DR. JAMES D. NORRIS (1930-2013)

DeKalb – Dr. James Donald Norris, 82, passed away Jan. 16, 2013, at Oak Crest DeKalb Area Retirement Center with his family by his side. Born Nov. 2, 1930, in Richmond, Mo., to Floyd and Gladys Norris, Jim or Jimmy Don as he was called, grew up in Richmond and then attended Central Missouri University in Warrensburg, Mo. The Korean War interrupted his education, and he entered the Air Force where he served four years. He was accepted in the Air Force Cadet School but was forced to leave because of hearing loss. He spent the balance of his service working in intelligence, participating in the testing of the hydrogen bomb in the Marshall Islands. Immediately upon leaving the Air Force, Jim enrolled at the University of Missouri at Columbia, Mo., where he arrived at his first class still in military fatigue. He graduated with a bachelor of science in education in 1956, a master of arts in 1958 and a Ph.D. in history in 1962. During this time, he married his sweetheart, Nancy Hamilton, in 1957 who also was enrolled at the university.

Jim was an assistant, then associate professor of history at Hiram College for four years and in 1965, was a visiting associate professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He then moved to the University of Missouri, St. Louis, becoming chairman of the history department in 1969. Jim served the University of Missouri system on the intercampus faculty council. In 1972, Jim was awarded a Federal Fulbright Senior Lectureship in Ghana, West Africa. He spent time on their limited television, answering questions about Watergate, teaching and lecturing.

As a historian, Jim taught American history, but specialized in frontier and business history, the field in which he researched and published eight books during his career.

In 1979, Jim, Nancy and their three children moved to DeKalb, to serve as dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. His distinguished service to Northern Illinois University and to the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences from 1979 to 2000 included the creation of several new academic units such as the Department of Computer Science, the Women's Studies program, the Division of Statistics and the Center for the Study of Family Violence and Sexual Assault. He championed new doctoral programs in biological, mathematical and geological sciences, always with an eye toward enhancing NIU's reputation as a comprehensive teaching and research university. Dean Norris' leadership ability and integrity led his colleagues to select him to serve as executive secretary of the University Council and then as president of the Faculty Senate. In 2011, he was a recipient of a Distinguished Faculty Award in Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Above all else, Jim was a devoted faculty member. That perspective guided all of his decisions, informed his leadership style and earned him the reputation as a fair, collegial and transparent administrator and colleague.

All his life, Jim enjoyed the outdoors – boating and fishing on Leech Lake in Minnesota, hunting geese, pheasant and quail in Missouri and Illinois and being with his family at his cabin in Minnesota. He especially enjoyed hunting with his son, Jim; brother-in-law, Buford; and nephew, Scott, in Missouri. Upon retirement, Jim developed new friendships with which he hunted, fished and enjoyed various adventures: Phil Nye and sons, who did the heavy lifting on deer hunts, Charlie Larson, Bud Tyler and Chuck Ballard.

Jim is survived by his wife of 55 years, Nancy; son, James Hamilton Norris; wife, Irene and three children, Jimmy, Shannon and Jenny; daughter, Katie Geer and children, Taylor Hopper and twins, Tessa and Hunter; daughter, Elizabeth Dalley and son, David Smith; a sister, Joanne Gad; Nancy's brother and sister-in-law, Dr. Buford and Camille Hamilton and their children, Scott Hamilton and Megan Hamilton.

Jim was preceded in death by his parents; a brother, Earl Norris; sister-in-law, Peggy Norris; and niece, Jenny Riley; brother-in-law, James Gad; and niece, Jo Ellen Hicks.

The visitation will be from 9 to 11 a.m. Friday, Feb. 15, and a memorial service will be at 11 a.m. at Westminster Presbyterian Church, 830 Annie Glidden Road in DeKalb.

Those wishing to honor his legacy can make donations in lieu of flowers to the NIU Foundation. Enclose a note advising the Foundation that the gift is in memory of Dr. James D. Norris. Gifts can be sent to NIU Foundation, Altgeld Hall 134, DeKalb, IL 60115 ATTN: Teri Gensler.

Arrangements were entrusted to Ronan-Moore-Finch Funeral Home, 310 Oak St., DeKalb, IL 60115. To send an online condolence, visit www.RonanMooreFinch.com or call 815-758-3841.

Published in Daily Chronicle on Jan. 26, 2013