



IN MEMORIAM

Ralph Richardson
Professor of Communication Studies/ Speech, Emeritus
Los Angeles
1918 — 2002

Whether in a classroom, a cockpit, at a bridge table or in the middle of a political campaign, Ralph Richardson was a born teacher. He had so much knowledge and enthusiasm in his soul that it just naturally spilled out, even if the person with whom he was sharing was unaware that he was Ralph's student. Everyone who knew or loved Ralph was his student and was the better for it.

Ralph passed away on January 4, 2002, after 38 years in UCLA's classrooms, more than 60 years as a pilot (and of course as a flight instructor), after more than 50 years as a bridge player (and instructor) and after 12 years as a member of the Los Angeles Board of Education and eight years on the Los Angeles Community College Board of Trustees. He served as president of both the Board of Education and Trustees and retired as the trustees' first president emeritus.

Ralph was born on the family farm in Morehead, Kansas, and studied at the University of Kansas. After serving in the Navy, he escaped Kansas to earn a master's degree at Penn State and a Ph.D. at Northwestern, writing a dissertation on Jefferson Davis. In 1948 he began his formal teaching career as a member of UCLA's English Department, later to move into the Department of Speech. Although he studied Jefferson Davis, that work gave him a love and appreciation of the words and genius of Abraham Lincoln. One of the most popular classes at UCLA in the 1970s and 1980s was Ralph's seminar on the speeches of Abraham Lincoln. Ralph did not as much teach Lincoln's words as much as he shared his love of Lincoln's craftsmanship as a speaker and brilliance as a politician. Listening to Ralph teach Lincoln, you felt you were actually listening to Lincoln. At 6 feet 4 inches, he also had the physical persona. If you were going to central casting to put someone in a stovepipe hat, you would pick Ralph.

Although Ralph studied Lincoln's speeches over and over again, with a special fondness for the poetic Second Inaugural and the emotional Farewell to the People of Springfield (students often detected a tear when he closed the course with this speech), he never wanted to complete his study of Lincoln and left one speech unread until just before his death.

Ralph's love for Lincoln, not as a saintly figure, but a real politician, must have led him into his own political career. In 1957 he ran for a seat on the Los Angeles Board of Education and was re-elected twice. On the Board during the difficult days of the 1960s, Ralph served as a champion for teachers as well as students. On the Board, he felt that the needs of the community colleges were lost in the much larger K-12 system and led the effort to separate those colleges from the Board of Education. Before leaving the Board, he spearheaded the move to open West Los Angeles College. When the community colleges were separated from the Board, Ralph ran for the newly created Board of Trustees and served for eight years.

Other than his four children and wife of 50 years, Mary Lou (who served as mayor of Culver City), Ralph's loves were flying and bridge. He was meticulous at both and shared his passion with all his friends, neighbors and family. To be with Ralph was to share everything he loved and it was impossible to spend time with him without being his student and learning something of great value.

In his retirement, Ralph stayed in close contact with almost all of his students, both the formal ones and the informal ones. At his UCLA retirement, almost all of his past students in the Lincoln course returned to pay tribute to the effect the course and, more importantly, Ralph, had on their lives. It was impossible for his students to visit Springfield, Illinois; Washington, D.C., or even Lincoln, Nebraska, without them sending a postcard of Lincoln to Ralph, even if they had been out of touch many years. A visit to the Lincoln Memorial was a time to relive the Lincoln course and remember the special brilliance of both Abraham Lincoln and Professor Ralph Richardson. For most of us, it was not possible to separate the two. He remained a close friend, teacher and advisor to the very end and will always be loved and remembered by all his students because of it.

Jeffrey Cole