William Oliver Thweatt, Professor Emeritus of Economics, known to his colleagues as “Bill”, died on February 28, 2008, at the age of 86 after being ill for about a year. Bill was born in Brooklyn, New York, on June 4, 1921. He spent a difficult childhood since his father died in a car accident when he was six, and when he was ten, his mother died of tuberculosis. By then the Great Depression had started. Bill was shuttled among the households of relatives from New York to Alabama until he was 18, attending four high schools in three states. When World War Two broke out, Bill enlisted in the Navy’s V-12 program and was assigned to the Great Lakes Naval Training Station. Through the Officers’ Training Program, he began studying at Berea College, Kentucky, and the University of North Carolina. Thanks to the G.I. Bill, he completed his Bachelor of Science degree in Industrial Management in 1946 at UCLA, and stayed there to earn the M. A. degree in Economics in 1948. While a Teaching Assistant at UCLA, he met and tutored Coralie, who was then a student and a year later became his wife. After a year at George Pepperdine College in Los Angeles, Bill began the first of four lengthy assignments that brought him overseas, first as a graduate student, then as teacher and administrator in three different continents. The ease with which he adapted to these varied assignments abroad may well be due to his successful response to the dislocations that marked his early life.

Bill was first invited to teach at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon, from 1950 to 1953. He seemed to acquire a taste for living overseas, and in 1953 he won a Ford Foundation Overseas Scholarship to study at the Institute of Colonial Studies at Nuffield College, Oxford, with Professor Sir John Hicks, the noted economist who later received the Nobel Prize in Economics. Bill received the B. Phil. degree in Economics at Oxford in 1955. After a year at Montana State University, he began his long association with Vanderbilt when he taught as Assistant Professor of Economic Development from 1956 to 1958. The opportunity then arose for Bill Thweatt to become a Program Economist and Economic Advisor to the Government of Nepal from 1958 to 1960 with USAID, and Ford Foundation Tax and Fiscal Consultant to the National Planning Council and the Ministry of Economic Affairs of the Nepalese Government from 1960 to 1963. Being stationed in Katmandu, and Nepal being a small country, Bill became an economic advisor to the King, and got to know the royal family socially.

After this stint in Nepal, Bill returned to Vanderbilt and became Associate Professor of Economics and Assistant Director of the Graduate Program in Economic Development. The many years that Bill spent in Lebanon, Oxford and Nepal made him a natural candidate to lead a group of Vanderbilt faculty members who were asked to set up a Master of Arts Program in Economics at the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Bill was appointed as Chief of Party of the Vanderbilt University Contract Group to the University of São Paulo from 1966 to 1969, and the U.S. State Department recognized Bill’s effectiveness in administering what became one of Vanderbilt’s best-known foreign programs – which continues to thrive as a domestic Brazilian program and now also offers the Ph.D. degree in Economics.
When he returned to Vanderbilt from Brazil in 1969, Bill was promoted Professor of Economics and continued until 1973 as Campus Coordinator of the USAID/Brazil program in Graduate Economics and Training Coordinator for the Brazil Program in Science and Technology of the Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt. He served as Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Economics from 1978 to 1980.


Bill’s sojourn in England as a graduate student, and his interaction with John Hicks and other British academics, made him aware of the British roots of the classical school of economics of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, T. Robert Malthus and John Stuart Mill. His initial attraction to the field of economic development was then displaced by a passionate interest in the history of economic thought. He acquired a reputation in that area in the economics profession, being appointed Vice President of the History of Economics Society in 1978-79, and member of the Board of Editors of journals such as Journal of the History of Economic Thought and History of Political Economy. From 1982 to 1985, Bill served as member of the Executive Committee of the History of Economics Society. He played a leading role among historians of economic thought, and published numerous articles in that area in journals such as Scottish Journal of Political Economy, History of Political Economy, Journal of International Economics (with Andrea Maneschi), Eastern Economic Journal, and Quarterly Review of Economics and Business. He also edited a well-received volume on Classical Political Economy: A Survey of Recent Literature (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1988).

In our Department, Bill Thweatt was known for his gregarious outgoing nature, his wry sense of humor, friendliness toward colleagues and students, and his excellent teaching. In 1977 he was awarded the Madison Sarratt Prize for best undergraduate teacher. In 1985 he went on to win the Chancellor’s Cup for the greatest contribution outside the classroom to student-faculty relationships. As reported by Grace Zibart in the Vanderbilt Alumni magazine some years ago, a former student of Bill described his teaching aptitude in a way that explains his reputation as one of the most popular professors on campus. This student wrote about Bill: “It is not altogether his energy that makes such an impact, although you have to see him in action – talking, moving about, never giving you a chance to waver in your attention. It is his complete involvement in his subject, he is as interested in his subject as he wants you to be. He has a characteristic way of putting things, often witty or ironic. He brings a sense of discovery to what could be the cut and dried tenets of introductory economics. Best of all, he seems to be talking to you personally, quite a feat when there are 300 students in the class.”

The energy that this student commented on regarding Bill’s teaching was mirrored in other aspects of his life. Bill was a very keen and competitive tennis player, playing several times a week with students and colleagues. He and his wife often invited students and colleagues to swim in their pool and stay afterwards for snacks and refreshments. One of Bill’s endearing personal quirks was his tendency to clap his hands together, rubbing them briskly back and forth, smiling, as a commemoration of a job well done, or perhaps to stir up energy for the next task.
He was a voracious reader, always carrying a book around with him and reading in spare moments. In Nepal he and his wife also became art collectors, and accumulated an impressive collection of bronze and brass statuettes of Buddha and other religious artifacts, many of which they bought to help out Tibetans escaping from their homeland.

Bill Thweatt retired from Vanderbilt in 1991 and became Professor Emeritus. Even after he fell ill in his last year, Bill retained an invariably positive attitude, a contagious enthusiasm for life, and a marked sense of humor. He was a fun-loving, generous and kind person, an affectionate family man, and he is missed by the colleagues who knew him.

by Andrea Maneschi
Professor of Economics