

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
J. NEILS THOMPSON**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution J. Neils Thompson, Professor Emeritus, civil engineering, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM
J. NEILS THOMPSON**

J. Neils Thompson, professor emeritus of civil engineering died on Friday, September 25, 1998, in Austin. His passing deprived the University of Texas of a multifaceted and extremely loyal member of the University community — a scholar, an athlete, an administrator, a visionary, and an honest and hardworking ambassador to the public and civic associations that surround the University community. Those who were privileged to work closely with him know that Neils never acted in self-interest. His overwhelming motivation in life was to advance each and every person who shared his world of UT, and above all to advance the honor and prestige of his beloved University.

Professor Thompson was a native Texan. He was born in Canyon, Texas, on October 14, 1912, to Pat Thompson and Winnie (Anderson) Thompson. The family moved to Bay City where his father was prominent in the automobile business and served as mayor. Growing up in Bay City, he developed a love of sports and other athletic skills. He played football for Texas after he entered the University in 1930. Playing as an end and wearing number 23, he played in the historic 1934 game against Notre Dame. Texas defeated the highly favored Fighting Irish 7 to 6 and gained national prominence for the Southwest Conference. Throughout his life, Neils remained active as a participant in athletics, especially as a highly skilled golfer. He was a long-time member of the Austin Country Club.

Professor Thompson received his BS in civil engineering in 1935. This was the last engineering class to graduate under the legendary Dean T. U. Taylor. The “Old Man,” Dean T. U. Taylor, did not believe in the concept of graduation with honors for his college. At commencement, Dean Taylor lauded Neils for his active participation in varsity football and graduation with a strong A average. This was a highly distinctive kudo. Professor Thompson’s lifelong dedication to the concept of the “student-athlete” was based on his personal experience and example.

In 1935, he was employed as a research assistant engineer by the Texas Highway Department (THD). He worked for THD through the ensuing Great Depression as a testing and research engineer, dealing largely with properties of concrete materials and concrete pavements. During this period, he met his wife, Wanda Stephens, who was also employed by THD. They were married on August 3, 1940, at the University United Methodist Church in Austin.

In 1941, several senior members of the civil engineering faculty invited Neils to return to the University to help launch research initiatives in what had been almost exclusively a teaching program. He was able to move several of his ongoing studies from THD to the University where he was appointed in 1941 as an instructor. He received his MSCE in 1944 and advanced rapidly through the professorial ranks, becoming a full professor in 1949. In 1993, he became a professor emeritus. During this period, Neils provided important leadership as the civil engineering faculty and program grew tenfold.

Throughout his over fifty years of service on the University faculty, Neils thoroughly enjoyed firsthand contact with students in the classroom. He taught courses in civil engineering materials, plain concrete, and engineering law, ethics, and management. He remained active in teaching in the latter area until shortly before his death. His senior course, CE 379, Professional Engineering Management, remained extremely popular as an elective. Most civil engineering graduates were greatly influenced by Professor Thompson's blend of law, management, finance, and professional ethics — constantly updated to reflect changes in society but always with a bedrock foundation in honesty and personal integrity. Professor Thompson maintained contact with many of his former students long after they graduated.

Neils Thompson supervised an active research program in the fields of materials, experimental mechanics, structures, sonic boom research, and housing research (including building codes, standards, and zoning). He received over five million dollars in research contracts and grants from the Navy, Army, Air Force, Atomic Energy Commission, Department of Housing and Urban Development, the National Research Council, and private industries. He was author or co-author of over 200 technical publications, books, papers, and reports in his research areas. In 1953, one of his papers was awarded the Wason Medal by the American Concrete Institute for the most distinguished paper on materials research. Professor Thompson on several occasions very self-effacingly proclaimed that his greatest research contribution was coaxing his close colleague, Professor Phil M. Ferguson, to join him in laboratory studies at a time when Professor Ferguson was already well past 50 years of age. Professor Ferguson's subsequent research career won great international recognition. Ferguson frequently recognized Neils Thompson as his initial key collaborator and laboratory mentor.

Professor Thompson supervised a large number of MS and PhD students. One of his doctoral students, Ervin Perry, became the first African-American to achieve tenured faculty rank at Texas. Dr. Perry was later honored by the naming of the Perry-Castaneda Library. Dr. Ned Burns, professor of civil engineering, worked closely with Neils in the supervision of Ervin Perry's dissertation research. A close personal friendship existed between Thompson, Perry, and Burns. Dr. Burns recalls clearly the days when Ervin Perry would come by his office to report on various interview trips as he was nearing completion of his PhD study — including an offer of a position as assistant professor at the University of Illinois, then the top civil engineering program in the United States. One morning, Ervin Perry burst into Dr. Burns' office with a big smile and said, "I can talk to you about something I could not talk about for the past three months. I'm going to be an assistant professor here at the University of Texas and it's exactly what I want to do." Then he proceeded to tell Dr. Burns that Neils Thompson had asked him if he would consider an offer here if it could be approved through the necessary channels. Dr. Perry indicated he would be very interested. It was Neils Thompson who saw that Ervin Perry, a distinguished African-American student, was a faculty member prospect we should recruit. Without Neils' vision of what this man, Ervin Perry, could contribute to the UT civil engineering program, it would not have happened. Just as Neils Thompson had a vision for future value of property in the acquisition of the 400 acres which became Pickle Research Campus, he saw the value of UT leading the South in opening their faculty ranks to a very bright African-American PhD graduate — even though it had never happened before. [Dr. Perry had a truly distinguished career in teaching and research, but tragically died of cancer at age 35 — he had already demonstrated the wisdom of Neils' suggesting to the civil engineering budget council that recruiting Ervin Perry would be an excellent move.]

J. Neils Thompson, PE, was a registered professional engineer and throughout his career was extremely active in promoting the professional issues and responsibility of engineering practice. He served as president of the Travis chapter, Texas Society of Professional Engineers (TSPE) in 1950, and as president of TSPE in 1953. His service to the profession was recognized by election as a director of the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE) from 1955-62, vice president (1962-65) and president (1965-66). In 1960, he was named "Engineer of the Year" by the Travis chapter of TSPE.

His national and international technical and professional society assignments received widespread recognition. He received the Silver Certificate from the Society for Experimental Stress Analysis in May 1969. Because of his important research in masonry, he was made an honorary member of the Bricklayers International Union in 1967. In September of 1972, he received the Special Achievement Award for his service to the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for his important role as chair of the Technical Advisory Committee of OPERATION BREAKTHROUGH. He was elected a "Fellow" of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1968, a "Fellow" in the American Concrete

Institute in December 1973, and a “Fellow” in the American Society of Civil Engineers in September 1974. In 1977, he received a Quarter Century Citation for his services with the Building Research Advisory Board of the National Academy of Science. The Texas Engineering Foundation presented the Distinguished Engineer Citation to him in 1979. He was also elected to the Board of Direction of the American Concrete Institute. He was one of five specialists on building materials and building technology representing the U. S. State Department on a joint U. S.-Egyptian study group in 1975. He was the only educator who served on the General Services Administration’s Special Study Committee on the Selection of Architects/Engineers in 1974. He was chairman of Panel I on Materials and Construction Optimization of the ad hoc Committee on Hardening of Materials for Ground Base Facilities of Ballistic Missile Defense Systems, National Advisory Board of the National Academy of Science. In 1970, he was appointed to the Building Research Advisory Board, National Academies of Science and Engineering, serving as vice chairman, 1974-77, and chairman, 1977-79. He served as consultant to many engineering and architectural firms, and to industry and government in the fields of materials and structural mechanics. He was a director of a bank and chairman of the board of two high tech companies. His memberships in professional societies include the National Society of Professional Engineers, American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Society for Testing and Materials, American Society of Civil Engineers, American Society for Engineering Education, Society for Experimental Stress Analysis, and American Concrete Institute.

Relatively few faculty members ever made the lasting contributions to the future direction of their University that Neils Thompson provided in his long-term role in research management. During the late 1940s, Professor Thompson became convinced that research at UT was limited because facilities on campus could not accommodate growth. More and more veterans were returning from the war and the engineering programs were expanding. He had the foresight to see how an abandoned magnesium plant eight miles north of the campus could be converted into a research center. He negotiated a twenty-year lease with the U. S. government through the office of Congressman Lyndon Baines Johnson. This working relationship continued through LBJ’s presidency. He also developed a very close working relationship with another former UT athlete, Congressman J. J. (Jake) Pickle. He worked closely with him on negotiating the 1971 acquisition of title from the federal government.

The 400-acre site was first known as the Off-Campus Research Facility, then Balcones Research Center, and now J. J. (Jake) Pickle Research Campus. As the Center’s original and only director, Professor Thompson was present at the 1971 ceremony marking the title transfer of the property to the University. The government waived the \$1.4 million purchase price after determining that the research work already performed there had greatly benefited the public.

Neils was able to see his embryonic dreams of a nationally prominent graduate research center become a reality from the decaying and abandoned buildings of the wartime defense plant. His role as proponent, advocate, administrator, and advisor to the directors of fledgling technical laboratories was critical in the development of the research center into an integral, important part of the University’s research program. His role in the development of this research center was the professional achievement that gave Professor Thompson the greatest feelings of pride and satisfaction. The University of Texas owes him a great debt for his long-range practical vision for the acquisition of the property that became an extremely important research campus for the university.

Throughout his research management career, Neils Thompson shared his vast array of personal, governmental, and corporate contacts with faculty associates desirous of launching new research activities. Many important research centers and prestigious researchers owe their development to the unselfish efforts of Neils Thompson, the “Research Gardener.”

Professor Thompson’s research management skills benefited the City of Austin as well as UT. In 1973-74 he was president of the Board of Directors of the Austin Chamber of Commerce and served for five years as vice president for Economic Development. He was influential in getting IBM and other technology companies to move to Austin. In 1970, he received the Economics Award from the Economic Development Council of the Austin Chamber of Commerce. The Austin City Council recognized his efforts by naming a new street in the Northwest Research Corridor “J. Neils Thompson Drive.” He was president of the Austin Country Club in 1957, president of the Austin Kiwanis Club in 1954, and is a past president of the Austin

Methodist City Board of Missions. He served with distinction as vice chair of the board of trustees of St. Edward's University from which he received an Honorary Doctorate in Humane Letters in 1996.

His numerous honors include election to Tau Beta Pi, Chi Epsilon, Sigma Xi, Omicron Delta Kappa, and Phi Kappa Phi. He is listed in Engineers of Distinction in the United States and Canada, 1974; and had repeated listings in Who's Who in Engineering, Who's Who in the South and Southwest, Who's Who in American Education, Who's Who in America, Who's Who in the Methodist Church, Who's Who in Commerce and Industry, Who's Who in Texas Today, and National Engineers Register.

He received the Joe J. King Professional Engineer Achievement Award in 1980 from the UT College of Engineering. In 1982, he was honored by his former students with the creation of the J. Neils Thompson Centennial Teaching Fellowship in Civil Engineering and, in 1984, his department established the J. Neils Thompson Graduate Fellowship in Structural Engineering. Later, at his retirement, Neils Thompson suggested the money collected at this occasion be added to the endowment for this fellowship. Over the years, many graduate students have benefited from this fellowship. One unique feature is that the recipients must write a short paper on the importance of ethics in engineering. This was at the suggestion of Neils Thompson who for over fifty years had taught the importance of ethics to his students. The endowment fund for this J. Neils Thompson Graduate Fellowship in Structural Engineering remains open and received many contributions at the time of his death.

As befits an individual who was totally dedicated to the concept of the scholar-athlete, Professor Thompson's contributions to college athletics are equally outstanding. He served on the UT Men's Athletic Council for over twenty years and was chairman for seventeen years. Legendary Coach Darrell K Royal credits Neils with creating an atmosphere and support staff that permitted Coach Royal to pay full attention to the creation of Texas national champion teams. For many years he was the faculty representative to the Southwest Athletic Conference and served as vice president, then president, during the years from 1971 to 1974. One of Professor Thompson's fondest memories as a proactive athletic faculty member was the success in getting Texas Tech and the University of Houston into the Southwest Athletic Conference. Professor Thompson had great influence in the deliberations of the Southwest Conference and the NCAA. In part this was because he represented a university that is an important part of both of those organizations. But his influence stemmed much more from the fact that he was Neils Thompson. His integrity was so great and his knowledge on the various issues was so comprehensive that people listened carefully every time he spoke, and it was a rare occasion when his view did not carry the day. He was a member of a number of committees of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and served as president in 1977 and 1978.

One time during a flight home to Austin from Arkansas, Professor Thompson sketched a design to give Frank Erwin, chairman of the Board of Regents. It was a plan to expand the west side of Memorial Stadium and ultimately led to the realization of Belmont Hall and the upper west deck and press box. He was also instrumental in the design and construction of the Frank Erwin Special Events Center, Disch-Falk Field, and the UT Swim Center. In recognition of his many contributions, he was inducted into the Longhorn Hall of Honor in 1979.

Throughout his long and distinguished career in intercollegiate sports management, Neils was a leading advocate for honesty, integrity, and justice for student athletes. He felt strongly that a level playing field was the first requirement for quality in intercollegiate athletics. He believed in playing by the rules and by his leadership helped maintain the University's reputation for integrity in its athletics programs. He maintained active contact with many of the Texas student athletes long after they graduated.

Neils was in a unique way a "Renaissance Man" for the University. Because of his key roles in teaching, research, and athletics, for many years he reported simultaneously to the civil engineering department budget council and chair, the dean of engineering, the president, and the Board of Regents. He wore many hats and juggled many balls in a truly unique style.

Professor Thompson is survived by his widow, Wanda. Throughout Neils' life at UT, Wanda was his partner in his activities and dedicated much of her energy to "mothering" Neils' graduate students, young faculty, coaching staff/families, scholar-athletes, and the extended body of UT fans everywhere. They had one daughter, Patricia (Thompson) Laitala of Richardson, Texas, who with her husband Wayne Laitala

presented Neils with two grandsons and namesakes, Michael Neils Laitala and David Thompson Laitala. Professor Thompson is also survived by one sister, Mrs. Glendine Short of Bay City, Texas, and three nephews, Michael Wade of Bay City, Texas, Dr. Pat Wade of Emporia, Kansas, and Harry Sockol of Lake Travis.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors John E. Breen (chair), Charles Alan Wright, L. O. Morgan, Ned H. Burns, and Richard L. Tucker.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Engineering, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on December 7, 1999. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under "Memorials" at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>