

Joseph Carlyle Sitterson '31

In April, 1942, Lyle Sitterson was a long way from the history classrooms of Chapel Hill that had been his principal residence for the 15 prior years. Camp Chaffee, Arkansas, was about as far away as you could get.

In a note he wrote to a friend in Chapel Hill, he said: "I am now a rather insignificant part of the 6th Armored Division of one of the Army's newest armored outfits."

Lyle as an insignificant part of anything is hard for those of us who know him, who have worked with him and under him, who have studied under his guidance, to accept at face value.

His next sentence in that war-time letter rings truer: "We of the armored division are proud of the fact that, like the air force, we are one of the principal offensive wings of the Army."

From 1935 Lyle has been one of the principal offensive wings of the University. History scholar of international repute, teacher of rare ability, and administrator blessed with judgment, patience, and perspective, Lyle has been a player on the offensive team at Chapel Hill over a long and productive career—Kenan Professor of History, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dean of the General College, Vice Chancellor, and, for six of the stormiest years in Carolina history, Chancellor.

He came to the campus' highest office in 1966, a time of political unrest on a score of fronts. Carolina was trying to right herself after the unfair infliction of the Speaker Ban Law. The civil rights movement had matured in complexity and in its ability to insist on long-delayed change, manifesting itself most tangibly in the cafeteria worker strikes.

Those events primed the campus for the even greater disturbances that were immediately to follow in the Vietnam protests.

Chancellor Sitterson, most of all, kept his cool. He considered it one of his most important responsibilities to educate supervisory personnel in sensitivity to the needs and status of people. That helped calm the racial unrest accompanying the food worker strikes. He stood before 10,000 angry students protesting the killing of anti-war student protestors at Kent State University and called them together in an emotional moment of silent prayer. He gave unruffled ear to the young lady who led a small gang of protestors into his classroom and demanded of his students, "Why are you people staying in here listening to this fascist who is responsible for so much repression?" He allowed her her say and then calmly and effectively reasserted control of his classroom.

In 1934, one year before joining the UNC faculty, Lyle became collector of the state Hall of History, following the legendary Fred Olds, the Hall's founder and for 40 years its director.

The *News and Observer*, commenting on the difficulty of following someone of Olds' stature, said: "Mr. Sitterson is eminently qualified for the job of collector of the Hall of History, but he will have to carve for himself his career."

Whether Lyle Sitterson took that advice only he can say. But the rest of us can attest that he has "carved for himself a career." We are grateful he did his carving at Chapel Hill and not in the Hall of History. We are in his debt for years of leadership as chancellor when attendance grew by a thousand students a year, when the campus remained open in the face of nearly insurmountable threat, when the character, size, and reputation of the faculty rose to new heights, and when the University accelerated its progress on the path to national prominence. And we are in his debt for his service as a teacher. Never as chancellor, or in his other administrative capacities did he give up the classroom. The double load was a burden, but the payoff was obvious. In 1980, almost a decade after leaving the chancellor's post to go back full-time to his first love, teaching, Lyle won the University Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching.

In 1981 when he was 70, Lyle spoke of what the University means to him: "There'd be no way I could put it into language. I'd have to go on indefinitely talking about the ways it has been central to my life. Sometimes it's given me capacities I didn't have. . . . I think of it every now and then, how much joy I've had in a life in this University. I marvel at it!"