



Edgar E. Willis

July 12, 1913 - January 25, 2014

Willis, Edgar E.
Ann Arbor, MI

Age 100, Edgar E. Willis, an emeritus professor of communication at the University of Michigan, died of a stroke on Saturday, January 25, 2014. He was born in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, on July 12, 1913, the son of Samuel and Ethel (Fairbourn) Willis. Edgar had two sisters, a twin sister Mary, and a younger sister, Edith, both of whom pre-deceased him. In 1920 his family immigrated to Detroit where he was naturalized as a U.S. citizen when both his father and mother became U.S. citizens. In 1938 he married Zella C. Nobles, whose father, Rev. Harry Nobles, pastor of the Temple Baptist Church in Windsor, Canada, performed the wedding ceremony. Zella and Edgar spent sixty-nine-and-a-half years together before her death in 2008 from pneumonia. They had three children: Richard (Elizabeth), Franklin Willis and Andrea (Richard) Weaver, eight grandchildren, and twenty-two great-grandchildren. After graduating from high school in 1930, Edgar worked for a year-and-a-half for the Hupp Motor Company and then, when the company went bankrupt, he enrolled in what is now Wayne State University, where he earned a B.A. in history in 1935 and an M.A. in speech, in 1936. In 1940 the University of Wisconsin granted him a Ph.D. After finishing his B.A. degree, he was employed by the Radio Department of the Detroit Public Schools as a

producer, writer, and director of educational radio programs, most of which were broadcast to children in schools. With two years off in 1938-1940 to attend the University of Wisconsin, he worked in the Radio Department in Detroit from 1935 to 1943 when he volunteered for service in the U.S. Navy. He was commissioned a naval officer, and after a year of training became the fighter-director officer aboard the battle cruiser Alaska. The Alaska received battle stars for its participation in the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and it was also awarded the Philippines Liberation Medal. After two-and-a-half years of service in the Navy, Edgar returned to his family on Christmas Eve, 1945. In 1946, Edgar began his career as a university teacher, first at Wayne State University and then at San Jose State College and Stanford University in California. In 1952, the University of Michigan invited him to join its faculty where he remained until his retirement in 1984. During ten of those years he served as the chairman of the Speech Communications and Theatre Department. He wrote some fifty articles for scholarly journals and was the author or co-author of five textbooks in his field. In addition, he wrote a memoir about his World War II experiences entitled *Civilian In An Ill-fitting Uniform: A Memoir of World War II* as well as a book on humor entitled *How to be Funny on Purpose: Creating and Consuming Humor*. He also completed a fictional book on university life entitled *Moss on the Ivory Tower*. In 1953-1954, just as television was getting underway, he spent fifteen minutes every Sunday at noon reviewing the week's news for the NBC affiliate in Detroit, Channel Four. In 1958-1959, he was granted a year's leave to serve as a program associate for what eventually became the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). In 1963-1964 he was granted another leave to accept appointment as a Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Durham and the University of Hull in England where he taught British students how to direct television shows. During the Christmas period he was also sent as an advisor to the broadcasting system on the island of Cyprus. That mission came to abrupt end when civil war erupted. Edgar lived in Ann Arbor, Michigan, for close to 60 years, then moved to Kingston Residence, Perrysburg, Ohio,

where he resided for three years. He returned to his home in Ann Arbor where he lived until his passing. Cremation has taken place. A Memorial Service will be held Sunday, February 23, 2014 at 2:00 P.M. at the First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor, with Rev. James Middleton, officiating. A reception will follow the service. Military honors will be held under the auspices of the Washtenaw County Veterans Honor Guard. Burial will take place at a later date. Memorial contributions may be made to the church or to a charity of one's choice and envelopes will be available the church. Arrangements entrusted to the Robison-Bahnmler Funeral Home of Saline. To sign Edgar's guestbook, to leave a memory, or for more information or directions please visit www.rbfhsaline.com.

Previous Events

Memorial Service

FEB **23**. 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM (ET)

First Baptist Church of Ann Arbor
517 East Washington Street
Ann Arbor, MI 48104
<http://www.fbca2.org/>

Tribute Wall



“ *Edgar E. Willis*

October 23, 2023 at 01:07 PM



“ *1 file added to the album New Album Name*



JOSEPH MOFFATT - March 05, 2014 at 10:00 AM



“ *1 file added to the album New Album Name*



Joseph Moffatt - March 04, 2014 at 12:12 PM



“ *1 file added to the tribute wall*



Joe Moffatt - February 28, 2014 at 11:21 AM

JM

“ 1 file added to the album *New Album Name*



Joe Moffatt - February 19, 2014 at 07:42 PM

JM

“ 1 file added to the album *New Album Name*



JOE MOFFATT - February 19, 2014 at 10:57 AM

JM

“ 1 file added to the album *New Album Name*



Joseph Moffatt - February 11, 2014 at 11:37 AM

TG

“ *My condolences Frank to you and your family. Your Dad had a remarkable, long time on this earth and greatly affected a lot of lives. Unfortunately, I will be out of town for his memorial service. Take care.*

Tom Guldberg

Tom Guldberg - February 09, 2014 at 04:56 PM

JM

“ *1 file added to the album New Album Name*



Joseph Moffatt - February 08, 2014 at 02:12 PM

TB

“ *As a radio-tv major in the mid 60s (do they even call it "radio"-TV anymore?), I learned timing and fine-tuned hearing from Dr. Willis. To have learned from a true broadcast pioneer was something I didn't appreciate as an undergrad but, today, is one of the wonders of my UM education. More important, he was a wonderful teacher, with his soft encouragement and wry chuckle. Farewell Edgar. And thanks.*

Terry Bangs - February 08, 2014 at 02:10 PM

JW

“ My condolences to Andrea, Richard and Franklin and their families. Uncle Edgar was a "cool" uncle. I have fond memories of our times together with our family and yours. God Bless.

Jim Ward (cousin)

Jim Ward - February 06, 2014 at 07:29 PM

PN

“ About a year ago I had the distinct honor and pleasure of getting to know Dr. Willis. As a remarkable centenarian, his depth of character, intellect, charisma and unprecedented humor did not wane. Edgar was the guest of honor for the Veteran's Day Celebration/Birthday Celebration last September at the Chelsea Senior Center. Dr. Willis held the attention of the seventy members in attendance by sharing a WWII memory from his book, " Civilian In An Ill Fitting Uniform" with great humor. Members of the Senior Center announced their birthdates. When it was Edgar's turn, and he announced his birth year of 1913, it received a rousing applause!

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to meet and spend time with such a remarkable individual.

*Pamela F. Newbury
Service First Home Care*

Pamela F. Newbury - February 03, 2014 at 01:54 PM

SS

“ I was a student in the Speech Department in the early 60s and have very fond memories of Dr. Willis -- an outstanding man and teacher. The 2013 video interview with him is a great tribute and is very valuable to those of us he taught. Although I never pursued a broadcasting career, I benefited greatly by what I learned from him and the rest of the Department in all aspects of my life. RIP Dr. Willis.

*Steve Stockmeyer
Delray Beach, Florida*

Steven Stockmeyer - February 03, 2014 at 10:19 AM

JM

“ 1 file added to the album REMEMBERING A MENTOR...



Joe Moffatt - January 31, 2014 at 06:02 PM

SR

“ The following is the second part of the article that would not fit in the allowable space that the first part of the article was placed in. Thank you.

I respected his opinions and judgments on things. I think I'm really going to miss that the most.” Willis left behind three children, eight grandchildren and 22 great-grandchildren. He also had a twin sister, Mary and a younger sister, Edith – both of whom predeceased him.

Steve Robison - January 31, 2014 at 02:59 PM

“ The following is an article written by the staff at the Ann Arbor News. You may find the article complete with pictures on the Ann Arbor News website. <http://www.mlive.com/ann-arbor/>

Edgar E. Willis may have been known to the public as a broadcasting pioneer, but to his three children Andrea, Richard and Franklin, he was simply known as dad. “He was a wonderful family man. We did everything together,” Franklin said. Willis, 100, who taught at the University of Michigan for more than 30 years as a communications professor, died on Saturday, Jan. 25 following a severe stroke he suffered just a few days before his death. “We actually thought we were going to lose him back in April of last year because there was a time when he wasn't doing too well,” Franklin said. “We were looking forward to seeing him make it to 100 but didn't know if he'd be able to, but he did it. He was very strong and mobile up until the moment he passed. People were always amazed by how active he was physically and mentally. He lived a full life.” Franklin describes his father's death as “very peaceful,” adding that he died surrounded by family and friends. Willis decided to write his own obituary before passing away, which Franklin says he did for several reasons. “He covered a lot of ground during his long life and career,” he said. “I think he wanted to be remembered for some specific things. He knew we would remember his most recent years, but he didn't want us to forget what he did 40 years ago. He was doing us a favor. He also loved to write and said to us, ‘I'm the best vehicle to do this,’ so he went ahead and did it.” Over the course of his career, Willis wrote about 50 articles for scholarly journals and authored and co-authored 14 books, including “How to be Funny on Purpose: Creating and Consuming Humor” and “Civilian in an Ill-Fitting Uniform: A Memoir of World War II,” which was based on the two-and-a-half years he spent in the Navy. “He was very proud and honored to be able to serve his country,” Franklin said. After graduating from high school in 1930, Willis worked at the Hupp Motor Company for almost two years before enrolling in Wayne State University, where he earned a bachelor's in history and master's in speech. “By delivering the Detroit Free Press every

morning, he was able to put himself through college," Franklin said. In 1938, he married Zella C. Nobles, whom he had met almost two years prior. The couple spent 69 years together before Zella's death in 2008 from pneumonia. Two years after getting married, Willis earned his doctorate degree from the University of Wisconsin. Willis began teaching in 1946 at Wayne State University and then at San Jose State College and Stanford University in California. In 1952, the University of Michigan invited him to join its faculty, where he remained until his retirement in 1984. During 10 of those years, he served as the chairman of the Speech Communications and Theatre Department. "He loved teaching and he loved his students," Franklin said. "He spent a lot of time correcting our grammar and making sure that we enunciated everything perfectly [laughs], so he was a teacher to us as well." He also worked at several broadcasting stations, including WWJ-TV in Detroit. From 1953-54, just as television was getting underway, he spent every Sunday afternoon reviewing the week's news for the NBC affiliate in Detroit, Channel Four. In 1958, he was granted a year's leave to serve as a program associate for the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS). Outside the classroom and newsroom, Willis was a self-proclaimed sports fanatic. "He was a huge Detroit Tigers fan, but he also loved Michigan football and basketball," Franklin said. "He would boast about being at the 1940 World Series game. He was very proud of that." Among the many things Franklin says he'll miss about his dad is their long conversations regarding government and politics. "We always had the greatest conversations about that," he said. "He was very analytical and would've made a great lawyer. I respected his opinions and judgments on thing

Steve Robison - January 31, 2014 at 02:50 PM

JM

“ 1 file added to the album *A TREASURED NOTE FROM EDGAR E. WILLIS*



Joe Moffatt - January 31, 2014 at 12:18 PM

JM

“ 1 file added to the album *EDGAR. E. WILLIS COLLAGE*



joe moffatt - January 30, 2014 at 01:19 PM

JM

PROFESSOR, TEACHER, MENTOR, FRIEND...

Joe Moffatt - January 30, 2014 at 05:34 PM

DL

“ The following is a video link submitted to the funeral home by Dale R. Leslie. He included the following message, "I video recorded an interview with Dr. Willis just under a year ago. It appears on my YouTube site if anyone wishes to view it."

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBhni_1WwUA

Thank you. -Robison-Bahnmler Funeral Home, Inc.

Dale R. Leslie - January 27, 2014 at 02:38 PM



Thanks for including the video. It gave wonderful insight into Dr. Willis' achievements and values.

Barbara Wilkins - January 27, 2014 at 03:54 PM



Thank you so much for the video. It was wonderful having a last visit, as it were, with him. As his former student and secretary in the U-M Speech Department, 1964-1968, Dr. Willis was my mentor, surrogate father and friend. He, along with Dr. Austin and Professor Stasheff, set the critical bar for me in my broadcasting and writing career, and formed me as a person. I loved him dearly and will miss him very much. I am gratified to see what a wonderful and varied life he lived. He was a great influence in my life and will be sorely missed.

*Barbara F. Seiden - February 9 at 2:53 PM
barbara.seiden@att.net*

Barbara Seiden - February 09, 2014 at 01:57 PM



“ 1 file added to the album New Album Name



Joseph Moffatt - January 26, 2014 at 11:34 AM



“ 1 file added to the album New Album Name



Joseph Moffatt - January 26, 2014 at 11:32 AM

HA

I was honored to be a student for Dr. Willis in 1970-71 and to co-author a textbook with him in the late 1980s. He was a wonderful scholar and teacher and a superb gentleman. He was a marvelous role model for anyone aspiring to be a college professor. Dr. Willis was of enormous help to me over the years. He was a man to be admired and emulated in every aspect of his life.

Henry Aldridge - January 31, 2014 at 01:01 PM

BS

Joe, these are wonderful pictures of Dr. Willis, Dr. Austin and Professor Stasheff. I would love to have copies of them. Please contact me at barbara.seiden@att.net. Glad you are still going strong!

Barbara Seiden - February 9 at 2:58 p.m.

Barbara Seiden - February 09, 2014 at 02:00 PM