

Philip Gustaf Johnson

September 21, 1900 — October 3, 1994

Philip Gustaf Johnson, Professor Emeritus of Science Education, died in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, on October 3, 1994. Born September 21, 1900, on a farm in Loomis, Nebraska, the fifth of six children of Swedish immigrants, he began his education in a one-room school, speaking only Swedish. From the village public school he entered the county high school from which he graduated. He entered the University of Nebraska engineering program and dropped out after one year, but he returned to the Teachers College and, with careful planning, graduated in 1923 with his entering class and with a Certificate to teach Science and Mathematics. For two years he was a high school teacher of science, mathematics, and Spanish in Havelock, Nebraska.

From 1925-26, he was a graduate student at the University of Minnesota, but the following year was invited to the University of Nebraska as a graduate student and staff member. He earned his M.S. degree from the University of Nebraska in 1931, with a major in chemistry and minors in biological science and chemistry. From Nebraska, he came to Cornell on a scholarship in pursuit of a more advanced degree, initially as a Fellow in Nature Study and Forestry. He completed his Ph.D. degree in 1933, with a major in science education and minors in biological science and chemistry.

After a brief sojourn in Nebraska, and armed with his degree, he returned to Cornell in 1935 as an Assistant Professor of Science Education. In this position, he assumed the dual responsibility of preparing certified teachers for secondary school science and teaching classes at Ithaca High School. He rose quickly to the rank of Professor of Science Education, and in his early professorship saw the need for a formal, national organization of science teachers. Encouraged by his work with the NEA's Department of Science Instruction, and supported by affiliation with the AAAS, he was largely responsible for the founding, in 1944, of the National Science Teachers Association, which today boasts 50,000 members. He was the first president of NSTA. An energetic visionary, he was called to Washington in 1946, where for seven years he was Specialist in Science Education in the U.S. Office of Education.

In 1953, Dr. Johnson returned to Cornell as Professor and Head of Science Education, which included what was then called "Nature Study," but today is more widely accepted as environmental education. It was after his return that he, together with Professor Paul deH. Hurd of Stanford University, entered an agreement with the Shell Oil Company to support the influential Shell Merit Fellowship Program, a program of graduate study whereby highly selected high school science and math teachers were brought together for special training to become

leaders in their fields. Many of today's outstanding program leaders, department chairs, authors, and educational administrators are products of that far-sighted program that spanned the years 1953-68 and was one of the first industry-supported university programs in science education.

During his tenure at Cornell, Professor Johnson was exceedingly active as lecturer, consultant, and author. He was Director of the NSF Program for Science Teachers at Cornell from 1959-63; Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Chile in Valparaiso; and Lecturer in Residence or Visiting Professor at the University of Costa Rica, Emory University, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of South Dakota, and Oregon State University. There was almost no science education program of size or substance in which Professor Johnson did not have a role or considerable influence.

A serious heart attack in the late 1950s slowed him only momentarily, and he returned to full-time duties at a self-regulated pace that would have worn out most people. He was instrumental in basing at Cornell the AAAS Feasibility Study that led to NSF's development of the largest and one of the most innovative elementary school science programs to that time—*Science, A Process Approach*. Few people are aware that it was Professor Philip Johnson's foresight that gave birth to that program.

When he retired from his Cornell professorship in 1967, Professor Johnson did not retire from professional education. He continued to serve as a Visiting Professor and Science Education Consultant to Puerto Rico and Canada and his active involvement in NSTA. Numerous recognitions and awards from that body attest to his creative and devoted support to science education. He received the Recognition Award of the Science Teachers Association of New York State (1947 and 1987); the Canadian Science Teachers awarded him their Centennial Award in Science Education (1967); and the National Science Teachers Association awarded him their Distinguished Service Citation (1970).

Professor Johnson authored many journal articles and was a co-author of the widely-used, pre-War science textbook series, *Modern Science*, by Dull, Mann, and Johnson. He was the senior author of NSTA's *School Facilities for Science Instruction* and author of numerous articles in various journals and bulletins from NSTA and the U.S. Office of Education. In all his writing, he remained modestly in the background, preferring to create and administer than to accept credit and public acclaim.

A life member of NSTA, NEA, and STANYS, his interests broadened in his final years. He was a consultant on human rights for North Carolina Memorial Hospital; had a lively interest in human rights in educational and medical research; and remained very active in church work.

Philip Johnson married Elsie Thiel in 1929. They had two children: Tom, born in 1935, now an architect in California; and Pat (Evans), born in 1937, now residing in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His first wife, Elsie, died in 1979 after fifty years of marriage. In 1981, he remarried. Olive, who gave unstinting support to Professor Johnson in his professional as well as social and family life, continues to live in their Chapel Hill home. Into his nineties, Professor Johnson was a regular participant in annual conventions of NSTA, where he continued to host the Shell Merit Fellows. Productive into his last decade, he still produced articles for journals such as *The Science Teacher*.

Always a gentleman of impeccable taste and sense of propriety, he had an infectious sense of humor as well as a rare insight into the problems and programs of public education, especially science education. He was truly a giant of the old school. One of his grandchildren expressed a fitting family tribute to Professor Johnson when he said, "Grandfathers are for loving and fixing things." Phil was that kind of man.

Joe Bail, Helen Wardeberg, Verne Rockcastle