

ALUMNI *who* TOUCHED *our* LIVES

BY DAN KNAPP

Among the hundreds of thousands of students who have hiked up and down Bascom Hill since the University of Wisconsin's founding in 1848, an enormous number have gone on to distinguish themselves in their chosen careers. A smaller array of individuals transcend even the highest levels of such distinction. These are the UW alumni who have directly or indirectly reached out and touched the very fabric of our lives. Here, in the first of what may become an *ON WISCONSIN* series — selected randomly and in purely alphabetical order — are a half dozen whom we may never have met or known, but who have nevertheless carved an indelible place for themselves in our consciousness.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF ARTHUR HEITZER (TOP LEFT) AND THE WISCONSIN STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Above: Nazi resister Mildred Fish Harnack was imprisoned, tortured, and beheaded, the only American to be executed by Hitler. Right and below: Hollywood film star and NBC radio announcer Don Ameche got his start in show business when he auditioned for a campus play on a lark. Center: Charles Lindbergh was feted as a hero in France and around the world when he made the first solo non-stop flight from New York to Paris in 1927. Wherever they went, these legendary alums took with them the mark of their days on the UW campus.

to popular audiences for nearly six decades.

A Kenosha, Wisconsin native of humble origins, he never quite got over the sting of the severe, anti-Italian-American prejudice he experienced during his childhood in the early decades of this century. Ameche was preparing for law school at the UW when, after auditioning on a lark, he won his first acclaim as a thespian in a campus production of George Bernard Shaw's *The Devil's Disciple* in 1928. Bitten by the acting bug, he had continued success with the Wisconsin Players, and then fate sealed his career when he was asked to replace the accidentally injured leading man in a local stock company production.

Steady work during the heyday of Chicago-based network radio followed, as did twelve years starring in second-banana movie roles for 20th Century Fox. In a twist of fate, film tycoon Darryl Zanuck had sensed his potential even in the failed screen test Ameche had done for MGM, placing the uncle of Wisconsin football great Alan Ameche in male leads opposite such stars as Alice Faye, Betty Grable, Loretta Young, and Claudette Colbert.

Zanuck's instinct proved to be on the money. Musicals, biographicals, war pictures, you name it, Ameche was in them all. While he was for a time the busiest actor on the 20th Century lot, Ameche was later no stranger to the ups and downs of show business. But somehow, when work grew scarce in Hollywood, he deftly segued from films (*Ramona*, *Wing and a Prayer*, *Down Argentine Way*, *In Old Chicago*, *Moon Over Miami*, *Hollywood Cavalcade*, and the original *Heaven Can Wait*) to starring musical and dramatic roles on and off Broadway, in summer stock, and at dinner theaters across the nation. He also kept his hat in the radio ring with a continuing, post-WW II show opposite Frances Langford (as the battling, bickering Bickersons) that was so successful it carried over into the early years of television. In that medium, Ameche became familiar to even younger generations of viewers, assaying guest roles in such series as "The Love Boat."

His film career finally restarted in 1983 — at seventy-six — with a solid role in the comedy *Trading Places* opposite Dan Aykroyd and Eddie Murphy. (They weren't even born when Ameche made such early films as *Sins of Man*, *Swanee River*, and *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*. So well known, so identified with across America was the actor at the time, that for a decade or more after the latter

film, moviegoers referred to a telephone as an "Ameche.") The enduringly popular actor's last films, before he succumbed to cancer at the age of eight-five, were *Coming To America*, *Harry and the Hendersons*, *Oscar*, and *Corrina, Corrina*, opposite Whoopi Goldberg.

MILDRED FISH HARNACK '25, MA '26

Few, if any, University of Wisconsin alumni have risked and ultimately paid more in the cause of humanity than this literature major who also taught at the Madison campus during the flapper age. And few lives of the time departed so dramatically from the frivolity of the Roaring Twenties. Nearly two decades after receiving her degrees, Mildred Fish of Milwaukee died an unspeakably horrible death — after what no doubt was months of excruciating torture in a Nazi prison — on the direct orders of Adolph Hitler himself.

What led to her death is the stuff of a John LeCarre novel. She had discovered and developed a love for Germany and its philosophers during her years at the UW. Then, after meeting German scholar Arvid Harnack on campus, she married and returned with him to his homeland.

By the early thirties, Arvid Harnack was an official at the Third Reich's Ministry of Economics and Mildred taught American literature at the University of Berlin. Ironically, their American friends seem to have wondered how these two people could accept or acquiesce to, let alone live under, the extremes of Nazism. Neither Mildred Fish Harnack nor her husband could afford to openly address such a question. For they had established an anti-Nazi underground resistance group with access to sensitive military information.

The group eventually became known as "The Red Orchestra" (the implication being that it was a Communist espionage cell, when in fact it was made up of anti-Nazis of every stripe) because of its clandestine broadcasts to the USSR. Somehow, for almost a decade, the Harnacks and their co-conspirators managed to evade detection while helping dissidents and Jews escape the country. They published illegal newsletters and a newspaper as well as *verboten* speeches by Franklin Roosevelt. As if that were not perilous

DON AMECHE X'31

Although he didn't have the fame of Clark Gable or Cary Grant, Don Ameche nonetheless capped an unbroken fifty-seven-year career in radio, theater, films, and television with an Academy Award for his role in the motion picture *Cocoon* in 1986 — at the age of seventy-nine. He was, said acting legend Hume Cronyn, Ameche's co-star in that film and its sequel, "a consummate professional. He was always prepared and endlessly willing." And incessantly entertaining, bringing enjoyment and sometimes inspiration





A native of Milwaukee, Mildred Fish met her German husband-to-be, Arvid Harnack, on campus. They moved to Germany and eventually settled in Berlin, where they were active in the anti-Nazi resistance until they were caught by the Gestapo in 1942.

enough, the group also committed sabotage, fomented slave labor revolts, hung anti-Nazi posters, and passed both military and economic intelligence to the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

With the Gestapo about, their luck couldn't last. In 1942, more than one hundred members of "The Red Orchestra" were rounded up and summarily tried. Mildred's husband was sentenced to death and executed on Christmas Eve that same year. Days before, he'd written her: "... I feel part of all that is good and beautiful in the world ... Despite everything ... the darkness was outweighed by the light. And this is largely because of our marriage ..."

Mildred's life at first seemed about to be spared. A chaplain visiting her at Plotzensee Prison noted her blonde hair had turned white, that she was so emaciated, so broken by six months of "interrogation," she could not stand upright. Looking twice her age, she'd been sentenced to six years hard labor. But that changed suddenly and stunningly when her case came to Adolph Hitler's attention. Enraged at what Mildred Fish Harnack had done and setting an example, he ordered her beheaded in early 1943. She was the only American to receive such an execution.

KARL MENNINGER '14, MS '15

There is little if any doubt that Karl Augustus Menninger left such indelible marks on the worlds of psychiatry and social reform that he had an impact on just about all of us. The son of a Topeka, Kansas doctor, Menninger moved on from his studies at the University of Wisconsin to a degree in medicine from Harvard.

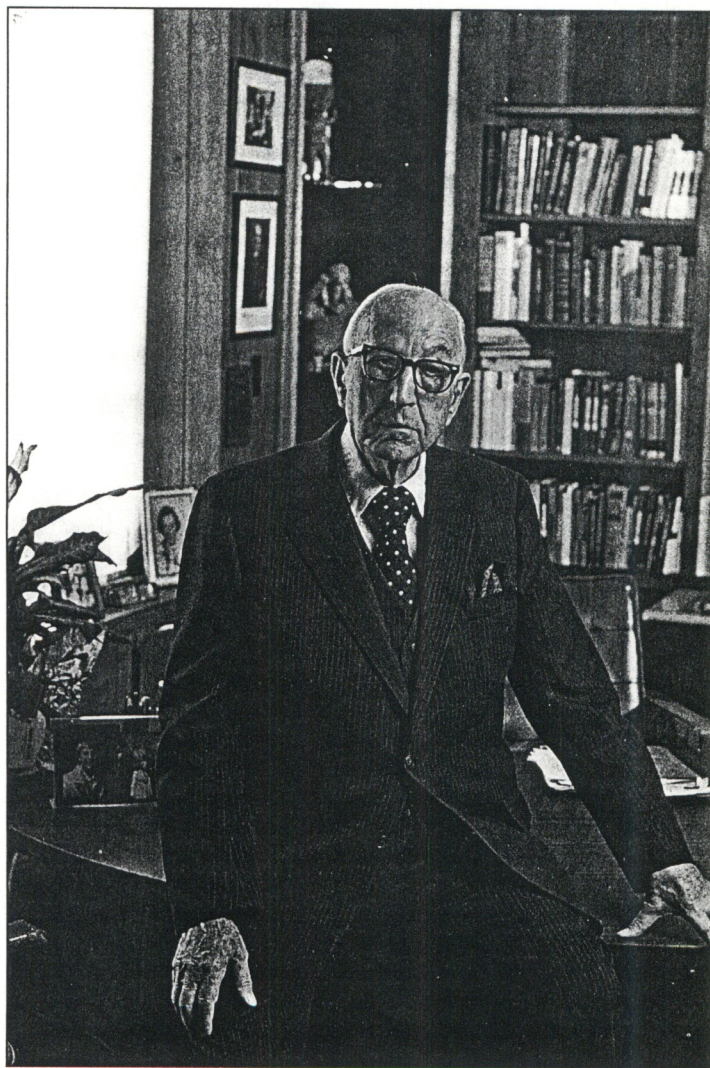
He became fascinated with mental disorders as an intern, and after he subsequently joined his father's family practice in Kansas, the two of them founded the now world-renowned Menninger Clinic, which helped pioneer the idea of assembling a variety of medical specialists in one place. He was also one of the first physicians to believe that mental illness could actually be treated. His Menninger Foundation, established to train psychiatrists, as well as to conduct research into and educate the public about mental disorders, followed.

Menninger's books (more than a dozen in all, including *The Human Mind*, *Man Against Himself*, *Love and Hate*, and *The Crime of Punishment*) are classic texts on mental sickness and societal ills.

During the decade after World War II, Menninger established the largest psychiatric program in the world at the Winter Veteran's Administration Hospital. But that interest, as well as Menninger's compelling campaigns for prison reform and the abolishment of both capital punishment and nuclear weapons, ultimately gave way to what became his

greatest love and most gentle effort. The man whom the American Psychiatric Association at one time called America's greatest living psychiatrist, had posited as early as the fifties that if abused or neglected youngsters were afforded a stable home and school environment, they could not only escape a life of crime and imprisonment, but lead productive lives.

Following up on that belief late in his long, ninety-plus-year life, Menninger created The Villages, groups of homes for delinquent and abandoned children in Kentucky, Indiana, and Kansas, first established in the seventies. Said Menninger: "Nothing I ever did in psychiatry is as joyful to me, as pleasant and rewarding and stimulating, as the idea that by changing the environment the right way, at the right age, you can change the life course."



Before his death in 1990, Karl Menninger was dubbed "the world's greatest living psychiatrist" by the American Psychiatric Association. A social reformer, he believed in rehabilitating prisoners and giving wayward children a stable home environment early on to keep them out of the penal system.