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Osborne Remembered as Witty, Gracious, Courteous and Absolute

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—“A quintessential gentleman professor” is how Dr. Joyce C. Brown describes her friend and colleague, Thirlen Osborne, who passed away Nov. 17 in Shelby, N.C., at the age of 97. He taught English at Gardner-Webb University from 1957 to 1987 and was awarded the status of professor emeritus of English after his retirement.

Dr. Thirlen Osborne

Brown, GWU professor emerita of English, remembers being nervous the first time she met Osborne. “He was chair of the department and while he was formal, he was gracious, always witty and courteous, as well as absolute,” she reflected. “My first lessons in college teaching were conducted by Mr. Osborne. Thirlen taught propriety and courtesy through example. He loved the Victorian greats—Hardy, Tennyson, Browning—and shared his love of classicism with his students.”

Osborne grew up in Winchester, Ky. His father was a retail dairyman, and Osborne helped him deliver milk from house to house. He was active in school musical programs and was a member of the Kentucky All-State High School chorus, receiving high honors in the tenor solo division.

He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from Kentucky Wesleyan College in Owensboro. He earned his Master of Arts degree from the University of Kentucky in Lexington. He studied on the doctoral level at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, focusing on the Renaissance and the 19th century periods of English literature.

Osborne said his first inspiration to teach was his favorite English professor at Kentucky Wesleyan, Miss Pauline Peeples. According to Osborne, “She was very tough, very traditional, but she was an excellent teacher and motivator.” His teaching career began at Winchester High School from which he had graduated. Later, he taught high school English in Texas, Indiana, and Kentucky.

In 1987, three longtime Gardner-Webb professors retired and were honored with emeritus status: from left, P.A. Cline, associate professor of ancient languages and literature for 21 years, Thirlen Osborne, professor of English for 30 years, and Garland Allen, professor of religion and history for 26 years. Photo from GWU Archives

At Gardner-Webb, he was the sponsor for the Future Teachers of America and faculty adviser to the staff of “Reflections,” the school’s literary magazine. He contributed a prayer to the magazine and also wrote an article on the comical comments made by his students.

Brown taught with Osborne for 21 years. His love for the age of Victoria extended to collecting the gadgetry of the period—furnishings, cranberry glass and most especially, clocks. One of her most cherished possessions is a little German clock he gave her. “I keep it to remember him by—his representation of something fine and passing, as we all tried to contribute in our own ways to the growing of our beloved Gardner-Webb from a two-year institution, providing the foundation for success in college, to a university, offering full career programs,” Brown observed. “That institutional growth began with professors who, like Thirlen, believed that all success starts with building strength in scholarship and in character.”

A memorial service for Osborne is to be held today (Nov. 20) at 2 p.m. at Boiling Springs Baptist Church, where he had served as a deacon, choir member, Sunday school teacher, member of the music and evangelism committees and a representative to the Kings Mountain Baptist Association. The family will receive friends before the service in the church sanctuary.

Located in the North Carolina foothills, Gardner-Webb University is a place where Christian compassion meets critical thinking. A private, Christian, liberal arts university, Gardner-Webb emphasizes a strong student-centered experience and rigorous academics to prepare students to become effective servant-leaders within the global community. Ignite your future at Gardner-Webb.edu.