



# Wyoming's History Authority

By Rick Carpenter  
ALUMNEWS Editor

**T.A.** "Al" Larson's educational philosophy of challenging students to the outer limits of their individual capabilities to get the best out of them is not only something he practiced in his classroom for 39 years as a University of Wyoming history professor, it's also a philosophy he

not aware of 98 percent of the jobs that were available. I just always thought I'd be a journalist because I had edited the school newspaper. It never crossed my mind that I would some day be a history professor."

Throughout Larson's life, particularly when he was young and trying to find his niche, fate would throw a series of curves that would eventually direct him to become THE authority of Wyoming history. His first dealing with fate came as a

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practiced in his personal life to get the best out of himself.

During homecoming ceremonies in October, Larson will receive the Medallion Service Award from the University of Wyoming Alumni Association for his dedication and service to the university as a professor emeritus, as the leading authority of Wyoming history and for his continued work for UW as a member of the Wyoming House of Representatives following his retirement from UW.

As the son of Swedish immigrants, Larson was born and raised on a farm near Wakefield, Neb. where his parents gave him a daily dose of the hard work ethic.

Larson remembers well his parents telling him the way to get ahead in life is to "do what you're told, go to class and don't fail to turn in an assignment."

Although Larson said it may have seemed hard at the time, he now feels the lessons he learned from his parents have paid off and he's thankful for the pressure they applied on him to succeed.

"People who came out of more favorable home situations, with more educated parents and so on, probably weren't pushed as hard as I was," he said. The results were immediate for the young Larson.

After graduating at the top of his high school class and serving as the editor of his high school newspaper, Larson left the Nebraska farm to attend the University of Colorado with his mind set on becoming a journalist.

"The jobs you know about while growing up in a small town tend to limit your goals," Larson said. "I was

University of Colorado freshman.

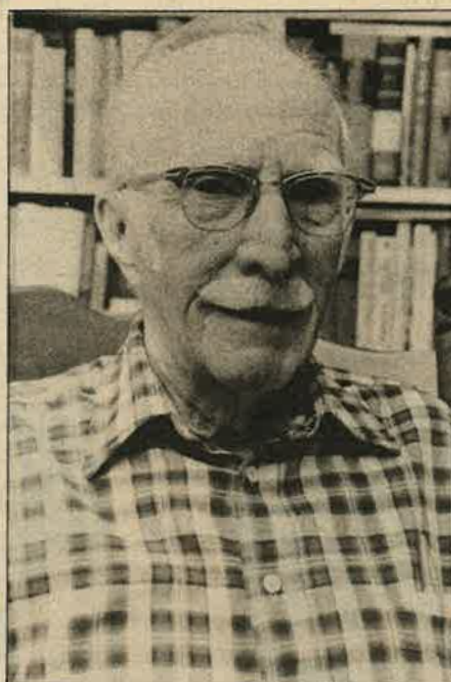
"When I went to Colorado, they didn't have any courses for freshman journalism majors so they channeled me into a straight liberal arts program," Larson remembers with a sharp mind. "A young history professor saw my intense drive to succeed in all my classes and, after class one day, he cornered me and said 'don't go into journalism, you ought to major in history and learn something, then go off to write.'"

"Since I hadn't met anyone in the journalism department and I was a little shy anyway, it sounded pretty good to me so I wound up as a history major."

It was while Larson was attending college in the late '20s and early '30s that the country became engulfed in the great depression. During those years, Larson saw his father lose almost everything he had. Over a 20-year period, his father had retired at the age of 43 and had bought another farm. He had paid \$237 an acre for the farm and had to sell it for about \$100 an acre.

Larson had received financial support from his parents during his freshman year of college but, because of the economic conditions of the times, it was to be the last year he was able to depend on them for support.

As a person raised with an intense work ethic, Larson realized it was up to him to help himself. The first two years of college he lived in the basement of the Pi Phi sorority house working in the kitchen as a cook's helper washing pots and pans and tending the furnace (back then, the furnace used coal and it required occasional attention).



Dr. T. A. Larson gave up his studies in medieval English history to become a Wyoming history buff and eventually a state representative.

Then, as a junior, the history professor who had convinced him to transfer to his department, paid Larson to grade papers.

Larson's first taste of Wyoming came during the summer following his junior year when he began the first of four summers working in Yellowstone National Park where a love for Wyoming and its unique history began to stimulate his inquisitive mind.

But for the time being, Larson was engrossed in becoming an authority in medieval English history. After graduating with a bachelor's and a master's degree in English history from Colorado, Larson received a fellowship to study at the University of Chicago in 1934. He used the fellowship to begin his doctoral program and received his doctorate from the University of Illinois in 1937.

While finishing his dissertation in 1936, Larson was hired by the University of Wyoming to replace a professor who was taking a one year leave-of-absence. After teaching at the university for a year, Larson found himself without a job and decided the best way and the best place to learn about English history was in England.

For only \$50, Larson hitched a ride aboard a freighter in Montreal that took him to England where he studied at the University of London and began to get "noticed" with several articles published in scholarly publications.

Following the death of a UW history professor, Larson was asked back to the university under the

condition he add a course in Wyoming history to his repertoire, a course he would have to develop from scratch.

While Larson was studying in England, his two chief mentors, the young professor in Colorado and the man he studied his doctorate program under at Illinois, both died.

With the two chief sources of direction in his educational life now dead, Larson, who was in need of a job, decided to take the UW position "to see what developed."

"That's what happens in life," he notes, "you come to these crossroads and you take what seems to be the most prudent path at the time."

The path he chose would throw such a drastic but fateful curve in his life, Larson would change the emphasis of his research efforts which would ultimately force him to remain at UW the remainder of his professional teaching career.

Once Larson decided to focus on Wyoming history and de-emphasize his research of medieval English history, he never looked back as he went at it with his patented zeal.

When he wanted to find out about the history of something in the state, to get an accurate account he would drive to the location, interview people and read newspaper and historical accounts of events. The culmination of his research resulted in a book, "The History of Wyoming" published in 1965 and revised in 1978. The book won an Award of Merit from the American Association of State and Local History and has been called a "model" state history text.

Ironically, once Larson devoted his attention to the history of Wyoming, he, in effect, limited himself from ever being able to leave UW and transfer to another major university.

"By concentrating on Wyoming history, I prevented myself from being able to get a teaching job elsewhere," Larson said. "I never looked elsewhere because who in New York was going to hire a Wyoming history teacher?"

"When I concentrated on Wyoming history, I did so realizing I was going to make or break here."

Larson not only made it here, he made it big. Among his accomplishments, he served as a faculty member from 1936 to 1975 (except for serving in the Navy from 1943-46 and the year in London); was professor and head of the history department from 1948 to 1968; was director of the School of American Studies, 1959-68; was honored as the W.R. Coe Distinguished Professor of



## Dr. T.A. "Al" Larson, Recipient 1985 University of Wyoming Medallion Service Award

American Studies, 1968-75; received the status of Professor Emeritus in 1975; served as a visiting professor to Columbia University in 1950-51; was awarded the G.D. Humphrey outstanding faculty award in 1966; and received an honorary doctor of laws degree from the University in 1984.

He is also a member of a number of civic organizations; helped found the Wyoming State Historical Society

legislature and its participants.

"I was more impressed than I anticipated with the quality of the legislators, because it seemed like practically all of them had pretty good backgrounds and were very conscientious, hard working people and they all worked very hard," Larson recalls of his first days in Cheyenne. "Most of them had more energy than I did because when I got there, I was 67 years old. In fact, when I retired, I was the oldest

of other states where they had medical schools and they said 'you'd better have a lot of revenue around to take care of it because you are forced to set up a two-tier system.' "

According to Larson, the two-tier system involved high salary requirements for doctors and other people who would have to come in to speak and teach the programs. The second tier of the system would involve everyone else who would have to be paid less.

"Medical schools have a high power accrediting system behind them that says you have to have this, you have to spend this, you have to have this equipment and so on to meet their standards for accreditation. It didn't appear to me that the State of Wyoming was going to be able to support a first rate medical school under those conditions," he said.

Another concern of Larson's was whether the state would have the clinical facilities he says are needed for a "decent medical school."

"You need a large population, a city like Denver, Salt Lake City or Chicago where you can get all sorts of charity patients for the clinics," Larson said. "For a good medical school, you can't depend on what you get in the small hospitals in Wyoming. You're still going to have to send them (doctors in training) somewhere else for any specialization."

Larson also disputed the claim that a UW medical school would train doctors to stay in the state where they are especially needed in smaller communities.

"You're not going to get a doctor to settle in say Shoshoni, for instance, if he can't develop enough of a practice. And he doesn't want to be the only doctor in a small town of 1,500 because it makes virtual slaves out of them, they have to work all the time.

"And even if they do get a doctor to settle in a place like Shoshoni, then his wife won't go there because she knows the wife of a doctor in a small town won't have much of an opportunity to see her husband," Larson explained.

Currently, Wyoming has a program where the state picks up out-of-state tuition and fees, which can run up to \$20,000 a year for three years, for students to attend medical school in other states, usually in Nebraska or Utah. The agreement is made with the understanding the student will return the state investment by working in Wyoming.

While some legislators were calling Larson "the worst enemy the

University had" because of his stand against the medical school, after defeating the proposal, Larson says he came home a hero and received more votes than ever before.

"Everyone was coming around and setting me up as a man of wisdom," he said. "It was the hardest decision I had to make in the legislature."

What people had failed to understand, Larson said, is that the money used for the medical school would have to be taken from the university budget and would probably affect the quality of other campus programs. He said some people still resent his vote against the proposal, but he honestly believes the defeat was in the best interest of the university.

Larson was highly responsible for raising teacher pay scales and benefit packages for university employees to enable the university to attract and maintain high quality faculty members.

"I made no bones about the fact that education was my number one priority," Larson said, "because I believe firmly that education is the most important thing in the country.

"You've got to have good teachers. You can't expect the world to flourish and develop unless you've got good people carrying on the traditions and knowledge of the past. What sort of a future does the country have if we have low-grade teachers?"

Part of maintaining a high pay scale at UW involves keeping only one four-year school in the state. He said if the money for education was divided between UW and another four-year institution, the pay scale would have to be reduced and the subsequent quality of the university would probably drop because the top teachers would go to where they could receive more pay.

Larson believes the University can be run most efficiently with 18-20,000 students in its existing facilities.

"Until the University gets that big, it's foolish to consider starting a second four-year school in the state," Larson said.

"States around us have too many schools and have to pay their professors less money to accommodate more facilities that may be duplicating the services provided by other institutions within the same state.

"What separates UW from other schools in the area is that because it is the only university in the state, the University has political advantages that have been translated into higher  
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and was its president in 1957-58; served as the first chairman of the Wyoming Council for the Humanities; and served on a number of other state and national organizations' boards and committees.

Larson has also published five books and numerous scholarly articles.

Through his research, Larson is known as a leading authority on the history of the women's suffrage movement in western America.

In his 39 years of teaching at UW, Larson had over 16,000 students enrolled in his classes with 80 of them completing the master's thesis and six doctorate dissertations under his direction.

Although Larson spent his early years in Nebraska and Colorado, his knowledge of Wyoming history is unsurpassed by his contemporaries. He has actually grown up with the university and has seen its enrollment drop from 2,000 when he started in 1936 to less than 600 during World War II and then skyrocket to over 10,000 students in recent years.

After retiring from UW in 1975, Larson was elected to four terms in the state House of Representatives where he joined a number of his former students.

Larson's lifelong study of Wyoming history provided him with a good background when he entered the House. "I had been studying, writing and teaching Wyoming history and that's important to knowing the problems of Wyoming and its economic history," he said.

But although he was better equipped than most legislators, Larson said he was still amazed at the complexity and the quality of the

person in the legislature.

"When I decided to retire from the legislature, I had decided that I had reached what I call a point of marginal utility, that I ought to get out of the way and let the younger people take over."

As the first university professor to ever serve in the Wyoming Legislature, Larson was called on to provide background and the historical perspective of issues facing the delegation.

But one issue facing the lawmakers turned out to be the toughest decision he would face in the eight years Larson served in the legislature, whether to support a proposal to build and fund a fully accredited medical school at UW.

During a preliminary vote on the proposal in the Joint Appropriations Committee, Larson abstained from voting because he said he hadn't had the time to study the issue as thoroughly as he would have liked.

Because of a shortage of doctors in the state, the proposal called for a \$17 million building and a large yearly appropriation to meet the accreditation standards. The state medical society, the president of the University and most of the pre-med faculty and students were in favor of the medical school and applied pressure to Larson and other legislators to vote in favor of the school.

"I found most of the people in this town (Laramie) thought I was crazy. All the other representatives in this community voted in favor of it," Larson said.

"After two weeks of studying the medical school issue, I decided to vote against it. For one thing, it was too expensive. I talked with a number



# Simpson Learned Important Lessons About Life

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loose in a den of BSers and I'll be right at the top when it's over.

"But, if you can't communicate it, what hell good does it do you?"

"And that's what I learned at the University of Wyoming," he said. "Because of these people, I have lived among them all my life, they are articulate and thoughtful and well read and highly opinionated and they can spot a BSer a thousand feet away."

"And on the converse, so can the students." He said he knew of professors that came to UW and didn't last two years because the students will pick them apart if they don't know their subjects or can't explain them in common terms.

Part of Simpson's early problem with expressing himself was that he never was able to master the English language, at least not from a scholastic standpoint.

"I want you to know that when I was a freshman, I had to take 'remedial English.' I couldn't diagram a sentence and still can't. I don't know an adverb from a dangling participle," he confessed. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't get it. "Mental block — sure. I don't need a shrink to tell me what it was."

"I can't diagram a sentence today and yet that is one of my strengths, the written word. Yet, I write like I speak. You'll find my letters with just dashes instead of punctuation. I'm not doing it for effect, I just don't know."

For Simpson, the rule became to simply say things honestly.

"Say 'em more honestly. If you feel something, say it," he advises. "And in no way can you mis-identify something you're saying if you feel honestly about it. You can't get clogged up, it just comes out. The words work."

While he was in law school for the final two years, Simpson learned another valuable lesson when a classmate made fun of the way he answered a question in class.

"That's when I learned another great thing in life and that's how to be your own authority," he said from his sermon on the log. "Until you learn to be your own authority, you ain't going to get very far because there

are millions of 'authorities' in the world and they give advice continually and many of them are full of crap."

"So you finally get to the point where you just learn more and say to yourself, 'Simpson, what is right here and what is wrong?'"

"You have to learn to be your own load star."

After graduating "somewhere in the middle to low-middle" of his law class, Simpson scored among the highest of his class on the bar exam in 1958 ("Take that! All of you," he jokes).

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When Al's dad was defeated in his bid for re-election in 1958, the two joined together in a law practice in Cody.

In 1962, however, Milward Simpson was elected to fulfill an unexpired U.S. Senate seat following the sudden death of the elected senator.

Al decided to try his hand at politics in 1964 when a long-time Cody representative, who was Speaker of the House in Wyoming, decided not to run for re-election (Simpson said traditionally, the speaker quits after his term as speaker is completed). Simpson ran because, he said, he wouldn't have to run against an incumbent.

"So, I got in the race for Park County legislator in 1964. I was elected and stayed there until 1977 when I resigned to seek the (U.S.) Senate seat," he said.

His move into the U.S. Senate has drawn rave reviews and now, in only his second term, Simpson serves as Assistant Majority Leader as the Party Whip for the 99th Congress.

He also serves on the committee of veterans' affairs, the judiciary committee, the environment and public works committee and he served on a select committee to investigate the undercover operations

of the FBI and the Department of Justice in 1982 following the ABSCAM investigations.

Despite his quick rise within the Republican Party, Simpson says he has little or no desire to seek higher office. "I don't harbor any lust in my bosom for higher office," he confides, "because I see what it does to limit your life and you wonder why a guy would do that to himself. Heck, there ain't many higher offices; two, I believe."

Besides Simpson loves his job as a senator.

"I like what I do," he said. "This is a remarkable honor. I take it as a sincere honor, kind of a trust. I mean, they give me a lot of headway in Wyoming, a lot of use of my own brain. And they don't second guess me a lot, I admit that, and therefore I feel a sense of trust and I can't violate that either."

Simpson is well known for his humor both at home and on Capitol Hill, but he admits sometimes it gets him into trouble.

"There's a fine line between good humor and smart ass and sometimes I cross that line," he said, "and everytime I cross it, I get slapped ... and I should."

"Humor is my word and my shield in Washington and here. It always has been. It's my leveler, it keeps me from being self-important in the great Oz."

But, Simpson knows when it's time to be serious on the job.

"I have a great honor in being the Assistant Majority Leader of the Senate — a great honor I take seriously."

"That puts new duties on me so that's why they're watching me like a hawk," he says as if he's afraid to stumble. "They watch me to see if these new duties take me away from Wyoming and its problems. So, I

spend more time working communities in Wyoming to be sure I'm hearing what they're saying."

Simpson would like to spend more time at home in Wyoming, particularly on his father's ranch near Cody on the southfork of the Shoshone River (a place he calls "soul country"), but his Washington duties keep him busy. Most of his trips back to Wyoming (he averages 25 trips home each year) are to listen to the public's concerns and to give speeches.

Spending a few hours with Simpson is probably the best way to get to know him. There are some things about him that he doesn't have to tell you. He still affectionately kisses Ann when he must leave her for only a few hours and he introduces himself to nearly everyone he meets, not to try to get votes as most politicians, but because he really seems to have a genuine concern for people he meets.

Instead of trying to act important, he makes other people feel important as he talks and listens to people. He is also not afraid to give a warm hug or look you in the eye when he shakes your hand.

This sincerity is a Simpson trait passed from strong family ties.

When the ALUMNEWS caught up with him after he had spent four days with his parents, Simpson said "they are great. They still have their resilience and their humor and their brains and a marvelous sense of values and great love for each other and us. It's a nice warm family."

In fact, he said, "my wife, Ann and Lynne (Pete's wife) are like the daughters they never had."

Simpson's parents' sense of values seems to transcend everything he does and shows what kind of a person he is.

Although those values may not have come out in his early days at UW, Laramie is where he was forced to take a serious look at them. It seems only fitting that after following his dad as a football and basketball player at UW and to the U.S. Senate, he now joins his dad as the first father and son to have received the Distinguished Alumni Award for outstanding contributions in his profession.

## Larson Was Forced to Make Tough Decisions

faculty pay and financial support than most other universities in the Rocky Mountain area. We need to continue to do that to have a really good

University.

"Right now, we can attract better faculty and our status and reputation as an institution has grown immensely throughout the country in

the recent years."

And with this continued influx of quality instructors, Larson hopes the University of Wyoming will continue

to challenge students and teach students to learn to get the best out of themselves. Just as Larson was able to do for himself.