



Karl Lange: a creative teacher.

Soldier, monk, teacher... Lange

by Marion Softky

How many of us can remember a very special teacher—someone who made a difference in our lives?

Karl Lange has been such a teacher to generations of students at Menlo-Atherton High School.

For 19 years Lange has introduced freshmen advanced English students to the classics. With a combination of affection and strictness, jokes and long tales of his varied life as native Hawaiian, soldier, monk and school teacher, he has led new ninth graders into the world of literature.

The Odyssey, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, the King James Bible, and "a great deal of poetry" enter the lives of his students through this teacher of vast warmth and experience.

"He was somebody I'll never forget," says a former student from the '60s. "It was our first exposure to something creative; it was something brand new." Lange was known to students and their parents in the '60s as Karl Simon. He explains that when his mother remarried he adopted her husband's name, Simon. After she died he took back Lange, which was his own father's name.

On the surface at least, Lange's techniques are anything but conventional. But any student who ever had

"I think it's good that parents interfere. You get the kind of schol you want, even without money."

him remembers joke names for each student—Elwood or Beelzebub; "short but amusing quizzes, larded with made-up gossip about class members; lunchtime in his classroom with bridge and conversation and high jinks; after school classes to prepare for the Scholastic Aptitude tests; vivid tales of beaches in Germany or his Hawaiian grandmother or almost anything.

His former students also remember his caring and his availability. "He was the kind of instructor who was not only in his classroom. His home was always open to help with a paper or answer a question," says a 1960s graduate.

"He was always around. He didn't retreat at lunch," adds a recent student.

"The big thing he taught us was context," says another former student. "He filled things in so they were not bits and pieces of information standing alone."

"He taught us rigor," says a fourth. "He didn't let us get away with anything."

"I run a very careful shop," Lange explains. "They simply must produce, and they do. But they complain a lot." Last term "producing" meant 24 essays, 22 of which Lange corrected himself.

"If they want to learn to write, they have to write."

It will seem the end of an era at Menlo-Atherton when Lange retires in June, before he has to. He is leaving because the new teachers' contract exchanges some retirement benefits for a "minuscule salary raise."

"I am retiring so I can get hospital protection. I am retiring because I worry about what will happen when all those germs get me," Lange explains.

Lange almost had to leave after the first semester because of the new contract, but an outpouring of support from the school community gained him another term before the benefits expire. He found the uproar "gratifying and flattering." He says one of the high points of his teaching career was "the feeling of approval from staff members, the kids and parents—not the administration."

Lange has never been silent on his opinions, he positively enjoys stirring things up. One of the familiar sights in the district has been Lange bearing placards at demonstrations or going to bat for school causes—last year for former Principal Fred Mangini, this year for the new principal, John Ott.

GROWING UP IN HAWAII

A big man, his build still suggests an active youth spent surfing off Hawaii—"I got a surfboard every Christmas"—and dancing the hula back in the days when it was still a dance "for men only."

As the native names lilt off his tongue, it is clear how his students can become absorbed by the vivid stories of his other lives.

"I was raised with my grandmother Polynesian-fashion," he recalls. His mother, who would not stay in California with his father, had taken a job, so he was left to his grandmother.

He attended an English-style school on a scholarship provided by the Hawaiian royal family, which was headed at that time by Princess Ruth, who weighed 400 pounds.

Hawaii at that time was a much smaller community. "The royal family knew everybody or someone who knew everyone all over the island," he remembers. "You couldn't get away with anything."

Lange takes pride in his ancestry which includes four racial minorities: Hawaiian, American Indian, Latino and Malayan. He is also opposed to the notion that minorities need extra help. "I want kids to be academically vigorous, he says. "I do not believe in a cover-up for lack of ability. Nobody ever came to me and said 'You poor little Kanaka...'"

He switches back to his grandmother. "Grandma always said, marry a white woman. She should know; she married eight times," he chuckles. "I always thought that's what they were there for."

Lange's later career brought him to Berkeley where he worked his way through university, almost starving along the way. He was saved from acute malnutrition by a woman who started him doing practice teaching, and launched him on a lifelong career of teaching.

A brief plan to be a curator of Japanese art was scuttled by the on-coming war. During the war Lange

learned Japanese and became an officer interrogating prisoners.

During a stint in the Pentagon after the war, he met some Franciscan friars at a party and changed direction again. For two years he was Friar Quentin, a Franciscan monk. "It was a beautiful life. I got things sorted out," he says.

Lange gave up being a monk and "came back into the world" to take care of his mother who was sick. After working as a warehouseman in Berkeley, he got a teaching job in Benicia and eventually came to Menlo-Atherton in 1963.

A LIFE OF TEACHING

Lange has almost always been a teacher. "I began teaching the day Hitler invaded Poland," he says.

He still speaks of his students with affection. "I'm fond of them, you know. They take the place of the kids I don't have." Lange lives in a modest Menlo Park house with his grown son from a brief early marriage.

"I give them names all the time," he goes on. This year there is Clementina and BF (for baby food) and Auntie Rehmus and Prunella and Yum Yum (a boy)."

Lange gets almost as much fun as the students do in making up juicy gossip about them and putting it in his "short but amusing" tests.

An example—without the gossip—from one of this year's vocabulary tests: "According to American advertising, if one cleans one's self out regularly by a substance such as Correctol, one will be a better executive." Answer: cathartic.

Beyond the jokes and stories lies devotion. Lange leaves his Menlo Park house at 5:30 every morning and gets to school before the custodian. "The kids come early to study. They need a place to get out of the cold," he says.

Outside of school hours he teaches three classes to prepare students for the Scholastic Aptitude tests. He also teaches several students Latin, something that was dropped from the formal curriculum several years ago.

At lunch time his room is packed with kids. Groups play bridge, hearts, and dungeons and dragons, and "a bunch chase each other."

Lange takes special interest in teaching poetry and the King James Bible. "I teach a lot of poetry—it's such good practice for careful reading," he says. "I give the Bible as literature. This is one of the few schools in the area to do that. Though I am a Roman Catholic, I like the King James version better."

Looking back over his career, Lange says the high points "have all been involved with kids." He was also very proud to be named teacher of the year last year by the PTA.

"The high point is realizing of all the things I could have tried to do, I stepped into one I could do and with a degree of success," he says. "I've been happy. I never felt as if I wasted my life. I felt about school teaching like entering religious life—I'll get my reward somewhere else."