a LETTER from the PRESIDENT of moorhead state university

Winter and the first day of the quarter arrived together, and we, having found the campus, however warm in the last days of our long fall, dreary in the absence of students, were caught between our regret at the return of winter and our pleasure in the return of students. Pleasure has won out, for we have learned to adjust to winter and we have never learned to adjust to a campus without students.

We live in the hope that students share our pleasure in their return to campus. We would like to believe that learning, even when circumscribed by schedules and regulations, is so exciting, satisfying, and joyful an experience that everyone is eager to get back to it. But we also know that the pleasure of coming back to college has a lot to do with people, with students seeing students and students seeing teachers.

In the days before the beginning of the fall quarter, I thought very often of teachers and their students, for in that week I had been a pallbearer at the funeral of one of my teachers. I talked about this to the parents of new students, and now I would like to add to what I said then about Carl Moe.

In the summer of 1932 there were too many teachers and too few jobs in my home town, Dassel. The school board had a rule that required that any applicant for a teaching position who was related to a member of the board had to receive a unanimous vote. My father was a member of the board and, when the vote on my uncle was not unanimous, Carl Moe was hired.

My uncle, having nothing else to do, went to graduate school. Eventually he became a professor at the University of Minnesota and an authority on the teaching of mathematics, with a national, in fact, an international, reputation. But many years ago I came to know that our school board had made the right decision in hiring Carl Moe. It was a decision that stuck, for Carl Moe stayed on at Dassel as teacher, principal, and superintendent until the Dassel district and the Cokato district consolidated in 1968 and built a new high school half-way between the two towns. Carl Moe retired two years later.

Longevity has its honors, but it was not the length of Carl Moe's career but its quality that truly mattered. It is hard to define that quality, even though everyone recognized it. One can talk about the teacher's clear presentations, the principal's firm discipline, and the superintendent's wise decisions, but how does one describe a life that touches so closely the lives of most of the people of a community that it seems to exist nearly independent of the positions filled. Or seems so to exist, for the fact is that part of Carl's life that was not private, as husband, father, and friend, was totally dedicated to the school. But so important is the school to its small town and so important is it in the lives of students, if it is the right kind of school, that its influence, which is the influence of those who work in it, spills over, becomes pervasive, imparts a sense of continuity and, in the passing of generations, defines change.

It was Carl's influence that outgrew the school; he, himself was always defined by his job, for that is the way of small towns. The teachers and, especially, the superintendent are (or were, for that may all have changed) a little apart, something more than visitors, something less than citizens. Time, nor yet respect and affection, did not alter that. Partly it is because they were newcomers; their grandparents were buried far away. Partly it was respect for learning, which set them apart as a clergyman was set apart by his piety. The superintendent, until Carl Moe's time, had always been called the Professor, the ultimate title for a man of learning. Partly the separateness grew out of the memory of all of us for the gap, never to

December 1980

be crossed, between us as pupils and them as teachers, so that even now I find it difficult, in writing, to use only the first name of a man who was for so many years my good friend. Partly, it must be said, the apartness derived from the less creditable notion that outsiders were, after all, outsiders, even, or especially, if we paid their salaries.

And Carl Moe, the young Norwegian from Lidgerwood, North Dakota, was surely an outsider in our Swede town, where the strain of Norwegian blood in the mostly Swedish Dilles was regarded with the same kind of amusement given to the youthful indiscretions of someone finally grown respectable. Moreover, the town soon became aware that Carl's wife, Dorothy, was a Catholic, an extraordinary thing to be in a town where half the people were Lutheran and the other half thought that the Lutherans, with their liturgy and carved altar-piece, were suspiciously like Catholics.

We can find these things amusing now, but it was only because I was so young in the early 'thirties that I did not know that life was very difficult for the Moes. Young men with growing families and small salaries find the life difficult enough, but the thought of no job at all makes them accept the indignities, although that situation often has, as it had in Carl's case, the effect of bringing the members of a family very close together, with the provision of strength that such closeness brings.

Eventually there were other jobs, and offers, but there were also changes. The town came to value Carl and no one seemed much worried when he joined the Catholic Church. But before that came Carl's sense of his vocation, of a dedication to the good of young people, which he, I would guess, found it difficult to separate from this particular place.

When Carl became principal, we small boys heard tales of his sterness as a disciplinarian. There was, we understood, much picking up and shaking. Of course, we heard that about most teachers who taught older boys; it was a part of growing up, this anticipation of the eventual exile from the kindly women teachers of the first floor, to the fears of the second floor and the absolute terror of the third.

I do not know whether I want the stories of Carl's discipline to have been exaggerated or to have been true, a stage in the development of the human being we finally met when we walked up those steps, that man who was kind, even gentle, amused at our follies, willing to sit down with us and to help us lay out the elements of a problem and recognize the options, a man for whom we behaved not out of fear but because we did not want to dissapoint him.

I had been given an example of his interest in students long before I really knew him, although I did not then recognize it for what it was. When I was about to enter the sixth grade, I found myself quarantined at home, since my sister had scarlet fever. The quarantine sign had been nailed to our door and I languished at home, far from the delights of the play ground. My brother, who was entering ninth grade, was unwilling to miss the excitements of starting high school and moved in with our grandparents. At the end of the first day of school, he came home, avoiding the house, of course, but finding my father and me in a hay field where we were forking together the sparse third crop of a dry year. I remember him coming across the hills and coming up to us to tell us about the first day of school and, as it turned out, to break some news. "Dad", he said, "I didn't sign up for agriculture." My father put down his fork and stared at him. Agriculture was a new subject; it held out a promise of competence that must have seemed all the more enticing in those years when the farm disappointed us year after year.

"Why not?" my father asked.

"Mr. Moe thinks that I might want to go to college and so I have to take algebra."

I know – I think I sensed it then – my father's disappointment. He was being told that he would lose his son, that they would not farm together.

I remember my own astonishment. It may say something about the way I was handling the pitchfork that I had no sense of the mantle of my father's partnership falling suddenly on my own shoulders. College should not have seemed so unlikely; we had the examples of uncles and aunts. But for my brother? The subject had never come up. I suppose that there was so much in the 'thirties that served to narrow our expectations.

Strange are the ways of fate! And who can precisely identify causes and assign effects or know the end of a good deed. My brother did go to college and then to medical school. And after Carl's funeral Dorothy asked me if I knew that my brother had twice saved Carl's life, once in a remarkably dramatic way, with the knowledge that had accumulated year after year upon that first algebra class.

I, too, went to college, and when I graduated Carl offered me a job. I had not intended to be a teacher, and I had not taken the courses that would have shown me how to do the job, but teachers were hard to find and I was hired

without a certificate. If I had been filled with self doubts, Carl would have found a way to give me help and confidence, but I suffered from no doubts at all. Carl was equal even to that. He had taught me both physics and chemistry and what I remembered most about him as a teacher was that he knew so very much. Well, I knew a great deal about English, but I knew little enough about a lot of other things. We talked in his office a good many times. But I don't recall that he ever gave me any advice, except how to direct a play. But I learned from my conversations with him something about the vulnerability of students who upset me by their behavior, about the values of education for those who would never do very well, about the satisfactions of small achievements – in short, he led me to discover what he had discovered long ago, that a teacher has a special responsibility for protecting human dignity.

I had a double chance to profit from Carl Moe's humanity, as one of his students and as one of his teachers, but those lessons must have been learned by many, many others.

To respect human dignity is to accept the capacity for achievement of others; it is also to treasure one's own capacities, and that is, perhaps, a more conventional goal of education.

We learned that lesson in his classes; it was reinforced by his optimistic expectations of us.

And by his example. The 'thirties were hard enough. Teachers devised all kinds of ways to keep children from being ashamed of being poor. And the conscientious superintendent during the years of World War II discovered all sorts of talents in himself. Carl Moe, scientist and administrator, coached sports, directed plays, coached debate and declamation, and taught every kind of course, filling in for teachers who could not be found or who wandered off in the middle of the year to better paying defense. jobs. He held it all together, as he held it together in the years of changing values before his retirement.

Not that his values changed, nor did he really retire. Thereafter, until his final illness, he spent part of each year in Mississippi where he and Dorothy taught at the Piney Woods School where Black boys and girls who have missed out on the normal opportunities for education get a second chance. That decision to serve surprised no one who knew Carl and Dorothy Moe.

Carl Moe is pictured here with a bust done by a former student, Roger Brodin, and presented to the school at a reunion of all classes in 1978. (Photograph courtesy of the Dassel 'Dispatch'.)

The last time I visited Carl, a few days before he died, I told him that I thought that there were two times when I had disappointed him badly and that I wanted to talk about them. They had troubled me for years; they had not troubled him at all.

There are some people we want to impress. There are others whom we do not want to disappoint, and among these are all the men and women for whom we greatly care. And among those for whom we care are teachers like Carl Moe, whose expectations follow us all the days of our life.

Roland Dille

The Bulletin: Volume 80, Number 12, Published monthly, except for two issues in February and none in July, by the Public Affairs Office, Owens Hall, Moorhead State University, Moorhead, Minnesota 56560. Second Class Postage paid in Moorhead, Minnesota 56560
December, 1980