

## REMEMBERING JOHN EHLE

By Joe Milner and Terry Roberts

Novelist, educator, and social activist John Ehle passed away on March 24<sup>th</sup> at his home in Winston-Salem. While working as a member of Governor Terry Sanford's staff during the early 1960s, John came up with the idea of a Governor's School for gifted and/or talented students from North Carolina, the very first in the United States. With Sanford's backing, he led the efforts to design and create such a school, and in that way, he touched all of our lives to the quick.

Joe Milner recalls that his first meeting with John Ehle came in his early days as a teacher at Wake Forest. "Nick Bragg, Director of Reynolda House, asked me to teach a Humanities class there and he scheduled for the class to travel by bus to Penland where John and his talented wife Rosemary Harris had a rustic mountain home. We had a chance to sit on their front porch and talk to the creative couple about literature, modern art, theater, and the creative possibilities lying ahead for bright college students. It was delightful and memorable."

Joe remembers "John as one of the North Carolina Governor's School's major visionaries and creators, a program that became the nation's first such school for gifted high school students. After many years of my involvement with the Governor's School as teacher, director, and head of its Foundation, I had the opportunity to talk with John about what he had expected and how well the school actually realized his vision in its first fifty years. He was extremely modest about his contribution to its founding, but his wisdom and genuineness and humanity were evident in his every word. These two meetings, early and late, marked my sense of the wisdom and creative powers of this great man who lived a truly astonishing life."

Novelist and educator Terry Roberts (GS class of '73) got to know Ehle after his time at Governor's School was over, and was a young, high school teacher. I first met John after writing him a fan letter because his magnificent

novels set in the mountains of Western North Carolina had become so profoundly important in my own reading and writing life. At that time (around 1980), he was a major cultural figure in the state and nation, so I was shocked to hear back from him by the next mail, a friendly letter full of offhand answers to my questions and with an invitation to visit. I did visit, not long after, at the cabin at Penland, where I met John and Rosemary for the first time. Over the next thirty-five plus years, we became true friends, and I began to realize just what a profound impact John had on the intellectual and creative life of our state.

Yes, he was the primary mover behind the Governor's School as well as the School of the Arts (now the University of North Carolina School of the Arts), the idea man behind the NC School of Math and Science, as well as numerous other innovative ideas for fostering the arts and sciences in the state. And yes, he was one among a generation of men and women who fostered truly progressive thought and feeling in the state. In fact, he was a major figure in national cultural affairs: writing a strong non-fiction book about the Civil Rights movement in Chapel Hill and serving on the White House Group for Domestic Affairs and the first National Council of the Humanities.

But the thing you don't know is what a fine and generous friend John was. He was surprisingly gentle and reflective for someone so forceful, funny and profane, yet always watching, always thinking. He was ferocious in defense of his ideas and yet kind and affectionate when sitting together over a glass of wine. His genius was in the large things—the creation of new and incredibly innovative schools, the sweep of his imagination—but also in the small things—a kind word and a warm embrace. I will miss his laugh each day going forward.

All of us who attended Governor's School over the years owe him a great debt for enriching our lives when it mattered most, during the rough passage that is adolescence; I suggest you repay that debt by reading one or more of his novels. He would like that. And while you are reading, be reminded that he is one of us—a fine and distant cousin from Asheville.