

# MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

## JOHN DAVIS WIRTH

(1936-2002)

John D. Wirth, Gildred Professor of Latin American Studies and Professor of History Emeritus, died of a heart aneurysm on June 20, 2002 in Toronto, Canada, while lecturing on Zebulon Pike to the Friends of Fort York, a Canadian historical society. He had celebrated his 66<sup>th</sup> birthday just three days earlier. In his thirty-seven years on the Stanford faculty, Professor Wirth distinguished himself as a scholar, teacher, and university citizen.

Education was John's calling and among his greatest passions, along with his family, his enchantment with the mystique of the American West, and his love of the outdoors – fly-fishing in particular. He was born in the midst of the Great Depression in Dawson, New Mexico, where his grandfather managed a coal-mining operation that petered out soon after John's birth, leaving Dawson a ghost town. As a boy, John ranged New Mexico's Pajarito Plateau, where his father, Cecil Wirth, served as headmaster of the Los Alamos Ranch School until his death at age 33 in 1943. When in the same year the United States Army commandeered the school as part of the Manhattan Project to build the atomic bomb, the family moved to Denver. As John later wrote: "Thus by age 8 I had already developed a keen sense of life's contingencies. Displaced by the war, single parented, and with a birth certificate from nowhere, I felt the pull and the need for historical explanation."

That pull and need generated a scholarship to Vermont's Putney School, beginning a life-long association with the School as student, teacher, and, beginning in 1988, trustee. He graduated from Harvard College in 1958, served in the United States Army, and taught for two years at Putney before enrolling in 1961 in Stanford's graduate program in History, where he studied Latin American history under John J. Johnson. He joined the Stanford faculty in 1965, and was named to the Gildred Chair in 1991.

John's scholarship was notable for its originality, breadth, and consequence. He played a central role in the development of Brazilian studies in North America. In a notably prolific and creative generation of scholars, he stood out as the author of a series of groundbreaking studies of the evolution of the modern state in Brazil. His first book, The Politics of Brazilian Development, 1930-1954 (Stanford University Press, 1970), provided a new interpretation of government-led economic development in Brazil during the middle years of the twentieth century. The book won the Conference on Latin American History's prestigious Bolton Prize in 1971, as the year's best English-language book on Latin America. John followed this with Minas Gerais in the Brazilian Federation, 1889-1937 (Stanford University Press, 1977), a masterful analysis of regional politics in one of Brazil's most important states. An honorable mention for the Bolton Prize, the book was part of a three-volume collaborative effort—with Joseph Love and Robert Levine—aimed at studying Brazilian regionalism in a rigorous, comparative manner. These three volumes, all translated into Portuguese, have been enormously influential in both the Brazilian and

North American academies, forming the standard against which all subsequent Brazilian regional studies have been measured.

Participating in that endeavor fueled John's interest in collaborative and comparative work. In subsequent years, he organized conferences and edited volumes of essays regarding the politics of the oil industry in Latin America, the intersection of history and anthropology in the study of pre-Columbian civilizations, and the nature of state and society in Brazil. All those efforts reflected John's unique gift for eliciting new ideas and unexpected results from the combined efforts of his peers.

John's questing curiosity led him into new territory as he matured as a scholar and leader within the community of Latin American studies. Complementing his continuing interest in Brazil, John increasingly focused on questions of environmental history and hemispheric integration. He developed innovative courses about the history of Canada and U.S.-Canadian relations. He founded the North American Institute (NAMI) in Santa Fe, New Mexico, as a forum for scholarly debate and informed activism regarding the economic, environmental, and cultural implications of NAFTA, immigration, and other major issues facing the continent. He lectured widely and also published on these topics, including Smelter Smoke in North America: The Politics of Transborder Pollution (University Press of Kansas, 2000), an historical examination of air pollution along the United States borders with Canada and Mexico. With this work, John's scholarly and personal life came full circle. He relished the irony that his grandfather had once managed the copper mine in Morenci, Arizona, that fed two of the smelters in his study. And his interest in the politics of development, regional and environmental history, and comparative methodology brought him home to his beloved Southwest, to the landscape of his childhood in New Mexico. His last scholarly project, published posthumously by the University of New Mexico Press, was a history of the Los Alamos Ranch School.

John was a visionary and a builder, an infectious optimist, an impassioned lover of his place and his profession, and a famously boon companion. He was also a spirited teacher, a tireless servant of Stanford University, and a dedicated citizen of the broader educational world, his country, and his continent. He introduced countless Stanford students to Latin American studies, served as the director of the Latin American Studies center from 1975 to 1983 and again in 2000-2001, led the Stanford-Berkeley Joint Center for Latin American Studies from 1981-1983, chaired the Department of Spanish and Portuguese from 1985-1987, and held the position of Vice Provost for Academic Planning and Development from 1988 to 1991. In addition to founding NAMI and his service on behalf of Putney School, he also served on the Board of Visitors and Governors of St. John's College, and was appointed by President Bill Clinton in 1994 to the Joint Public Advisory Committee for the North American commission for Environmental Cooperation. It was his dream that one day Canada, the United States, and Mexico might be woven into a coherent continental community

John is survived by his wife of 42 years, Nancy Meem Wirth, of Santa Fe, New Mexico, the daughter of noted architect John Gaw Meem, and their three sons, Peter, Timothy, and Nicholas, as well as his brother, Timothy Wirth, a former United States

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Senator from Colorado, his half-brother, John Wiebenson, his sisters Carla Henebry and Mary Gilland, and four grandchildren. His colleagues at Stanford sorely miss his energy and his ebullient presence, and share their loss.

Committee:  
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