THE FREDERICK BYRON PLUMMER MEMORIAL RESOLUTIONS

The General Faculty wishes to record its deep regret at the death of Professor F. B. Plummer and its appreciation of his many years of valuable service to the University of Texas and the State.

Frederick Byron Plummer, Geologist, Bureau of Economic Geology, and Professor of Petroleum Engineering, University of Texas, died at San Marcos, Texas, February 17, 1947. He was born at Hanover, New Hampshire, August 31, 1889, the first child and only son of Alva A. and Laura Merrill Plummer.

The Plummer family, known in the ancient records of England and Scotland, has been represented in America from almost the earliest permanent settlements in the New England colonies. Francis Plummer, with his wife, Ruth, came to America from England about 1633. Francis, a linen weaver by trade, busied himself with the activities incident to a new country, and in 1635 we find him keeper, among other activities, of the first inn to be opened in the township of Newbury, now the city of Newburyport, Massachusetts. The Plummers, descendants of Francis, although now widely distributed in the United States, continued for a century or more to live chiefly in the New England colonies. Frederick Byron was of the tenth generation in America of this New England family.

After completing grade school and high school at Hanover, Frederick Plummer entered Dartmouth College, from which institution he received his Bachelor of Science degree in 1909, and Master of Science in 1911. He was a graduate student at the University of Chicago from 1909 to 1911, major Chemistry, 1909-10, and Geology, 1910-11. He was assistant in Chemistry at Vassar College, 1911-12; instructor, 1912-13. He was fellow in Geology, University of Chicago, 1913 to 1915, and during this time completed work except thesis for the Doctor’s degree. Proceeding or during his service at Vassar, he completed his first paper on geology, recorded in his bibliography as “Surface Geology of the Presidential Range, New Hampshire.” During the summer of 1914, he worked with the Wisconsin Geological Survey where, according to State Geologist Bean, he is officially credited with having been the “hardest working man” of his party. To those who knew him in later life, such a record is not unexpected.

His first employment after leaving the University of Chicago was with the Roxanna Petroleum Company (now the Shell Company). After a short time in Oklahoma, he was sent into the coastal plains region of Louisiana and Texas, and in 1917 was placed in charge of the company’s investigations in northern Texas, where for three years he carried on extensive investigations. In the fall of 1920 the Bataafscbe Petroleum Mij., a member of the Dutch Shell Group, called Plummer as consultant to The Hague, Holland. Upon completing this engagement in 1922, he returned to Houston, Texas.

In the approximately five years from the close of his association with the Dutch Shell Group in 1923 until the beginning of his work with The University of Texas, he served as petroleum engineer, Rycoza Petroleum Corporation, 1923-’25; chief geologist, Texas Division, American Petroleum Corporation, 1925; and consulting petroleum engineer and chief geologist, Vacuum Oil Company, 1927-’28.

Professor Plummer’s connection with The University of Texas began with his appointment as Geologist in the Bureau of Economic Geology, October 1, 1928. In 1930, upon recommendation of the departments concerned, he became Professor of Petroleum Production Engineering in the Engineering College, and Geologist in the Bureau of Economic Geology. His activities in these departments in the ensuing years were many and varied.
Previous to coming to the University, Plummer had interested himself in teaching. His temporary service at Vasser has been mentioned. During the spring terms of 1924 to 1926, he lectured at the University of Chicago on Petroleum Geology, and during April, 1927, he lectured to Geology students at The University of Texas. After coming to the University of Texas, he undertook several outside engagements. He lectured on Petroleum Geology at Northwestern University during the spring terms of 1920 and 1922. During August and September, 1928, he made geologic investigations in Santo Domingo, and from August to December, 1946, carried on studies for the Conselho Nacional do Petroleo in the Maranhao Basin of Northern Brazil.

Plummer was a prodigious worker and writer. His bibliography contains 155 entries, varying from short notes to monographic reports. Among his major contributions to the geologic sciences are the following: Stratigraphy of the Pennsylvania Formations of North Central Texas (with Dr. R. C. Moore,) 1922. Conocotic Systems in Texas, 1933. Upper Paleozoic Ammonites in Texas (with Gayle Scott), 1937. Crinoids from the Upper Carboniferous and Permian Stretes in Texas (with R. C. Moore), 1940.

Plummer held membership in many scientific societies, including Geological Society of America; American Association of Petroleum Geologists; Society of Economic Geologists; American Geographical Society; Paleontological Society (Vice-President, 1932); Sigma Xi (President, University of Texas Chapter, 1931); and Texas Academy of Science (President, 1946), and Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists.

In 1918, Plummer married Helen Jeanne Skewes. Mrs. Plummer, a micro-paleontologist, has been an unerring helper to her husband, and has had a real part in the completion especially of his major publications.

Plummer worked actively and unselfishly with many societies. He was one of a small group of members of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists who met on March 26, 1926, to consider organizing a palaeontological section of the Society. The recommendations of this group were accepted by the Society, and Plummer was authorized to conduct a campaign for funds with which to initiate a journal for the proposed section. From this undertaking came the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists, of which Plummer was Secretary, 1927-29, and Secretary-Treasurer in 1930.

He was a member of several student scientific societies and founder of one, Pi Epsilon. He associated himself actively with the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers, particularly in the work with students as the student section at the University of Texas, petroleum engineering education, research in petroleum engineering and the twilight zone between petroleum engineering and geology. In this latter activity he many times served on the appropriate national committees. His annual reviews of this A.I.M.E. committee work were classics still quoted. He was a member of Sigma Gamma Epsilon and aided in the merger of the local Pi Epsilon with Zeta Chapter of Sigma Eta at the University shortly before his death. He was active in Gamma Alpha professional scientific fraternity at the University of Chicago during his graduate days there. His keen interest in students is well illustrated by his zealous work with local chapter of Phi Kappa Tau social fraternity, of which he was a member. A group of students organized the local chapter in the difficult days just prior to World War II. They came to Professor Plummer, sought his counsel and aroused his interest. Until his death he worked untiringly with them and it is not too much to say that the survival of this chapter is a monument to his persistence and energy. He was proud of his boys and they of him. He also was interested in civic affairs and for many years was a member of the Rotary Club of Austin.

Plummer had an active mind, constantly occupied with a diversity of subjects. His major interest was geology, but additional to geology, he maintained a keen interest in engineering problems. His early studies in chemistry, likewise, caused him to combine chemical studies with geology and engineering. In fact, he was interested in all science and had the knack of seeing utility in all knowledge. An eminent geologist stated recently in Dallas that he had been asked by the American Association of Petroleum Geologists to prepare biographical sketches of the great petroleum geologists living and dead. He commented that in his opinion there were three great petroleum geologists who stood out from the crowd, Wallace Pratt, (living), Sidney Powers (deceased), and Frederick Byron Plummer, and that they presented an interesting contrast. He said that Powers was the great theorist, interested in the theory of the occurrence and accumulation of oil quite aside from practicality, whereas Pratt was the practical
geologist, largely interested in finding oil. But, he continued, Fred Plummer was a most amazing genius, interested in theory yet not scorning application of theory for practical purposes, and his activity consequently was of an amazing area and scope. This unsought tribute is typical of what Plummer's colleagues in science thought of him.

He was a man of amazing activity and intellect, having inherited in full measure all the splendid qualities of his New England forebears. For example, a companion of his activity in early geophysical work in West Texas often remarks, "Freddy always approved expense accounts for alarm clocks to get up early by and brooms to sweep the outcrops clean." He did so many things first, many of them in the twilight zone of science. For example, he was one of the first to appreciate the significance of the geothermal gradient in the earth crust and measured it in many bore holes in East Texas, thereby contributing in an important way not realized until much later, to an understanding of the geology of the East Texas oil field. He became interested in the flow of fluids through permeable rocks and as a consequence we find him publishing important results as early as 1934. He speculated about the role of bacteria in the formation of travertine in the waste brines from the Luling oil field, and this interest led to his classic work on the treatment of salt water for injection into the East Texas oil field, work which those who know credit with solving the problems and making possible the flood of oil from this field which won the war. Yet he profited not a penny from this work. Many other examples could be cited from his publications. Yet he perhaps is best known as a paleontologist because he was so modest and unassuming a genius.

He loved his students, especially those who participated in his researches. No former student ever asked a loan which was not granted if at all possible. Upon his death, dozens of telegrams and expressions arrived from throughout the United States and also from many foreign countries from his boys. He loaned many of them money to enable them to complete their education, but no one ever heard of this except from the recipient. Nevertheless, he was exacting of his students and meticulous as to details. He expected all to rival him in diligence. He truly had a great soul and personality and his like will not soon be found. His monument lies in the inspiration he provided to his many students, his colleagues, and in the new Petroleum Engineering building which was his special pride. Few men are missed so genuinely and so long by their colleagues as is Fred Plummer, a New England gentleman who became a Texan to the core. He must take special pride in having died in Texas, in the field with his boots on, as a geologist should, and in sight of the spot he loved best in Texas. The University misses him sorely, but is vastly richer for his unselfish labor.

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