MEMORIAL RESOLUTION FOR
JOSEPH RAY COTTON (1892-1971)

Joseph Ray Cotton was born in St. Joseph County, Indiana on December 16, 1892. He began high school in Walkerton, Indiana and later attended high school in Lewistown, Montana where he won the high school speaking and debating championships in 1911 and 1912. He went on to the University of Michigan where he received his A.B. degree in 1916. He did further work at the Universities of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Marquette University where he received his M.A. degree in 1930. He began his long career as a teacher at high schools in Kalamazoo, Michigan (1916-17) and New Albany, Indiana (1917-18). The State Teachers College at Whitewater, Wisconsin employed him between 1918 and 1927, when he came to the State Teachers College in Milwaukee, where he remained until 1945. He died on August 25, 1971 in St. Petersburg, Florida.

Joe Cotton (he was always called "Joe" by those who know him) taught various courses in the social sciences and his students remember him as a man both forceful and kind. His students were assigned to seek out and converse with men and women of all political persuasions, and he would soon discover in class whether or not they had carried out their assignments. An iconoclast and skeptic by disposition he subjected conventions, social and political institutions, and beliefs to merciless critical analysis at every opportunity for the benefit of his students and colleagues. Students soon learned to think logically, speak precisely, not to overgeneralize and to subject themselves to the relentless use of the Socratic method. These requirements were also demanded of the students of the Debate Club (of which he was a co-advisor) and a group called Representative Speakers (of which he was the advisor). He was an instructor who made a strong and lasting impression on his students.

Joe Cotton felt great concern over a wide variety of social injustices, and was a zealous advocate of the reforms he thought were necessary to eliminate these injustices. He believed that education should deal with the pressing problems of our times in a truly relevant manner. Although he plied his views fearlessly and powerfully, he nevertheless, extended the civilized courtesy of listening to and giving careful consideration to the views of the opposition. He would have considered it a betrayal of democracy to deny anyone freedom of expression. His friends included not only liberals but also rigid conservatives and a surprisingly gentle anarchist.

Joe Cotton stood for greater international cooperation, a more equal distribution of income, and perhaps most of all, the cooperative movement. While some regarded his views as unrealistic and others were annoyed by his tactics, he did not waver the slightest from his staunch beliefs. He was an activist as well a foremost member of the vocal minority. He belonged to the La Follette Progressive wing of the Republican Party and became a member of the Socialist Party. He opposed the entry of the United States into World War II until Germany invaded the U.S.S.R.

He conceived and carried through constructive demonstrations such as the cooperative house that he, together with his students, built on South 27th Street. In constructing the house he made practical use of waste cans and bottles as insulation in concrete walls. This was an early example of recycling which is so popular today.

Many persons who in conscience follow the path of dissent do so at a high
cost in personal sacrifice. Today the role of the activist critic is more common and widely accepted. Joe Cotton was an activist critic when the role was uncommon, the stage inhospitable, and the sacrifice more costly. In this sense he was a generation ahead of his time.

Ernest Bellis
Neal Billings
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