Clarence Walter Olmstead, age 88, emeritus professor of geography at UW-Madison, died on Tuesday, December 12, 2000. He was born on November 4, 1912, in Summit, Mason County, Michigan, the son of Verne L. and Anne (Rinebolt) Olmstead. He grew up on a small orchard farm, learning early the values of work and care of the land. He graduated from Ludington High School in 1930, and met the Great Depression by attending the local county normal school and teaching for three years at the rural, one-room Lincoln Valley School. With the savings from his $65 monthly salary, and fellowships, he earned a bachelor’s degree in history at Central State Teachers College (Central Michigan University) in 1937, and a master’s degree in geography at the University of Michigan. He returned to teach for two years at his alma mater. He was married to Rhea Donnelly on August 18, 1939. In 1940, he resumed graduate study in geography, with a teaching assistantship, at the University of California-Berkeley. Study was interrupted by service in World War II from 1942 until 1946. Clarence was an ensign to lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, assigned to the Office of Strategic Services for work in map intelligence. He served in the Washington, D.C., headquarters, then as an assistant chief and subsequently was chief of the map intelligence in London, England, and on-field projects in Germany. He returned from Europe in 1946 and accepted a position in the Department of Geography at the University of Wisconsin, and completed his Ph.D. degree at the University of Michigan in 1951.

Clarence’s 35 years of teaching and research at the University of Wisconsin were concerned with the geography of agriculture and the regional geography of the United States and Canada. His research publications emphasized agricultural geography, population, and land utilization issues, especially as related to North America. He was a member of the Agricultural Typology Commission of the International Geographical Union where he served for 12 years as the North American representative. Clarence served on the dissertation committees of more than 75 doctoral students, being the major professor for 17. Clarence was fond of saying: “I have learned infinitely more from them than they ever learned from me.” He enjoyed teaching undergraduate students as well, trying to learn something about each one. Clarence’s caring attitude about education and teaching was reflected in his “Colloquium for Undergraduate Majors,” which was a popular capstone course for the geography students. He devoted extensive time and resources to advising students. For many years Clarence also served as a liaison to the School of Education where he assisted with development of geographic education curriculum and advising functions. Further evidence of his commitment to education, as well as his generosity, can be seen in the Clarence W. Olmstead Fund, which he and Rhea founded to reward excellence in geographic scholarship by undergraduate and graduate students. Yet another hallmark of Clarence’s active career, evident also in his retirement, was an abiding desire to extend fairness and justice to all human beings, especially those lacking power and privilege.

In 1973, he and his wife, Rhea, partially disabled by a brain tumor 10 years earlier, fulfilled a long-held dream by moving to the countryside west of Madison. There he designed a home to fit Rhea’s special needs and to nestle in the woods’ edge of the steeply sloping land overlooking the Pine Bluff (upper Sugar River) Valley to Mount Horeb and Blue Mounds. They dubbed the country place Thistle Hill where, for some 20 years, especially after retiring from active teaching in 1981, he devoted time, energy and love to home and family, to restoration of woods and prairie, to geographic study, writing, travel and photography, to environmental and historic preservation.

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