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ALBERT COATES—EDUCATOR (1896-1989) MY MOST UNFORGETTABLE CHARACTER

WILLIAM B. AYCOCK†

Albert Coates is the most unforgettable character I have known. I grew up in Johnston County where he was born and spent his boyhood. Later, I was his student in the Law School of U.N.C. and, thereafter, his colleague on the Law faculty.

He joined the Law Faculty at the age of twenty-three. As a young Professor of Law, he first discerned, and then proclaimed, a wide gap between law and government as taught in the classroom and as practiced in city halls and county courthouses. His obsession for the next sixty years was to bridge this gap. He pursued this goal with incredible tenacity. The keystone in his program to “bridge the gap” was to educate public officials at all levels—city, county and state.

Albert was a gifted writer and he recorded in his unique style most of the episodes in his long and difficult quest for better government through education. One of his many publications—*What the University of North Carolina Meant to Me*—is, in fact, an autobiography of his first seventy-two years. A legion of people can attest to the aggregate of distinctive qualities he possessed.

Albert Coates, in the 1920s, created the Institute of Government as the instrumentality through which he would “bridge the gap.” The Institute began as a private operation outside the framework of the University. In the late 1930s, Albert searched for funds to erect a home for the Institute on a lot located on Franklin Street which he had purchased with funds donated to him for that purpose. He contacted officials in the State Office in Raleigh of the National Youth Administration, a New Deal Agency, created in the “Depression” to provide vocational training to unemployed youths. I was one of those officials. Albert had learned that young people under skilled supervision, as a by-product of their training, had built community centers, small school buildings and the like. He wanted us to help him with his building. We knew about his work in the Institute and he did not need to win our hearts. But at the outset, we knew we could not help because the law limited us to working for public agencies on publicly owned land. We told him so. But he insisted on making his full two-hour presentation. We told him “No” again. He refused to accept “No” as a final answer. He promised to return. He did return for many more conferences. Somehow, he believed that his cause was so worthy that we would eventually create a gap in the law that governed us and the manner in which we practiced it. His persistence in probing for a gap that wasn’t there is an unforgettable experience.

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Albert eventually secured sufficient private funds to build on Franklin Street. In 1942, the University took the Institute of Government into its bosom and its future was secure. When I entered law school in 1945 and became a student in his criminal law class, he had two full-time jobs in the University—a professor in the Law School and Director of the Institute of Government. When he found time to prepare for class, his performances were superb. At other times, he did a good job of “winging” it by drawing heavily from his knowledge of the classics and history. Albert learned to appreciate the liberal arts while a student at U.N.C. and he always regarded law and the liberal arts as inextricably interwoven. Like his friend, Sam Ervin, he developed a vast repertoire of stories about law and government which he used generously to make a point. To be a student of Albert Coates was a valuable and unforgettable experience.

The early years of the Institute of Government tell a story of personal sacrifice for Albert and his wife, Gladys Hall Coates. Bridging the gap between law and government was more important than acquiring material things. His law school salary often was consumed in the operation of the Institute while the Coates' survived on credit extended by friends. Eventually the faith of several business leaders who made contributions to Albert's work in the early years was vindicated. In 1943 the *Readers Digest* published a feature article on the Institute entitled “Don't Shoot Your Sheriff: Teach Him.” Personal sacrifice to fulfill a dream is an attribute that is unforgettable.

Albert was a hard taskmaster on himself and demanding of others. But there was compassion too. This attribute surfaced for me in 1957. Selma, my hometown in Johnston County, sponsored a “Bill Aycock Night” in recognition of my recent selection to become Chancellor at U.N.C. Albert came, and, on arrival, he learned that our ten-year-old daughter could not attend because she had come down with the mumps. He was visibly concerned and forthwith he began to take notes. When he returned to Chapel Hill, this busy man with two jobs spent several hours writing a letter to her describing in minute detail all that occurred during that evening. To me this is unforgettable.

While Director of the Institute of Government, Albert came to the Chancellor's office more frequently than anyone else. As soon as he discovered that I often went to work in South Building at six or seven o'clock in the morning, he started appearing at those early hours ready to talk an hour or so about his current needs. In 1962 he reached the age of sixty-five and thus the mandatory retirement age for administrators in the University. I dreaded to preside over his retirement as much as he hated to retire from that position. But there was no gap between the Trustee's Rule and its enforcement on the campus. In the process of finding his successor, I sought his recommendations. He demurred. After several attempts, I set aside a full Saturday morning to elicit his views. He came and discussed the matter of his successor in a general way for five hours. To this day, I do not know his preference. His vocal energy on this occasion, as always, was inexhaustible. The frequency and duration of my meetings with him while I was Chancellor are unforgettable.

Among the admirable personal qualities of Albert was his willingness to

share his shortcomings. Shortly after I became his colleague on the faculty, he failed to show up for class. The Dean was a former student of Albert's and had served as the first full-time employee of Albert's Institute of Government. Let Albert tell the story:

One year the Law School registration came on a Friday. That night he [the Dean] talked to the annual convocation of students and faculty on the state of the Law School, emphasizing the virtues of getting to classes on time, and meeting responsibilities as they come. No one ever heard of classes starting on Saturday, though a look at the schedule would have shown it. Two members of the faculty were scheduled to set law students an example of meeting classes on time on this particular Saturday morning, and they did not show up. The Dean called one of them and found he was somewhere on the highway from Virginia Beach to Chapel Hill and could not be reached. Then he called me—in an office in another building. “Can you read?” he asked with all the fury of molten lava which had not caught the man who was already fleeing from the wrath to come. There was only one sensible answer to this question, put in this way, and that was *No*; and that is what I told him. This reply was briefly satisfying to me, but not at all satisfying to him. The upshot of his reply was that I should pick up that part of my anatomy which was usually covered up, and hurry over to the classroom where my students were meeting their responsibility if I were not meeting mine. I followed his instruction to the letter, and I don't mean maybe.

Another episode which he has shared involved the time he was on the road at midnight “hurried, worried and tired.” Albert fell asleep at the wheel of his car and the car turned upside down. In the car with Albert was one of his staff members. But again let Albert give his account of the event:

Both of us were knocked senseless at first. When we came to ourselves and managed to scramble up to the road, a passing motorist picked us up and took us to the University infirmary where we were treated. Harry [McGalliard] suffered a painfully sprained arm while I had a concussion and a scalp wound as a result of my head hitting the rear-view mirror. Harry later reported that on the way to the infirmary I made the most moving plea for the Institute he had ever heard. Though I do not remember making this plea, by the next morning my head was clear enough to call some of my colleagues and say, “Boys, for God's sake go out with the garage man to bring in the car. There are five thousand highway safety pamphlets on the back seat and I hate to think of the story some inquiring reporter could write if he found them.” When they carried out my request they also found copies of the Bible and Shakespeare which my wife kept in the car—she was often the driver—to read while I went in to talk for half an hour with prospective donors and stayed for an hour and a half, or more. She has had time to read and digest them both.

Gladys Hall Coates, his wife, was his constant companion for more than sixty years. He was the warrior King and she was the elegant Queen of the Institute of Government. She was his researcher, his editor, and his critic. In

1960, I was privileged to speak at the dedication of the Joseph Palmer Knapp Building, the present home of the Institute of Government. On that occasion I said:

Creative ideas have one parent. Rarely do they have both father and mother. But occasionally one is blessed with both, and the Institute of Government is living proof of it. Albert and Gladys Coates are so much a part of the life of this historic institution and the University is so much a part of their lives that they have long ago harmoniously blended.

To observe the marital partnership of Albert and Gladys devoted to public service with a minimum of material rewards for their life's work is to me unforgettable.

When Albert was retired as Director of the Institute of Government, he was still a Professor in the Law School. But his agenda was not yet complete. He proceeded to create an Institute of Civic Education which the University incorporated into the Extension Division. The State, through the University, provided funds to enable him to work with the public schools in the upgrading of the teaching of civics and government in the public schools. This phase of his career is described in his Report entitled *Out of a Classroom in Chapel Hill Into the Public Schools of North Carolina*.

In 1968, at the age of 71, and one year before mandatory retirement as a law school professor, he was stricken. He had a stroke with cardiac complications. He wrote an unforgettable account of his illness that includes a play by play account of his recovery.

After his recovery, when he was seventy-two years of age, he dropped in my law school office and shared with me his unfinished agenda. Among other things, he wanted to complete the book he and Gladys were writing about student government on this campus. Then there was an unfinished book on Women in North Carolina. Further, the History of the Institute of Government needed to be updated. He figured he needed twenty more years. After discussing the longevity of his ancestors, he concluded he would get the time he needed. He lived exactly twenty more years. All he said he wanted to do, he did and more. To the end he was, as Winston Churchill has been described, "incapable of inactivity." For his work he earned a top spot in the annals of education in North Carolina. He will always be present wherever he has been. He will remain in this University, in the city halls and in the county courthouses, and in the State Capitol for untold years to come. Of all the educators I have known, he is the most unforgettable.