REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
A. LESLIE WILLSON

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for A. Leslie Willson, professor emeritus, Germanic studies, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
A. LESLIE WILLSON

A. Leslie Willson, emeritus professor of Germanic Languages at The University of Texas at Austin, died at the age of 84 in his home in Austin, Texas, on December 28, 2007. His three children, six grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren survive him. He first came to UT as an undergraduate student in journalism. He served as a faculty member in the German department from 1955 to 1961 and from 1966 until his retirement in 1992; from 1972 to 1980 he also served two terms as the department’s chairman. His tireless efforts to foster interest in German literature, language, and culture were evident in his initiating or supporting a great number of activities, such as the writer-in-residence program and his bilingual literary magazine, that drew attention to UT and helped the German department remain among the top-rated departments in the United States.

He was born Amos Leslie Willson, Jr. in Texhoma, Oklahoma, on June 14, 1923. Being raised in the Panhandle of Texas and having graduated from Amarillo High School, he always considered himself a true Texan. As a Texan, he stood tall and was an asset to UT and the department, where everybody knew him as Leslie because he had decided to drop his father’s first name while keeping the initial. Only very late in his career, he would omit the first name’s initial in some publications. Even as one of the department’s grand old men, he would simply introduce himself with, “Hi, I’m Leslie Willson” to new students at the departmental ice-breaker parties, and then he would inquire about the students’ interests. And, of course, he would also tell fascinating stories, especially stories about his encounters with a tremendous number of German writers.

The great irony is that even wonderful storytellers sometimes do not get to tell all their stories. Leslie, for example, had a great story to tell about his military service, but he was not allowed to because that story was classified. Just weeks before Leslie’s death, it was declassified. As Leslie’s daughter Juliet writes, he was able to talk about this experience for the first time to a member of the National Parks Service’s “Oral History for the American People” project, who was recording the memories of the soldiers of the unit that was so secret that it was known by the address under which the men received their personal mail: “Post Office Box 1142.” This unit was tasked not only with interviewing and interrogating high-level prisoners of war but also with monitoring the “prisoner-to-prisoner” conversations around the clock. To fulfill this task, the American soldiers needed a good command and aptitude for foreign language, mostly German. Among many accomplishments, the Box 1142 unit is credited with discovering the existence of the German rocket program (the V1 and V2 rockets) at Pennemünde.

After the war, Leslie’s academic pursuits became intertwined with his new family when he met his life-long soul mate and wife, Margaret Jeanne Redrow, at UT, where he finished his bachelor of journalism and received his master’s degree in German. When Leslie and Jeanne met, they were both first-year graduate students. They were married in 1950 and stayed married until death parted them when Jeanne passed away May 11, 2006. While the young couple welcomed three children—Brian, Juliet, and Kevin—into this world, Leslie earned his Ph.D. from Yale University and accepted teaching positions at Wesleyan College and Northwestern University, and then The University of Texas at Austin. He left Texas again to teach at Duke University and Penn State University.

All these stations in Leslie’s career, before he finally returned to Texas for good in 1966, remained dear to him, both in his memories and personal contacts. He had especially fond memories of his time as a graduate student
at Yale; what impressed him in particular was the feeling of being treated by his professors as a colleague, albeit a young one. He took this as a model for how he wanted to treat his own students. It is a token of his gratitude that Leslie edited the writings of Herman J. Weigand, his dissertation supervisor: *Surveys and Soundings in European Literature* (1966) and *Führten und Funde: Aufsätze zur deutschen Literatur* (1967). And before that, Leslie dedicated his study, *A Mythical Image: The Ideal of India in German Romanticism*, the 1964 revised book publication of his dissertation, to Weigand, “genial scholar, good friend”—ways in which Leslie himself may be remembered.

By this time—the mid-1960s—Leslie had already been publishing for a decade. Articles on Herder and India, the “bläue Blume,” and other writers and aspects of German Romanticism appeared from 1955 onward in scholarly journals, such as the *PMLA*, *Monatshefte*, *The Germanic Review*, and *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Then he followed with his book-length study of 11 Romantics (in the wide sense) that examined how Romanticism constructed its mythical image of India as an influential yet short-lived source of poetic inspiration. It is an insightful study written well before an interest in Orientalism became more popular. In sum, Leslie was beginning to leave his mark as a scholar of German Romanticism.

By the mid-1960s, however, Leslie was also poised for a major shift in his scholarship. Two publications that he edited as part of two annual symposia sponsored by the German department at UT illustrate this shift. In 1960, Leslie edited *A Schiller Symposium*; in 1973, he not only edited *A Günter Grass Symposium*, but he had also translated the most recent of Grass’s plays, *Uptight*, which saw its English premiere during the symposium in April 1970. A Fulbright Research Fellowship made it possible for Leslie to travel to Germany during the academic year 1962-63. His intention had been to do research on Friedrich Schlegel, a writer and main theoretician of Romanticism; instead, Leslie became immersed in the German literary scene of the time. He embarked on what would become the journey of his life: contemporary literature and literary translation.

Leslie perceived a “time lapse” between, on the one hand, what was written in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and, on the other hand, what was read at American universities; therefore, he set out to remedy this time-lapse situation. His personable, out-going Texas style served Leslie well in reaching out to German writers. One of his favorite stories was how he was able to go to the legendary Group 47 meeting at Princeton. Understanding that only a personal invitation by Hans Werner Richter would secure anybody’s participation as well as knowing when Richter would be staying in the Algonquin Hotel in New York, Leslie checked himself into the hotel. When he called Richter’s room and Richter’s wife answered the phone, he offered to treat the Richters to breakfast. During breakfast, Richter first declined Leslie’s request to attend the Group 47 meeting but then invited Leslie because Richter felt cheered up after a long flight. This gathering in April 1966 would be Leslie’s only time to join the Group 47. The planned 1968 meeting in Prague, to which Leslie had been invited, was cancelled after the Soviet suppression of the Czech reform government, and Richter pledged to wait until the group would finally be able to meet in Prague.

In the fall of 1966, Leslie returned to UT and, in 1968, presented the first issue of his bilingual literary magazine, *Dimension: Contemporary German Arts and Letters*. From that year onward to 1994, 20 volumes and several special issues were published, at first with support from UT and later from Inter Nationes, the German government’s institute for cultural relations. A total of 610 authors were printed in *Dimension*; for many of them, this was their first publication in English, even for some major writers, such as Günter Kunert, Jürgen Becker, Peter Rühmkorf, Nicolas Born, and Barbara Frischmuth. The sheer number is hard to overestimate. The presence of the magazine in the German department drew in students, some of whom worked for the magazine as student assistant-to-the-editor and others contributed translations, which often were their first publications. *Dimension* also made the department’s flourishing writer-in-residence program even more attractive to German authors. The names of one major poet, one major novelist, and one major playwright may suffice as examples: Günter Kunert, Martin Walser, and Heiner Müller were at the department during Leslie’s tenure as department chair.

His friendships with many authors were a natural consequence of all his activities. Leslie’s correspondence with these authors is still astounding; it allowed him to “know” over 300 authors. During his trip to German-speaking countries in the spring of 1979, Leslie visited over 70 of these authors. He had a story to tell about each of them. He was on first-name basis (being “per du” means quite a big deal for German speakers) with many of the writers, including Günter Grass. When Grass toured the United States on a reading tour in 1989, Leslie was
invited to read the English translation when Grass read from his works in Houston, Texas. And, Grass was appalled when Leslie told him of his plans to discontinue *Dimension*. But all good things must come to an end, and so did Leslie’s magazine in 1994. In 1997, Leslie donated the archives for *Dimension*—including not only his correspondence, but also manuscripts and working library—to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

While Leslie’s efforts and interests were many, his focus was always on bringing German literature to the United States. At first, he was primarily a teacher. His classes included translation seminars, but he also taught beginning language classes because he believed that he had to help students lay the foundations for more advanced classes. As a natural consequence, he actively supported the German Summer School of New Mexico from its founding in 1975. He spent many summers in Taos Ski Valley teaching and, as some fondly remember, occasionally demonstrating his tap-dancing skills on talent night. In addition, he always was a scholar. While he widely published and lectured on contemporary German-language literature, Leslie is perhaps best known for his work as an editor. And, while *Dimension* may be his most prominent editorial achievement, it is not the only one. When Continuum Press in New York began work on its tremendous undertaking of the 100-volume “The German Library,” Leslie became involved immediately as a member of the editorial board and edited several volumes himself: *German Romantic Criticism* (1982), *Contemporary German Fiction* (1996), *Contemporary German Stories* (1998), and *Three Contemporary German Novellas* (2001).

Firmly believing that German literature should be available to every interested reader in the United States, regardless of that person’s command of German, Leslie appreciated the value of translation very early. As a result, he valued the newly-emerging field of translation studies, and he appreciated the importance of professional organizations in the area of translation. Consequently, he helped start the American Literary Translators Association as its co-founder and first president in 1979. He also served as president of the American Translators Association from 1991 to 1993. Among his responsibilities as president-elect was publication of the proceedings of the annual conference of the American Translator Association: *Looking Ahead* (1990) and *Horizons* (1991).


Leslie’s achievements are substantial—the “list” of his achievements suggested here remains incomplete—and they span his long career as genial scholar, inspiring teacher, and good friend to many colleagues and students. That he deeply cared about his profession and his profession’s subjects and goals won wide recognition, ranging from his memberships in the Darmstadt Academy for Language and Literature and the Mainz Academy of the Sciences and Literature to honors, such as the Bundesverdienstkreuz Erster Klasse, awarded by the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Goethe Medaille from the Goethe-Institut. His commitment to his profession also made him a critical and deeply concerned observer of the decline of German studies in the United States. Together with co-author, John Van Cleve, Leslie set out to offer his opinion in *Remarks on the Needed Reform of German Studies in the United States* (1993). While not all readers agreed, Leslie and his co-author offered specific examples of what might work in some instances; however, they mainly offered perspectives of hope.

Leslie lived a professional career that was not only an exiting personal journey through German literature, but it was also hard work characterized by Leslie’s belief that a Germanist had to do what a Germanist had to do: if knowledge of contemporary German literature is lacking, you start teaching it; if texts are not available, you publish them yourself, and so on. This was not just idle talk; Leslie practiced what he preached. And, he did it Texas style: with humor, with a sense of grand gestures, and with enthusiasm. Especially his enthusiasm—for German literature and for life in general—is Leslie’s true legacy.
This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors John Hoberman and Ingo Stoehr.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on February 3, 2009. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, WMB 2.102, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.