

Gilbert Courtland Fite (1918-2010)



Agricultural historian Gilbert C. Fite served as the twenty-fifth President of the Western History Association, 1985-86. He was also elected President of the Agricultural History Society in 1960, the Southern Historical Association in 1974, and Phi Alpha Theta in 1981. He joined the Department of History at the University of Oklahoma in 1945 where he was later awarded a George Lynn Cross Professorship. Fite left OU in 1971 to become the President of Eastern Illinois University at Charleston. He departed Eastern Illinois in 1976 to accept the Richard B. Russell Chair of History at the University of Georgia from which he retired in 1986.

“Gil” Fite was born May 14, 1918, in Santa Fe, Ohio, during his parents’ journey to attend the funeral of his grandfather. Otherwise he would have been born on the family’s homestead in Perkins County, South Dakota. His education began in a one-room school near their farm taught by his mother. Fite received both his B.A. and M.A. from the Uni-

versity of South Dakota in 1941, and his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri in 1945. Stomach ulcers which required major surgery kept him from military service in World War II.

During his career Fite wrote ten books, co-authored seven, edited three, and authored chapters in thirteen different volumes. He also contributed more than fifty scholarly articles and gave numerous papers. Those works include: *Peter Norbeck, Prairie Statesman* (1948), *Mount Rushmore* (1952), *George Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (1954), *The Farmers Frontier, 1865-1900* (1966), *Farm to Factory: A History of the Consumers Cooperative Association* (1965), *Beyond the Fence Rows: A History of Farmland Industries, Inc., 1929-1978*, *Cotton Fields No More, Southern Agriculture, 1965-1980*, and *Richard B. Russell, Jr., Senator from Georgia* (1993).

He served on the editorial boards of nine scholarly journals in history, the Screening Committee for Fulbright Awards, and as a consultant for the National Park Service as well as the United States Department of Education. Many honors were given to Dr. Gilbert Fite including a Ford Fellowship, two Fulbright Awards, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the Theodore Saloutos Award for the Best Book in Agricultural History (1985). In 1990, he was inducted into the South Dakota Hall of Fame. At the time of his death at his retirement home in Fort Myers, Florida, on July 12, 2010, he and his wife June were about to celebrate the 69th anniversary of their wedding. Six months later, June also passed away. Gilbert Courtland Fite was 92 when he died.

Sources:

Donald E. Green, “Gilbert C. Fite,” *Great Plains Journal* (Vol. 18, 1979), pp. 93-98. Obituary, *The Daily Oklahoman*, December 12, 2010; Press release from the South Dakota Historical Society Press, September 13, 2010; Eastern Illinois University Media Relations Press Release, July 21, 2010.

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