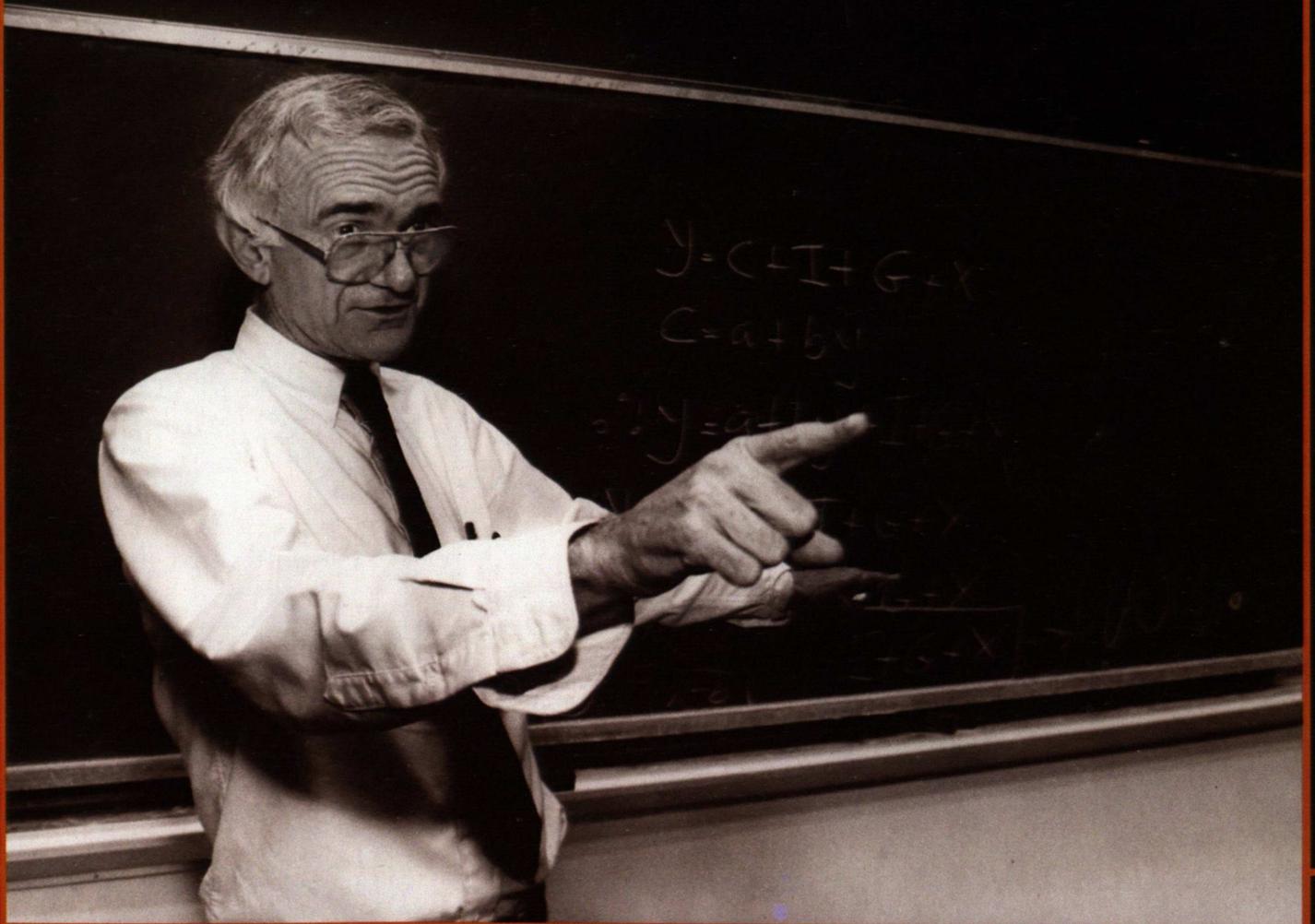


Story by Janine Latus

Guns, Butter and Walter Johnson



Quick with a quip (and a chalkboard eraser), the late, great professor made economics matter to thousands of Mizzou students.

It is 8:40 a.m. Middlebush Auditorium is stuffy and hot. Students slump in pre-coffee sprawls and complain about having to take this stupid, irrelevant class at all, let alone stacked 500-to-a-lecture hall at this ungodly hour. “Who needs to understand economics?” they grumble. “What does this have to do with anything?”

Enter Walter Johnson. Lanky, dandruffed, kinetic, he strides across the stage waving his arms and, in the early days before he had to take his habit outside, his unfiltered Camel cigarette. He explains the basics of supply and demand using his famous “guns and butter” speech about how government spending — i.e. guns — may stimulate the economy, but domestic spending — butter — stimulates it more. Or he lectures on opportunity costs using macaroni and cheese as an example. “Yes,” he says, “mac and cheese is wonderful. But you have to ask yourself, what are my other options? What am I giving up if I choose the macaroni and cheese? Whatever you give up, that’s your opportunity cost.”

Johnson — Wally J to many of the more than 40,000 students between 1965 to 1998 — knew how to bring his points home. He was the king of the run-on sentence,

rambling without pause from thought to thought, his mind working so fast that taking a breath would only slow him down. He spewed monologues punctuated with the occasional bark “Ha!” and the question, “How about that?” (the “about” left over from his Virginia tidewater upbringing). He drew diagrams that connected with other diagrams and then still more until they

Johnson’s door was always open, although you’d have to wend your way through stacks of papers, books and journals pocked with cigarette burns to find him.

covered the board. Then he would beam and spread his arms wide in a “ta-dah!” gesture, expecting, it seemed, applause.

Johnson’s shtick was well-oiled. He paced. He stalked. He leaned against the podium. He dropped his voice to just this side of a monotone, watching as half

his students began to fade, then Bam! He smacked his hand on the lectern and boomed into an analogy that made students jump in their seats. For the unlucky few who didn’t start into wakefulness, he had an alarmingly well-aimed chalkboard eraser that, as lore has it, more often than not hit the recalcitrant dozer smack on the head.

“Average,” he always said, “equals ordinary equals run-of-the-mill.”

Johnson, who died Nov. 20, 2001, at age 63, was none of the above. Best known for the required (and oft-dreaded) Economics 51: Principles of Economics, he taught what he called “kilo-kid” classes, 1,000 students in back-to-back 500-student sections. It was part teaching, part performance art.

“It takes real pizzazz and commitment to make that a set of teachable moments,” says Ted Tarkow, professor of classical studies and associate dean of the College of Arts and Science, “and there was no one who did it better than Walter in his prime.”

Johnson loved his students. His door was always open, although you’d have to wend your way through stacks of papers, books and journals pocked with cigarette burns to find him.

“He had two and three feet of papers

Through humor, clear explanations and an attention-grabbing lecture style, economics Professor Walter Johnson always got his point across.

Photo by Tammy Atkins

stacked on every nook and cranny of his desk, including on top of his typewriter,” says attorney Peggy Israel, BA '82, of Baltimore. “You had to shift all the stacks around just to sit down on a chair.

“I asked him once why he didn't have a filing system, and he said he did. ‘This,’ he said, ‘is a chronological filing system — newest stuff on top, oldest stuff on the bottom.’ ”

The combination of papers and chain smoking upset the fire marshal so much that he kept telling Mike Podgursky, professor of economics, to do something about it. “It got so I just sort of avoided the fire marshal,” Podgursky says. “It was like an archeological dig cleaning out when he retired in 1998.”

When indoor cigarette smoking was banned, Johnson adopted a bench outside Middlebush Hall where he held informal court on any topic.

“He was just such a brilliant person,” says Columbia Mayor Darwin Hindman, BA '55, JD '61, who worked with Johnson on a series of political campaigns, including ones that earned Johnson 16 years on the Boone Hospital board of trustees. “He had a very, very sharp mind. He always had an opinion, and he usually expressed it. You never could tell what it would be or when it would come out.”

He was a students' professor. He published little — and therefore never made full professor — because he was busy advising both the arts and science student government and the honor society QEBH, spending time at *The Maneater* offices and personally steering his students' careers. He would talk with anyone at any time about nearly anything.

Israel, who majored in math and economics, was so impressed by Johnson's Econ 51 performance that she decided just a few weeks into her freshman year that she wanted him as her adviser.

“I walked in and introduced myself, and he said, ‘We're going to make you a Truman

Scholar, and you're going to graduate Phi Beta Kappa.’ Then he sat down and worked up a plan to make it happen,” Israel says.

“He was thin and wiry, and his body language just sucked you into conspiring with him,” she says. “He'd lean into you, he'd wrap his arm around you, he'd get this impish look on his face and say, ‘We are going to do this.’ ”

Israel did win a Truman Scholarship, and she graduated Phi Beta Kappa. It was because of Johnson that she went to the University of Virginia for law school.

“You've lived in Missouri most of your life, and you think people are equal,” he told her. “You need to go to Virginia, where some people think they're aristocracy, or to Berkeley, where everyone's kind of nuts and nobody thinks like you.”

Bob Selsor, BA '82, JD '85, a former arts and sciences student government president who now is an attorney with the St. Louis law firm Polsinelli Shalton Welte Suelthaus PC, switched his major from journalism to economics because of Johnson. Then — with Johnson coaching him all the way — he went on to win a Fulbright scholarship in economics.

“He made economics come alive to people who never even dreamed they would have any interest in the subject,” Selsor says. “When I'm 70 or 80 years old and I look back on my days at Mizzou, I don't think anyone will stand out more vividly than Walter Johnson.”

He was vivid. He deplored cheating and used early computer technology to scramble both the questions and the answers on standardized tests. He'd leave his teaching assistants as proctors during exams while he went from room to room, sleuthing out the student with answers on the bill of his cap or the inside of his arm.

One day, he went out to his 1974 Toyota Landcruiser and flipped on the CB radio. He listened carefully, his eyes squinted against the smoke of the cigarette burning in his fingers, his long legs stretched out the open door. As suspected, someone was radioing

A supply of demanding professors

Econ 51, **Walter Johnson's** stomping ground, also helped elevate other MU professors to legend status.

John Kuhlman, who taught from 1961 until 1985, approached economics from a humanities perspective and reputedly (and jokingly) called it “the one true religion.”

Pinkney Walker, who taught from 1940 until 1975 except while serving during World War II, used his wit and classroom antics to such effect that students not enrolled would sometimes listen outside the lecture-hall door.

Harry Gunnison Brown, who taught from 1915 to 1951, was a leading orthodox economist of his era and an influential force at MU.

Ever the example for young scholars, Johnson, top right, met with students at Merit Scholar Day. Below right, Johnson stripped down economics to the bare essentials, so he was ready with a joke about the “gross national product” when a streaker darted in front of his class in the 1970s.

in answers to a test. The answers weren't his, but it was definitely an economics test. He slammed the car's door and strode the length of Middlebush Hall to the department office, where he demanded to see a copy of every exam being given. The answers he heard broadcast corresponded to a test under way for colleague Don Schilling's Money and Banking class. “Ha!” he said and took off running back to his red four-wheeler. He tracked the signal to a nearby park, where he found the cheaters huddled over a purloined test, radioing the answers to their compatriots inside. As soon as they saw him, they peeled out, but not before Johnson got their license plate number. Then he ran back, gasping and wheezing, to tell Schilling.

Johnson loved Mizzou. There was no job he would rather have had. In a 1979 *Savitar* story, he is quoted as saying, “Teaching Econ 51 at the Columbia campus of the University of Missouri is the best job in American



Photo by Larry Boehm

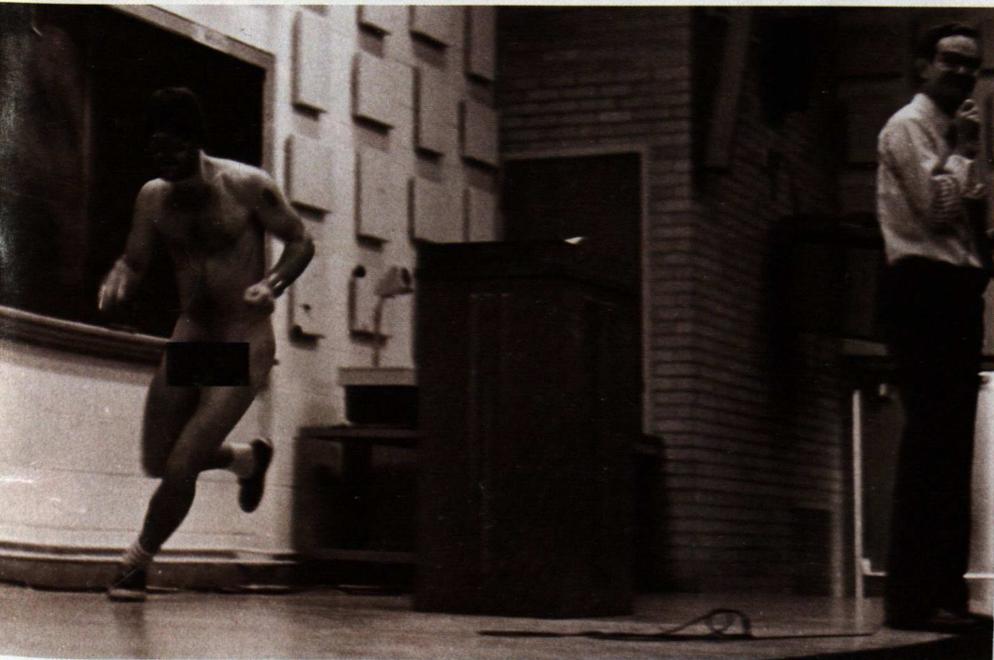


Photo courtesy of Mary-Angela Johnson

higher education, bar none.”

He reinforced that in his final lecture every semester, says Tim Kaine, BA '79, who was a teaching assistant under Johnson and who is now the governor of Virginia. “He said you should follow your dream, whatever it is,” Kaine says. “And then he’d say, ‘That’s what I’ve done and I’m happy. You

should do it, too.’ ” ■

About the author: Janine Latus, BS Ag '83, MA '88, writes for O, More, Woman's Day, Family Circle and other magazines and Web sites. Her book, If I Am Missing or Dead, is scheduled for release in spring 2007.

Large-scale learning and laughs

The auditorium in Middlebush Hall was home to Professor Walter Johnson’s economics classes for decades. There Johnson turned large-lecture instruction into an art form.

That auditorium, newly renovated, will now be called Walter Johnson Auditorium in honor of Johnson, who died in 2001. At 7:45 a.m. on Oct. 21, 2005, dozens of his former colleagues and students gathered to dedicate the auditorium and honor the much-loved professor.

“It would please Dad to no end to see all these former students here so bright and early,” quipped Johnson’s son Willoughby.

The dedication had to be held so early because the room is almost constantly filled with students. Fall semester 2005 alone, 10 different disciplines held classes in Walter Johnson Auditorium for more than 5,000 students.

In that very auditorium, Johnson inspired countless students to major in economics and numerous undergraduate teaching assistants to follow in his footsteps. One assistant, Mark Burton, BA '81, now a faculty member at the University of Tennessee, said: “There’s rarely a day I walk into a classroom that I don’t use something stolen from Walter Johnson. Walter is still teaching kids.”

Johnson’s quick wit also made his classes interesting for even the most bleary-eyed of students. Ted Tarkow, associate dean of arts and science, recalled the legendary story of how Johnson responded to a stalker darting in front of the class by joking, “That’s the perfect example of the gross national product!”

— Mary Beth Constant