

DEAN WILLIAMS*

REMEMBERING WENDELL JOHNSON[†]

THE DEBATE RAGES on college campuses across the country. For whom should academic buildings be named?

Academic institutions have recently switched from honoring scholars, whose main contributions were knowledge and students' intellectual growth, to [recognizing] those whose contributions have been primarily financial.

This university [the University of Iowa] can be proud of its academic superstars, past and present. But even naming buildings for them doesn't ensure they'll be remembered.

Students and younger faculty may recognize the names of former university presidents: the Hancher Auditorium and Boyd Law Building. But how many are aware of the scholars (outside of their own field)? What do names like Seashore, or Lindquist, mean to those not old enough to have known them?

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A column can't do justice to any of them, let alone all. But I can share with you a little insight into at least one of those personalities, my teacher, mentor and friend, Wendell Johnson, for whom the Speech and Hearing Center is named.

Johnson grew up on a farm in Kansas, struggling with a severe problem of stuttering — a fact that was to shape the rest of his life. He learned early that farming was not for him. An avid reader, he found it difficult to plow straight rows with a book in one hand and the reins in the other.

As a boy, Wendell was known as "Jack" to his friends, because of his prowess as a boxer at a time when Jack Johnson was a prominent pugilist. The name stuck, but the profession didn't. Baseball was his game. Ironically, a promising career as a professional pitcher was cut short when his hand was crushed in a printing press. Jack's stuttering was no handicap when he wrote, and that became his primary activity for the rest of his life.

In search of a cure for his stuttering, his road ultimately led to Iowa City in the 1920s and to undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees at the UI. His master's thesis, "Because I Stutter," was published commercially.

It's hard to believe today, but at the time Jack began doing scientific research on stuttering little factual information was available about this problem. Some were still practicing the Middle Ages' treatment of cutting tongues. He was a pioneer. As such, he often described himself as a human guinea pig as he designed, and then carried out, experiments on himself: attempting to change his handedness, curtailing speech altogether for periods, and then struggling through self-imposed public speaking assignments.

Because there was no "body of literature," he set about writing it. This set him off on a quest for any insights he could find in a range of disciplines literally from art to zoology. Out of this research, that would ultimately constitute hundreds of papers and books, came a huge breakthrough in understanding stuttering: the interaction between speaker and listener.

As Jack put it cryptically, "Stuttering often begins, not in the child's mouth, but in the parent's ear." That is, it is the well-meaning adult's diagnosis and treatment of "stuttering,"

applied to a child learning to talk, that contributes tremendously to the ultimate development of the problem. One of the most dramatic of his findings was a Native American tribe that had no word for stuttering — and no stutters. Former tribal members, once westernized, developed roughly the same proportion of stutters.

This discovery was related to his interest in "general semantics" (the study of other problems also related to language), one of the most popular courses on campus at the time, and the subject of his best-selling *People in Quandries* (still in print 45 years after publication).

Over the years he helped develop professional journals and organizations in his field, worked Washington, D.C., to gain recognition for "speech pathology" by the Veterans Administration and other federal agencies — while, not incidentally, overcoming his own stuttering problem.

He was much beloved, even by those in Iowa City who knew little of international recognition and awards. To them he was a neighbor, a great public speaker, teller of stories, composer of songs and limericks, personal counselor and active member of civic organizations.

When he died, in addition to the stories in national news magazines and newspapers, the family was flooded with thousands of letters from individuals around the world, formerly unknown to them, who had been touched in some way by his life and love of humankind.

Who knows of how many other names adorning buildings on this campus comparable stories could be told? That I will leave to others. But at least when next you pass by the Wendell Johnson Speech and Hearing Center you won't have to ask, "Who was Wendell Johnson?"