IN MEMORIAM

KARL AMES

Karl Ames was for sixteen years one of the most likeable and most widely respected members of the Department of English. Colleagues, students, and staff members found him friendly, self-effacing, intelligent, scholarly, generous, and energetic. An excellent and dedicated teacher, Karl believed that a teacher should concentrate on but go beyond the classroom. He would respond willingly and cheerfully to requests from high schools, other colleges, and the community, giving literally hundreds of talks and lectures.

An accomplished and almost fanatic tennis player, Karl enjoyed vigorous matches in both singles and doubles throughout his life. He died suddenly, the way vigorous people want to die. There was no illness, no hospital. Karl lived at peak energy and with full enjoyment for 71 years, and then his great heart shut down.

Karl was born in 1911 in New York City. He earned a bachelor's degree in 1932 at the City College of New York and a master's degree from Columbia University in 1934. In the 1930's, the M.A. at Columbia was a demanding program with standards higher than those found in some doctoral programs of the post World War II period.

During the 28 years Karl taught high school English in New York City, his outstanding abilities were repeatedly recognized. He was invited to teach also at C.C.N.Y., Hunter College, and Fairleigh Dickinson. He was offered, but did not accept, appointments with the University of Wisconsin, Swarthmore, and the University of Pennsylvania. Karl also won two John Hay Fellowships, using them for further graduate study, most notably at the University of Chicago under Walter Blair, the leading scholar in the field of American humor. Even the U.S. Army
recognized Karl's abilities, selecting him during his World War II service as one of a very small number of soldiers to study the Japanese language. One of Karl's classmates, it is interesting to note, was William Arrowsmith, later a distinguished classicist but then an astonishingly bright young man whose broad education did not include classical music. Always the teacher, Karl undertook the job of filling in this gap in his young friend's education, and the two became life-long friends.

Although he was devoted to high school teaching, Karl's inquiring mind sought new challenges, and in 1966 he accepted an appointment to the English Department at The University of Texas. At first, Karl's specialty was E360M, "English for High School Teachers." No one could have been better qualified to guide the development of young teachers. Karl's student-evaluations, consistently marked by high praise, support that judgment. Words such as "great," "superb," and "the best" recur. Many of his evaluations are represented by this brief student comment: "The finest professor I've had in my four years of college."

Wanting the best, the University Interscholastic League recruited Karl for a series of fifteen video-taped lectures on American literature which have since been used widely in central Texas and beyond. Asked to take charge of the annual spelling contest sponsored by the U.I.L., Karl found the program inadequate, reshaped it into an excellent program, and wrote a pamphlet on spelling which has come to be the source of information for spelling contests.

Karl's second interest was American humor, and he soon developed a senior course—exhaustively researched and prepared—which immediately became an integral part of the Department's program. The course was not a joke-telling session, not a "fun" course. It was a scholarly study of humor from Ben Franklin to the present. It was a demanding course, and yet the only problem was that enrollment tended to be too high.

Karl's third major interest, actually a life-long passion, was onomastics, the study of names. First used to stimulate reluctant high
school students—Karl often said that all people would perk up when the origin of their name was mentioned—onomastics became, like his interest in humor, another field of scholarly study. Through his study of names, Karl developed rich insights into linguistics, cultural history, national relationships, literature, and law.

High school teachers are not required to do research, nor do their schedules allow time for research. Thus Karl, at the age of 55, teaching full-time at a major university, was beginning a new career. Although he devoted most of his research time to liaison work with high schools and to community service, Karl proved to be a remarkably able research scholar. His bibliography for the period 1965-1978, for example, consists of 152 items. The list includes in-service training for teachers, guest lectures to students, appearances on radio (including national radio) and television, work as a consultant for both high schools and colleges, and the reading of papers at meetings of learned societies, most notably the Modern Language Association.

Representative subjects are personal names, place names, political humor, Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, William Shakespeare, and a wide variety of topics in folklore. Journals publishing the results of Karl’s research include New York Folklore Quarterly, Historical Society of Southern California Quarterly, C.C.T.E. Proceedings, American Names Society Bulletin, Indiana English Journal, Studies in American Humor, and Names, the journal of the American Name Society.

Chairman of the South Central American Name Society, 1980-81, Karl was appointed to the National Humanities Faculty, nominated for teaching awards, and honored as a pioneer folklorist of New York City for having taught the first folklore course in a New York City high school. He was a member of the American Name Society, South Central Name Society, American Folklore Society, and the Texas Folklore Society.

Karl’s reputation as a student of names resulted in his being called, on several occasions, as an expert witness in a trial, and—once the case was settled—led to additional articles, including what may be
his most important single publication: "Is 1069 a Name?" A thirty-five page study of a famous case, the essay was written in conjunction with Thomas Lockney, the lawyer who represented a man named Michael Herbert Dengler. Dengler was trying to have his name changed to 1069, a number he sincerely believed representative of his "authentic identity," his "relationship to nature, time, the universe, and essence." Dengler lost his case, but Karl's thorough analysis is a landmark in the scholarly study of names.

Karl is survived by his beloved wife, officially Roberta but always known as Bobbie; their son Michael, editor of the Temple University Press in Philadelphia; a daughter, Carol, who works in the Adult Education Campus Study-Vacation Program at Cornell University; their youngest, Chris, a U.T. Plan II graduate with a Ph.D in English from Stanford currently teaching at Agnes Scott University in Decatur, Georgia; and four grandchildren.

Family was central to Karl, but he is also survived by thousands of students and hundreds of colleagues who never paid any attention to his self-deprecations but knew him to be a rara avis, a splendid teacher, brilliant scholar, marvelous friend, and—for those with the energy to keep up—a generous, delightful, and unforgettable companion.

Adjectives do not convey the personality, but something of Karl's special qualities may be indicated by a brief remark. One of Karl's boon companions, having failed again in efforts to match Karl's thoughtfulness and generosity, finally gave up and remarked to Bobbie, "That's the price of being Karl's friend; you have to accept the fact that he's going to be a better friend than you are."
In friendship as in tennis, in teaching on or off the campus, in scholarship as in his devotion to family, Karl Ames always gave one hundred percent.

William H. Cunningham, President
The University of Texas at Austin

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a Special Committee consisting of Professors Max Westbrook (Chairman), Thomas Whitbread, and Maureen McElroy.