



Dr. Willson Wood

WKU English

Department Head, 1959-1972

By Collin Massie

"[Western Kentucky] is more complicated. There are more crazy people and more sane people. You see, we've picked up more of all kinds."

- Dr. Willson Wood

Dr. Willson Wood's beginning as English department head had an odd start because he was essentially dubbed department head with no knowledge of being considered. He recalled how the president called him, along with other professors, into his office shortly before his retirement and told each of them what they were going to do once he was gone. The department head who followed Dr. Wood was chosen more democratically, but Dr. Wood had no notion that he was even considered for the position, and once this unorthodox bestowal was made, his career as department head began.

Dr. Wood, began his teaching career at WKU teaching mathematics in the year of 1941. This academic beginning, while it probably seems strange to many in the English department, actually makes sense, in terms of Dr. Wood. In his own words, he considered himself a "depression school teacher" because he acquired a number of economical practices from his experiences as a child during the Great Depression that he famously used during his time as department head. Professor Mary Ellen Miller fondly reflects, "... [H]e was fabulously stingy with school supplies." She later mentions how he would always give her the *exact* amount of paper clips she requested. However, his colleagues had nothing but respect for him. Anne Fields, a former English professor during his time as head, says that he was a great leader who never seemed at a loss for words.

Though Dr. Wood's economical restrictions were perhaps humorous, it was an attribute which afforded the English department the ability to further flourish in a time of already intense growth in the 60's. From 1955 to 1970 the student enrollment increased about 557 percent, the state appropriation 1,746 percent, and the general fund budget 1,334 percent, (Flynn, 8).

Dr. Wood says in an interview, "When I started, speech and theater was a one-man part of the English department; journalism was a one-woman operation; religion and philosophy was also taken care of by one man in the English department. We've mothered all these departments that are now separate from English." If only Dr. Wood could see how much these departments have all continued to grow and flourish since then. It's strange to imagine these departments, at their present sizes, being born from such humble beginnings, but it also reminds one how tightly knit the Arts family really is at WKU.

One will undoubtedly already be familiar with the English department's creative writing magazine, *Zephyrus*, but have they been confused and unable to understand why it bears that title? They wouldn't be alone. It does seem a strange name, but here one will finally learn its origin. Dr. Wood had an inspiration behind the creation of the title; he had requested that "Western" be included in the title, and so two professors by the names of Wanda Gatlin and Will Fridy, found that the Roman name for the god of the west wind was a perfect fit, (Flynn, 10). And it's true! From its Western applicability to its meaning, it was indeed a perfect fit.

Dr. Wood once said, while in the midst of preparing for retirement, "As head [of the English department], I'm a lame duck and everyone knows it." Yet, those who spoke about him had a genuine love for him, light-hearted stinginess and all. Dr. Wood says, "We may fight occasionally, but we still love each other. One of the women teachers came up to me and hugged me in the hall and said, 'Even though I fight you in faculty meetings, I still love you.' This has been the attitude."

Dr. Wood died in the year 2006, at the very respectable age of 98. His obituary in the College Heights Herald seems a very fitting conclusion: "Dero Downing, a former Western president, said he remembered Wood gardening and teaching Sunday school at State Street Methodist Church... 'He leaves a rich legacy of academic excellence,' he said." And the English department has been thoroughly blessed for that legacy to have continued throughout the years.

Sources

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