

A TRIBUTE TO
DR. ROBERT E. GIBSON
- EDUCATOR IN MICRONESIA -

Probably few people in Hawaii are aware that Dr. Robert E. Gibson, before he settled into "retirement" in Waimanalo, had achieved a distinguished career in international education. In that capacity, he was honored in April 1984, as a special guest at a conference on "The History of the U.S. Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI)," held at the University of Hawaii/Manoa and sponsored by the University's Pacific Islands Studies Program and the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council.

In a conference paper on Micronesian education, Ms. Karen Peacock, a doctoral candidate in Pacific History at the University of Hawaii, recalled from her own family's long association with Bob and Ida Gibson in Micronesia that he was the first civilian director of education in the U.S. Trust Territory following World War II. He came to that post with many years of experience in the California school system; during World War II he had been director of the education program for interned Japanese-Americans; and he served as education advisor to the U.S. occupation forces in postwar Korea. In his new assignment, he worked out of temporary TTPI headquarters at Fort Ruger. His first activity was to undertake a familiarization tour of the trust area which included the Marshall, Caroline, and northern Mariana islands.

In those days, Micronesians were still recovering from a war that ended three decades of Japanese colonial rule. Most islanders had already returned to a way of life that moved from one event to another. Daily routine in the small, isolated communities meant cultivating taro and catching fish, building and repairing thatched homes and sailing canoes, and caring for children, the elderly, and the sick. Birth and death were causes for special gatherings of family and community and, like first birthdays, a chief's installation, or the dedication of a new meeting house, they called for sharing of large amounts of food and renewed attention to social obligations. It was a strange new world for Bob Gibson. The challenge he faced was awesome, yet exciting — he had been commissioned to develop a program of public education for all Micronesian children.

As Peacock writes, Gibson came to TTPI with a philosophy based on the needs of the community. He developed the theme of an island-oriented education with teaching in the local language. He urged community participation in public meetings and school boards, he supported preparation of classroom materials suited to local values and customs, and he promoted recruitment and training of Micronesians as teachers. He worked diligently with his Micronesian and American educational staff to develop curricula which recognized local crafts and customs and environment, but students were also introduced to other Pacific islands and to the world through their classroom studies. Indigenous languages

were used in the early grades. Only in the higher grades was English introduced to meet the need to communicate with outsiders who were bringing change to Micronesia.

In the early 1960s, policy directions from Washington demanded a shift in educational goals in Micronesia. Education was to play a larger role in persuading Micronesians to abandon their traditional cultures and to become part of the U.S. family. Big budgets and huge programs in education soon eclipsed the island-oriented, community education approach espoused by Gibson and his school colleagues. In protest, he resigned from the TTPI administration in 1964.

Peacock concludes that the Gibson years saw "some of the most innovative and creative thinking" ever applied to education in Micronesia. The political future of the region is now in the final stages of negotiations and is concerned mainly with the issue of Micronesian independence vs. an increasing dependency on the U.S. The external question asked everywhere today is "Education for What?" Bob Gibson, to his everlasting credit, tried to find the answers to that question during his administration in the 1950s.

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