In Memoriam: Blythe Ahlstrom (1933 - 2019)

10/15/2019

Blythe Ahlstrom, long-time friend and colleague to the history department, died at his home in Logan, Utah on August 28, 2019. Blythe was a popular U.S. history professor and university administrator at USU and California State University, Chico, and held positions as Professor, Executive Assistant to the President, and Associate Provost. A graduate of Columbia and Rutgers University, he also served as an Army Intelligence Officer at the Pentagon. USU professors remember their colleague and friend.

Blythe Ahlstrom returned to USU as a history department faculty member in the fall of 1964. Seven years later, he went with Dr. Stanford O. Cazier to Chico State in California as an assistant to the President. They returned to Utah State in the spring of 1979 when Cazier replaced Glen L. Taggart as President of USU. Blythe and Anne—as well as their children Susan, Jon, and Evelyn—epitomized commitment and love of Aggies. The Ahlstroms served the university and Logan community continually until his death this past August. In spite of years as an administrator, Blythe’s true love was teaching and he worked diligently to provide his students with exceptional classes. When he retired from the Provost’s Office, he returned to the history department and taught whenever needed.

In retirement, the Ahlstroms chose the USU Merrill-Cazier Library as the focal point of their service. Blythe believed strongly in the significance of a university’s library and understood the dynamic of change as the academic world moved toward an electronic knowledge base. A kind, compassionate caring man, Blythe used his time and resources to enhance the library as the physical center of learning on campus. When he came back to USU, I was one of his advisees and then when he returned from Chico, we became colleagues and forged a professional and personal relationship that, like USU’s library, stood the test of time.

-- F. Ross Peterson

I remember the friendly welcome Blythe Ahlstrom offered the first time I walked into the history department in 1970. Blythe was sincere. He was proud to be a historian. Above all, he was loyal—to his profession, his colleagues, and his family. He was dedicated to the department and to the university which he followed even in his retirement as he continued to serve the Friends of the Library. I remember him as always curious, and I was not surprised to see him traveling the world and volunteering his service where he saw the need.

-- Ed Glatfelter

I first knew Blythe in the 1990s, after he had returned to USU on President Cazier’s staff. Although he was an administrator, he was teaching American Civ, staying in touch with students. In all his roles he was kind, humorous as generous. He had tact, and many administrative discussions began with a laughing “Well...” Teaching and administration did not prevent him from being an active philanthropist and world traveler, and he was often seen at concerts. He was a good and decent colleague!
I came to USU because of Blythe Ahlstrom. My dissertation director at William & Mary had previously been on the faculty at Rutgers University when Blythe was a graduate student there and this connection surely opened an opportunity for me. When Linda and I arrived in Logan in early September 1970, he and Anne welcomed us, allowed us to take hot showers at their house while we bunked at the Vannoy apartments, which had no hot water. They took us around Logan while we looked for a place to rent, and translated Utah and Mormon lingo for us. We learned the difference between steak and stake, for example. They were also wonderful hosts to us when I gave an American Revolution bicentennial lecture at Chico State. After their return to Logan, Blythe and his son Jon joined Ross and me on some backpacking trips, where Blythe’s good cheer and jokes kept us moving up the trail.

Blythe was deeply committed to his students and their education. I remember that he once, if not more times, experimented with teaching History 170, the old quarter-long daily American History survey. If I remember correctly, he would start the course in 1945 in order to provide more context for the world the students lived in and would then jump back and bring them along to where they started. He hoped that with more of a working knowledge of the recent past, they might better understand where the course was headed.

When Blythe returned to USU he again taught American history courses, often just to help increase the offerings when we were understaffed. As a teacher and colleague he was always approachable, always seemed to see the best in everyone and in every situation. He was loyal, a steadfast and committed supporter of the Department and USU, and gave his time and energies to good causes. After his retirement he put in many hours as head of the Friends of the Library, a recognition of its central place in the university. He was a wonderful colleague and friend.

-- Mick Nicholls