IN MEMORIAM

ADOLPH BENJAMIN SWANSON
(1890-1968)

Adolph Benjamin Swanson was born on October 15, 1890, in Marcy township in Boone County, Iowa. His parents, Carl John and Sarah Hendrickson Swanson, had emigrated from Sweden. Ben's father died when he was a child. Ben spent his first years on the farm with four older children, a brother and three sisters. The family spoke Swedish at home and to their neighbors, and they heard church services conducted in Swedish. Ben studied the Bible in Swedish, and he said in later years that he remembered it better in Swedish than in English. As a child he thought it was necessary to address the Lord in Swedish to be understood.

The family soon moved into the town of Boone. On May 12, 1907, Ben was confirmed in the Swedish Lutheran church there. Confirmation came late because it required a great deal of memorization (in Swedish) and also an understanding of doctrine. Ben attended high school in Boone from 1903 to 1907; his report cards, preserved among his papers, show that he was an excellent student in all subjects, though he chose the "scientific course" of study. After graduating he enrolled in Augustana College at Rock Island, Illinois. In October of his sophomore year a ruptured appendix forced him to withdraw, and he spent the remainder of the year teaching in a rural school. He re-entered Augustana and graduated in 1912, one of a class of twenty-four. His chief courses were Greek, Latin, and Swedish.

In the academic year of 1912-13 Ben taught Latin, German, and
mathematics at Osage City, Kansas. Several students tried to dissuade him from leaving by sending him a note written in different hands and signed "Friends": "We hear that you are not going to teach here next year, and as some of us have not had you for a teacher and would certainly like to, and others of us would like to have you again, we ask you to reconsider your decision." He entered the State University of Iowa at Iowa City in the fall of 1913, and was granted an MA degree in German and French at the end of the summer session in 1915. His thesis was entitled "Reconciliation in Friedrich Hebbel's Tragedies." In his second year he held a fellowship in German.

The next year, 1915-16, Ben taught German and English at Ellsworth College in Iowa Falls. In 1916 the offer of a higher salary persuaded him to move to Boise, Idaho, to teach German and French in the high school. He did not return to Boise in the fall; America had entered World War I in April, and Ben was expecting to be drafted. On December 6, 1917, he enlisted at Des Moines, and he was sworn in as a private three days later at Fort Logan, near Denver.

Ben chose to serve in the Medical Corps. For two weeks he was at Fort Riley in Kansas; then he was sent to Fort Dix, N.J., to be assigned to Evacuation Hospital No. 12 and receive training before being sent overseas. On August 14 at Philadelphia he boarded HMS City of Exeter, converted from a cattle boat to a troopship, which joined a convoy in New York harbor and sailed for England. On the first night out Ben noted in his diary, "I study a little French and do some reading when the excitement of leaving has worn away."
He enjoyed this first ocean voyage in spite of the discomfort. A later entry reads: "Think I am making fair progress in French. --Hope I may be able to take an ocean voyage first-class some day. If we only had a few accommodations it would be delightful. The lights and colors of the ocean are wonderful. . . ." He was never seasick, though plenty of his comrades were. The ship sailed north of Ireland, then south through the Irish Sea to Liverpool, on up the Mersey, and through the canal to Manchester. Ben was struck by the beauty of the countryside. From Manchester the troops were moved overland to Southampton and then taken by fast ship to Cherbourg. On his first day in France, August 31, 1918, Ben wrote in his diary, "Took a hike in the afternoon and perpetrated my French on the suffering inhabitants." His French was good enough to make him useful as an interpreter in the hospitals where he served. At one point he was so close to the front that he could hear the cannonading. After the armistice he was sent on into Germany with the army of occupation. In March a special arrangement for American soldiers permitted him to enroll for study at the Sorbonne. While waiting in a payroll line for men assigned to the Sorbonne detachment (they were lined up alphabetically), he made the acquaintance of Carl Swanson, who was later to become his colleague and close friend at the University of Texas. Ben attended his first class on March 8, 1919, and continued to study at the Sorbonne until June.

Ben went back to Boise to teach in 1919-20. The next summer he entered the University of Chicago, but left in the fall to teach French at Rice Institute. He was recommended by his professorsto
Albert Léon Guérard, who taught regularly at Rice but was teaching in the summer school at Chicago. The place at Rice was offered first to Carl Swanson, who happened to be in Guérard's class, but he decided to remain at Kansas University. After two years at Rice, 1920-22, Ben returned to Chicago to continue his doctoral work. During the summer of 1921 he studied at the University of Grenoble in France. He was a fellow in Romance languages at Chicago in 1923-24. He was back again at Rice in 1924-25, and then he joined the Department of Romance Languages at the University of Texas. He spent several summers at the University of Chicago and also the spring of 1929 working on the Arthurian project and his doctoral dissertation on two sixteenth-century editions of the *Perlesvaus*, both under the direction of W. A. Nitze. In 1931 he received his degree.

At the University of Texas Ben was assistant professor from 1925 to 1935, associate professor from 1935 to 1941, and full professor until his retirement on January 31, 1959. He was forced to retire because of a heart condition. After recovering, he was persuaded to teach two small classes at St. Edward's University in Austin. He taught there from the fall of 1963 until February of 1965. For two summers, 1934 and 1935, he was a visiting professor at Our Lady of the Lake College in San Antonio.

On September 4, 1926, Ben was married in New York City to Edith Adele Elizabeth Nelson, who had been studying music there. She was from a family of Swedish settlers near Round Rock, Texas. Ben had met her in Austin. A son, Benjamin Fritiof, was born on
November 27, 1929. Edith died on July 9, 1942. Ben was then married to Mrs. Frances Cummings Waltmon on August 11, 1944 in Austin.

Ben chose to devote his wide knowledge of languages and literature to teaching rather than to scholarly research and publication. In the classroom he was thorough and evenly paced; never did he indulge in striking statements or any other form of histrionics. The French grammars that he wrote or collaborated on are models of clarity. The readings included to build up vocabulary are of the broadly cultural type rather than being exclusively literary. By means of his texts, Ben reached beyond his own classroom to serve the cause of French studies in this country. His books are in use today.

Ben once set down on paper his philosophy of education. It is simple and concise enough to be quoted in full:

"The student who wants a good education should in my opinion set for himself the following goals: 1. He should attempt to master the content of every course in his program. This requires mental discipline. 2. He should be intellectually honest, ready to face all new problems with integrity in spite of preconceived ideas or prejudices. 3. He should discipline himself spiritually. In its broadest sense this means that he should actively cultivate such qualities as tolerance, sympathy and compassion for all his fellow men. These are only the main features of my educational philosophy. It follows, of course, that the good teacher should do his utmost to help his students attain these goals."
The royalties from Ben's books financed many trips to Europe, some lasting the whole summer vacation period. From 1952 to 1967 he made ten trips in all, three times accompanied by his wife Frances. In June of 1968 he visited the office of an old student of his who had been with him in Europe twice. He had with him, in a small plastic bag, a ten-shilling note, half a crown, and some other English coins. "I wish I could be with you in Europe this summer, but I know that I can never go again. Take this money and buy a drink for me in London." And so a toast was drunk to Ben at a pub known to him, only two days before he died.

In his later years Ben was afflicted with cataracts. Since he was able to use his eyes only a few scattered hours a day, time hung heavy on his hands. He delighted in visits from his old friends. Ben had a great deal to talk about. He was an excellent conversationalist and a fine storyteller. He was not the kind of person to capture a roomful of people, being at his best when only a few were present. Here are a few of his stories.

"In the little town near us there was a Swedish doctor from the old country. He was a well-educated man, and since he didn't go to church he was suspected of being a freethinker. But everybody had to go to him because there wasn't any other doctor around. Sometimes when he had to break bad news to a patient, the patient would ask, 'But why did this happen to me? What have I done that I should be sick like this?' Then the old doctor would give a dry Voltairean laugh and say, 'Too much sin! Too much sin!'"

"At the University of Chicago the wife of one of the professors
smiling at them occasionally, as the two following stories will show.

"S. M. Swenson had quite a bit of land near Round Rock, and he helped many Swedes come over and take up land for themselves. On his place there was an old Negro man who had been with him a long time and had learned Swedish. Sometimes Swenson would send the old Negro to the railroad station to meet and help Swedes arriving from the old country. Once a Swedish woman asked him how it was that he could speak Swedish. He replied, 'Jag är en sol bränd svensk.' (I'm a sunburned Swede.) When she heard this she burst out crying and exclaimed to her husband, 'If this is what the sun does to a Swede in Texas, we should never have come here!'"

"In and around Lindsborg in Kansas there are many Swedes. They would write to their relatives and tell them how fine the land was and urge them to come over. Two boys, young men, who had heard their parents talking about Lindsborg all their lives persuaded their father to let them go to visit their uncle in Lindsborg. They had great expectations of Lindsborg because they had heard so much about it. They got off the boat and went into downtown New York. They wandered about overawed by the big crowds of people and the tall buildings. Finally one said to the other, 'If New York is like this, what will Lindsborg be!'"

While teaching French and writing French textbooks, Ben never lost his interest in Swedish. Whenever the minister of the Swedish
Lutheran Church in Austin was to preach in Swedish, Ben did not fail to attend. He visited relatives in Sweden several times, and he read current Swedish fiction. In 1951 he was elected to the board of trustees of the Texas Swedish Cultural Foundation. He offered the first course in Swedish at the University in 1954-55. Ben's efforts in behalf of Swedish culture were recognized officially in 1956 when King Gustavus VI made him a member of the Knights of the Royal Order of Vasa. The presentation was made by the Swedish consul in Houston, and Ben responded in Swedish and English. Though he was not given to ostentation of any sort, Ben often wore the small green insignia of the Order in his lapel. In London or Paris it was sometimes the means of opening a conversation with a traveller from Sweden. Ben loved to talk Swedish, but he did not have many opportunities to do so.

Ben did not lose touch with Augustana College. The fiftieth anniversary of his class came in 1962, and a celebration was held. Ben attended, accompanied by his wife Frances; they were honored guests of the college during their stay. Augustana officials and Ben's classmates were aware of the distinction he had won in a life given to teaching.

After he returned from abroad in the summer of 1967, Ben complained of a dull pain in his stomach. This was diagnosed as an ulcer and he was put on a diet, but the pain diminished only temporarily. He told his stepdaughter, Mrs. Mary Waltmon Smith, that he thought he must have "le crabe." She understood what he meant
because as a student in one of his classes she had read René Boylesve's *La Becquée*, in which the principal character suffers from "le crabe," (cancer). Ben's diagnosis turned out to be correct. Knowing what his chances were, he chose to have an operation rather than to go on suffering. He survived the operation only five days. On August 15, 1968, he died. He is buried in Palm Valley churchyard cemetery at Round Rock, beside Edith.

One of Ben's last notations--perhaps the last--is this: "N'aurai-je pas pour me reposer l'éternité entière?" (Shall I not have all eternity to rest in?)

Ben possessed spiritual discipline as he defined it in the statement of his philosophy of education. In a high degree he possessed the qualities of tolerance, sympathy, and compassion. He had a clear and definite sense of what is fitting and right and of what is unfitting and wrong, but he kept himself free of self-righteousness and moral indignation. To gentleness of spirit he added the grace of humor.

Ben's son, Benjamin Fritiof Swanson, lives in Houston, where he is a research physicist in the Shell Oil Laboratory. He is married to Joanne Crowell and has three children--Benita Joan, Edith Suzanne, and Carl Jeffrey. Frances Swanson lives in Austin in the house on David Street where she and Ben spent many happy years together.
These Resolutions were prepared by a Special Committee consisting of Professors Ernest F. Haden, Wilson M. Hudson, Oscar W. Reinmuth and Raphael Levy, Chairman.
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF A. B. SWANSON


