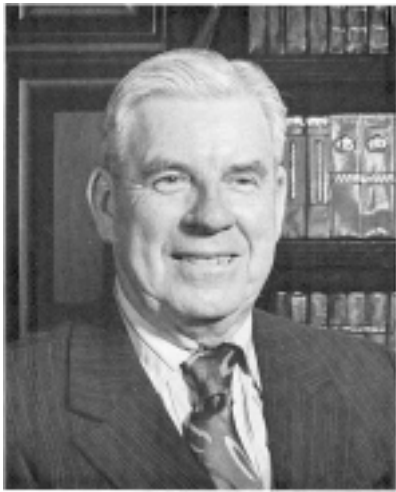




## Who was Walter Gage, the founder of the UBC 25 Year Club?

*(Written by Roland Porter, Co-chair 25 YC 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Committee, 25YC Past-President 2012, inducted into the 25YC in 1998, retired from the UBC Bookstore)*



In his foreword to the book “The Age of Walter Gage,” President Santa Ono writes: “...Walter Gage stands out as an exceptional leader. I’ve heard more about President Gage than any other President. This is remarkable since he left UBC in the 1970’s” (Fralic 7). This is an indication of the respect, admiration, and fondness that faculty, students, and staff alike had for the man.

Born and raised in Vancouver, he graduated from John Oliver High School and enrolled at UBC in 1921 and a year later marched in the Great Trek, , a momentous event in the University’s history.

After getting his BA in 1925, and his MA the following year, he went on to teach for six years at the UBC affiliate, Victoria College, in Victoria, before returning in 1933 to his Alma Mater UBC, as assistant professor of Mathematics.

While at Victoria College he was said to have “brought with him a quick cheerful understanding of people – he liked them, they liked him – that rare ability to give meaning to mathematics...boundless vitality, a well-developed sense of the ridiculous and an infectious grin ” (cited by Fralic, p.32). Biographer Shelley Fralic continues: “Gage was later credited by many with changing the tone of the college – his easy laughter coupled with his slightly theatrical instructional style in the lecture halls seemed to set him apart from other professors” (33). One student recalled that at the College, “Walter was at once Registrar, teacher of mathematics, chief administrator, father confessor to a generation impoverished by the Great Depression, and promotor of the athletic and social life of the students.” It was at Victoria College, Fralic adds, “that the generosity for which Gage would become renowned became increasingly apparent. He seemed to sense when someone needed help, especially financial...and it wasn’t unusual for a fellow teacher...broke between paydays... turning to Gage for a tide-me-over loan, and the same was true for students....Gage, no questions asked, would readily empty his own pockets to help anyone in need, for these were the days of the Depression and money was tight all around” (Fralic 33).

This was only a foreshadowing of what he was to accomplish at UBC. “A natural teacher, his affection for the subject of Mathematics [was] superseded only by his devotion to his students” who clamoured to get into his math classes (Fralic 37). He was the first recipient to receive the Master Teacher award introduced in 1969, only one among the many, many, awards and honours he received over his 57-year history with UBC. He continued being active in the arts, both producing and directing operas for the Musical Society and directing a production of *Julius Caesar* for the Players’ Club. It was at UBC he became legendary for his photographic memory for names and faces. Students, faculty and staff marvelled at his ability to remember their names once he had met them. As at Victoria College, his responsibilities continued to increase throughout the years and became so widespread and remarkable that he came to be affectionately known as the Dean of Everything. “Gage’s work ethic was something of legend,” notes Fralic, “and it was said that he never really took a day off, much less time for a vacation. He did, however, continue his own professional development on occasion off campus”(45-6). Perhaps Gage was best known for making it his mission to ensure that no student was turned away from studies at UBC because of financial need. Gage not only used his personal resources to help students... and never, ever, demanding an IOU or even a verbal promise to repay – his generosity extended well beyond ensuring students could afford tuition fees” (Fralic 58).

Walter Gage was appointed UBC President in 1969 at age 64 after serving as Deputy President and Acting President. He preferred to teach; and one of the conditions in his annual contract for his six years as President, was that he be allowed to continue teaching. A confirmed bachelor, he chose not to live in the President’s residence but to continue to live with his mother in an apartment at 1565 West 16<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and he repurposed the President’s residence on campus as classrooms for adult education, seminars and research. A measure of the widely-held regard and appreciation for the man were the many nicknames he accumulated: Dean of Everything, B.C.’s Mr. Chips, Prince of Our University, Mirror Man, Papa Bear, Pater Patriae, and Mr. UBC (Fralic 84).

On June 25, 1971 President Gage was named a recipient of the Companion of the Order of Canada, considered the highest level of the Order, and he travelled to receive his award at Rideau Hall on October 29, 1971 from Governor General Roland Michener

Coincidentally as President Gage celebrated his 50 years at UBC in 1971, we are celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Club he founded for staff and its first dinner in 1971. It seems only fitting that Walter Gage would found a 25 Year Club for staff, as it is said that President “Gage ran the campus like a family”. He respected and recognized all members of the UBC community; UBC was truly his family, and staff was an important part of this family.

On November 6, 1970, J.F. McLean, Director of Personnel, Labour Relations and Ancillary Services, in a memo to President Gage said; “according to your suggestion at the recent banquet for persons with long University service, I held an organization meeting to discuss the formation of a 25Year Club.” In a letter to McLean, dated October 25 1971, Walter Gage outlined details of the club and the annual dinner, including the revised list of active and retired members with 25 years of service to be inducted. The invitation was sent out for the first dinner to be held in honour of Members of the 25 Year Club in the Ballroom of the Faculty Club at 6:45 pm on November 24, 1971.

Thanks to the steadfast support of the Presidents who followed Gage, the unwavering and tireless work of The Ceremonies Office and of Human Resources, and the dedication of the 25 Year Club committee members over the years, I think Walter Gage would be immensely proud of the club he founded and how it has evolved to recognize 35, 40, and this year on its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, 50 years of service. He might be surprised that the dinner has become a signature event in the lives of the staff at UBC, and how it has survived and thrived over the past 50 years.

Let us take a moment to reflect on this remarkable man and his contributions to the Staff at UBC.

For further information on the life of Walter Gage and his time at UBC, please refer to the sources below, used for this summary of his life.

Shelley Fralic, *The Age of Walter Gage: How One Canadian Shaped the Lives of Thousands*. 2017.

Eric Damer and Herbert Rosengarten, *UBC: The First 100 Years*. 2009.