MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

ON THE DEATH OF EMERITUS PROFESSOR JOHN A. DENOVO

Professor John A. DeNovo joined the Department of History faculty in September, 1964 and died in Madison on January 26, 2000 at the age of 83, concluding a distinguished career of service to the American history profession. A specialist in the History of American Foreign Relations he also taught the Survey of American History and Recent American History as well as a survey course on the History of the Middle East. Throughout his career, he focused his research interest upon American ties with the latter area. With the exception of research leaves, supported by the Rockefeller Foundation International Relations Fellowship Program during 1966-67 and the U. S. Energy Research and Development Administration in 1976-77, John taught in the History department until 1981 when he retired. He continued his research for a time thereafter and once taught an undergraduate seminar in the College of Letters and Sciences program featuring retired professors as instructors.

DeNovo was born on November 5, 1916 in Galva, Illinois, the son of August DeNovo who had entered the United States as a sixteen-year old immigrant from Sicily and Paula LaMantina DeNovo, a first generation Italian American. August owned a grocery store in Galva. Graduating cum laude from Knox College in 1938, John continued his studies in history at the University of Minnesota, receiving his M.A. in 1940. During World War II he served as a naval officer in the South Pacific and thereafter enrolled in the history doctoral program at Yale University under the provisions of the G. I. Bill. At Yale, John studied with the eminent professor of international relations, Samuel Flagg Bemis and prepared his doctoral dissertation on the subject “American Diplomacy in the Near East, 1908-1928.” In completing his Ph. D. in 1948, he fulfilled an ambition set, as he later wrote, at the age of fourteen and in that same year he married his former Knox classmate, Jeanne Humphreys.

In that year also, DeNovo accepted the position of instructor of history at Pennsylvania State University where he rose to the rank of full professor. Among the first American scholars to specialize in American relations with the Middle East, he felt required to master American policy relating to that region and also to develop an understanding of the peoples, histories, and geographies of more than a dozen middle eastern polities. As a result, he sought additional training at the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the School of Advanced International Studies at The Johns Hopkins University. While at Penn State he also attended summer conferences sponsored by the University of Kansas “On the Nature and Writing of History,” and on “Twentieth Century American Diplomacy” in 1955 and 1957 and participated in a Social Science Research Council Summer Research Training Institute on Current Research on International Affairs at the University of Denver in the summer of 1956. As a visiting professor he taught in summer sessions at George Washington University (1949) at the University of Wisconsin (1961) and throughout academic year (1963-64) at Cornell University.

In 1963 DeNovo published American Interests and Policies in the Middle East, 1900-1939 which won the national book award of Phi Alpha Theta and became a classic study in the history of American international relations. Impressively comprehensive, this pioneering study explored the activities of American diplomats, business agents, educators, philanthropists, and missionaries in Turkey, Iran, and the Arab East. It conclusively demonstrated that the United States maintained an active economic, cultural, and to some extent, political involvement in the region before the Second World War. This work was among the first to address the origins of the American oil interest in the region and U. S. policy toward the Arab-Israel conflict. DeNovo also published a considerable number of articles and chapters in scholarly collections during his career and, with others, edited a two volume reader in American history (1969). While at the University of Wisconsin he worked on a sequel to his Middle East study, an investigation that involved trips abroad and research in manuscript repositories in the United States. (continued)
Deteriorating health prevented him from completing this work and, in retirement, he gave his collection of notes and research materials to the Library of Georgetown University.

DeNovo excelled as a teacher and mentor of graduate students. During his years at Penn State and Wisconsin he served as major advisor of thirty-four M. A. and fifteen Ph. D. graduates. Pressing his graduate students to achieve their full potential, he demanded that they investigate topics to their fullest and was a meticulous critic of written work. DeNovo, however, was so kindly and supportive, so patently concerned with the welfare of students, that their study with him usually initiated friendly relations, maintained long after they had settled into teaching positions or government service.

John DeNovo was an exemplary colleague. As a committee member, he did his homework thoroughly and promptly, his judgments were fair and balanced, and his suggestions about issues and procedure were always sensible and sometimes brilliant. There are no letters to the chairman in his departmental personnel file complaining about collegial, departmental, or campus shortcomings. He never displayed exasperation when outcomes failed to meet expectations and he was always happy to suggest the bibliography or monograph which colleagues had ignored or forgotten, or to mention an approach that might turn up a relevant source or solve a troublesome problem of organization. He was a good listener. In addition, he usually had a twinkle in his eyes and could always see the humorous side of a situation. His skill at turning a clever pun was unmatched in the department. Within the history profession he served on various committees and participated actively in the formation of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations, being elected to the council of that association in 1969.

John loved music and was an accomplished pianist. He also loved the lakes and woods of northern Wisconsin and spent most of his Wisconsin summers at his cabin near Minocqua. Between sessions there with his books and research notes he and other members of the family swam, hiked, canoed, and studied nature. John particularly enjoyed the efforts of the wild life to foil the activity of the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and he was an active member of the Blue Lake Preservation Society. Following his retirement, he countered his heart problems by walking as many as eight miles a day. In 1992, however, he suffered a severe stroke that left him partially paralyzed and thereafter he lived in the Attic Angel Health Center in Madison, reading widely and entertaining other residents periodically with “name that tune” programs in which he played the piano with his right hand. He maintained his sense of humor and indomitable spirit to the end.

John DeNovo is survived by his wife Jeanne, his daughter Anne DeNovo (Jim Lovin) and his son Jay (Donna Sereda), as well as by his sister, Marguerite Varven.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
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UW-Madison Fac Doc 1598 - 3 December 2001