurer and chief fiscal officer.

During his tenure, Peterson served five Cornell presidents—Edmund Ezra Day, Cornelius de Kiewiet, Deane W. Malott, James Perkins, and Dale R. Corson, the last of whom noted, “Over the years, Pete has been asked to take over everything that has gone wrong. He has done so and made them right.” During his entire career he worked on twelve-month appointments, never worked less than a fifty-five hour week, started every work day by 7:00 a.m., never had a leave of absence for any purpose, and had only eight days of sick leave. In the words of his wife, Helen, “He opened and closed the University daily.”

At one stage, the president sought to arrive in his office early enough in the morning to drop by Peterson’s office to leave a note asking him to call the president. He finally succeeded one day—by arriving at six o’clock. He did not persist, however; it was not worth it—better to let Peterson continue to be the first in the building.

The only words of complaint Arthur Peterson ever uttered had to do with dishonest practices or disorderly administrative practices. When the decision was made to go to completely centralized computing, with business computing incorporated, he did not complain, even though he knew it was an unwise decision. Eventually business computing was changed back to dedicated computers, as Peterson always knew it should be.

Several features characterized him and his work. He never ate lunch, so his colleagues knew they could always find him at his desk—with his office door open—over the lunch hour. He always carried half a dozen sharpened pencils in his shirt or coat breast pocket. He always wore a black suit, even when he attended the annual Safety Division picnic. Peterson always had a large amount of data at his fingertips: he knew, for example, how many trips he had made to Albany in his career—the number was in the many hundreds.

No one understood the complexities of the fiscal workings of Cornell as well as he. Not only did he have a mind suited perfectly to the intricacies and subtleties of the Cornell hybrid which has been called “demonstrably

unworkable in theory,” but through attention to all details, he made it work. He was devoted to Cornell and although he had his own strong sense of what was right, when those above him told him what they believed would be best for Cornell, he found a way to make things move quickly and surely in the direction they desired. One of his former colleagues described Pete as “. . . totally honest, totally forthright, and totally reliable... .”

He never questioned any new assignment, even though he had a full-time primary responsibility. In consequence he had, at times, four or five major jobs. He always organized these operations properly and put them back on a firm base. Occasionally a program was reassigned to someone else, once it was functioning satisfactorily.

At one time or another, Peterson had general supervisory responsibility for just about every Cornell administrative unit on the campus and off, including the Statutory Finance and Business Office, Laboratory of Ornithology, Radio Station WHCU, Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory, Safety Division, Housing, Dining, Fleet, Life Safety, Insurance, Cashier’s Office, Bank Accounts and Cash Management, Non-Academic Personnel, Auditor’s Office, Budget, Campus Store, Print Shop, Photo Science, Cornell Plantations, and Shoals Marine Laboratory. In addition, he was the University central contact point for some 60 major construction projects.

In the community, Peterson was active with the Boy Scouts of America for fifty years, and was chairman of the L.A. Fuertes Council, board member of the Community Chest and United Way, president of the Ithaca Rotary Club, chairman of the Tompkins County Red Cross, chairman of the Ithaca Council of Churches, chairman of Cornell United Religious Work, board member for twenty-two years and chairman of the board for eleven years of Citizens Savings Bank, and board member of the Southside Community Center.

Peterson was a modest man. Knowing in his own mind that a job had been well done was all the credit he seemed to want. When he retired he declined to allow a dinner in his honor, even though he had a large number of friends in the University, in the community and in Albany who wanted to recognize all that he had contributed to Cornell and to Ithaca. He moved from Ithaca to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the moment he retired. He did not want to interfere in the work of his successor (or successors) by continuing to live in Ithaca.

In thanks for his many contributions to the University, anonymous alumni on their own initiative funded the Arthur H. Peterson Oak Grove at Cornell Plantations. On hearing of this honor, Peterson wrote that it “brought tears to my eyes.” The plaque, on a boulder at the site bears the words, “Over Thirty-Seven Years ... From Dawn To Dark.”

*Dale Corson, John Kingsbury, Robert Plane*