

# Robert F. Risley

*March 28, 1922 — January 20, 1994*

Robert Risley who spent most of his working life at Cornell, grew up in Horseheads, New York and graduated high school in 1940. After two years working variously as a construction laborer, grocery clerk, meter repairman, and lathe operator, he enrolled at Union College. For the next half year, he was both full-time student and full-time industrial worker until he entered the U.S. Air Force.

The three and one-half years spent in the service provided early experience in two areas in which he would excel during his lifetime — teaching and administration. After his own training as a bombardier-navigator, he became an instructor of others. When he was shipped overseas as bombardier in a B-29 crew with the 20th Air Force, he held various administrative assignments including those of Squadron Intelligence Officer and Squadron Executive Officer. Captain Risley was mustered out in August 1946.

Graduating from Union College in 1948, Bob came to Cornell's newly established School of Industrial and Labor Relations where he earned the M.S. degree in 1949 and the Ph.D. degree in 1953. While still working on the degree, Bob was administrative assistant to ILR Dean Martin P. Catherwood. He also served a year as consultant to the President of the State University of New York on administrative organization and personnel policy. His dissertation dealt with faculty personnel policies.

Bob Risley was appointed to the ILR faculty in 1953 and a year later was promoted to the rank of Associate Professor. In 1959, he became Acting Dean of the School pending selection of a new dean. This was an assignment he was to take on again on two other occasions, in 1963 and in 1971. In 1960 and 1961, Dean Catherwood, who had become Industrial Commissioner for New York State, persuaded Bob to take a leave of absence to assist him as Deputy Commissioner for New York City. From 1963 to 1970, Bob was Associate Dean for Extension and Public Service. From 1971 to 1974, he served in Day Hall as University Vice Provost. All of these assignments called on Bob Risley's special talent and sensibility in working with varied persons and interest groups whether he was dealing with governmental bureaucrats, legislators, labor or business people, or university employees. He accomplished these purposes, less by rhetorical skill, than by dint of a keen, perceptive and creative intelligence. He was a continuing source of fresh, imaginative ideas to those with whom he worked, and in turn he encouraged others to perform at their best.

Bob was not concerned with style, either in manner or in dress, a fact that sometimes led persons initially to underestimate him. What did come across was the absence of pretention, his total genuineness. What you see is what you got. This directness, coupled with an immense capacity to enjoy life and his great energy, earned him a very large network of friends.

What particularly marked Bob as a teacher was his commitment to the notion that students in the ILR School should acquire some sense of practical problems in the field. Consequently he always made extensive use of practitioners in the classroom. In his first years in the School, Bob was identified with a required course on Industrial Occupations and Processes, known to all as “Bus Riding”, because it featured field visits to area industrial firms including a Pennsylvania coal mine. The course afforded students an opportunity to study labor policies within a specific work setting. Years later, Bob developed a new course on human resource management in small business that focused on entrepreneurship and students did case studies of a firm and reported their findings to management.

Extending the idea of learning from firsthand experience, Bob led the way in creating the School’s credit internship program that permits students to earn full academic credit for a semester while working with some private or public organization related to industrial relations. Bob scouted out the internship opportunities, primarily in Albany, New York City, and Washington, and supervised the program for several years. The program has continued to grow to the benefit of students and to the School itself.

Another example of Bob’s interest in relating education to current problems and issues is the annual conference now called the Netter Seminar that he initiated over 25 years ago. These seminars jointly sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews and the ILR School examine timely issues with special attention to implications for race relations. It is a theme that was especially important to Bob harking back to his days as Deputy Industrial Commissioner for New York City when he inaugurated a number of programs dealing with the status of minorities in the work force, including a pioneering study of household workers. Also as Director of Extension, Bob initiated programs in urban affairs and civil rights leadership training, themes that have continued to occupy a prominent position in extension offerings. In cooperation with the Urban League and the Puerto Rican Forum, he founded Skill Advancement, Inc., a non-profit organization which conducted programs for upgrading the skills of low income workers.

In his various roles at Cornell, Bob was active in the affairs of the ILR Alumni Association. It was his idea to establish an annual award to honor a distinguished graduate of the School who has demonstrated exceptional

professional accomplishment in the field of industrial and labor relations. Over the years, the Judge William B. Groat Award has become highly prized. Fittingly, Bob himself was the 1989 recipient of the award.

From his graduate student days on, Helen and Bob Risley lived in Candor where they became central figures in the life of the village. Here they raised their two sons, Robert, Jr. and Thomas. Helen was a popular high school teacher. For over 25 years, Bob was active in public education as a member and president of the Candor School Board and also with the Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga Board of Cooperative Educational Services, including time as its president. Indeed, whenever the community needed to get things done, Bob Risley was usually called upon. Thus among many other public activities, he was at various times president of the Tioga County Economic Opportunity Board; president of the Tioga Industrial Development Corporation; and board member of the Tioga General Hospital and the Tioga County Chamber of Commerce.

The Risley's big house on Main Street was important in the social life of the community. Traditionally town and university friends would gather there for Fourth of July and New Year's Eve celebrations. Another regular event was the annual "Risley Open" at Catatonk Golf Course.

It was not uncommon for the Risleys to house or provide financial assistance to improvident students. One former student wrote to Helen Risley of her husband: "It was the quality of putting principle before personal advantage that marked him extraordinary. He taught me the job of giving, the job of reaching down and lifting up someone who needed a hand, the job of connecting with others rather than remaining aloof."

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These and similar sentiments shared by the many people who knew him fairly represent the lasting legacy of Bob Risley.

*Karin Ash, Ronald Donovan, Lois Gray*