IN MEMORIAM

STEPHEN H. SPURR

Go forth, under the open sky and listen to nature's teachings,
while from all around earth and her waters and the
depths of air comes a still voice.

Take the wings of morning, pierce the barren wilderness or
lose thyself in the continuous woods...

(from Thanatopsis, by William Cullen Bryant)

Stephen H. Spurr died June 20, 1990, after a decade of stubborn resistance to heart disease and Parkinson's
disease. He had been a devoted son and brother, a creative ecologist and forester, a principled and effective
administrator, an engaging teacher and mentor, a loving husband, father, and uncle, and a man who sought the best
from every person. He is survived by his wife Patricia of Austin; a son, Daniel, of Newport, RI; a daughter, Jean, of
San Francisco; and two grandchildren.

Stephen Hopkins Spurr was born in Washington, D. C. on February 14, 1918, to Josiah Edward Spurr and
Sophie Burchard Spurr. Josiah, a distinguished consulting geologist who traveled to the Klondike, South America,
and Turkey on assignment, brought Steve into contact with the world of rocks and trees. Sophie, a German
immigrant, was the stronger influence on Steve's life through her expectations, priority on education, delight with
language, and pragmatic approach to life decisions.

As the youngest of five brothers, Steve acted as if he had to excel. He was chess champion at thirteen, a
voracious reader, and an enthusiastic athlete. He memorized classical poetry, mastered mathematics, and developed
a remarkable talent for wicked puns.
At sixteen Steve agreed to study at the University of Florida with the condition that he be allowed to integrate study of the natural sciences. He graduated first in his class of 1938 with a major in botany and minors in geology and chemistry. Steve completed a masters degree in forestry at Yale in 1940, cum laude, and his first three professional papers. He also was badminton champion.

Stephen Spurr began his forestry career at Harvard University’s Harvard Forest in 1940, where he was promoted from Research Assistant through Assistant Professor to Acting Director over ten years. During the Harvard years he invented, wrote, taught and managed. He also started a family. Steve developed two devices, the parallax wedge (to remotely measure tree height) and the multiscope (to sketch maps from aerial photographs). Steve recognized how aerial photography could be used to evaluate and manage forests. This work grew into Aerial Photographs in Forestry (1948), the first book in the field, and its 1960 revision Photogrammetry and Photo Interpretation. While serving as a visiting Assistant Professor for a semester at the University of West Virginia in 1943, Steve met Patricia Orton, daughter of the Dean of Forestry and Home Economics. A second meeting at Michigan (where Pat had gone to study for a masters degree) led to Pat’s acceptance of Steve’s offer of marriage, proffered on a rainy April first evening in front of Ann Arbor’s Natural Science Museum.

At the urging of Sophie Spurr, Steve returned to Yale to earn his Ph.D. in forest ecology in 1950. Steve then spent 1950 to 1952 as an Associate Professor at the University of Minnesota. He completed Forest Inventory (1952), a monograph that introduced forestry the use of statistical sampling methods to estimate forest growth, volume, and yield.

Steve joined the School of Natural Resources at the University of Michigan as professor of silviculture in 1952. He continued research into photogrammetry and forest sampling and began to write on forest management practice, forest ecology, Pleistocene geology, aspen physiology, and the history of ecology. Steve developed a new teaching program in forest ecology and silviculture and established the soils laboratory and a field research program in ecology, geology and silviculture. He lobbied fellow foresters to establish a scientific journal (Forest Science) and then became its founding editor during 1955-1959.
In 1964 Spurr wrote *Forest Ecology*, a lively readable undergraduate text that David Smith at Yale called "a book about forest ecology that told what it was really all about." This book, now in its fourth edition, revolutionized the forestry profession by its stress upon continuous change in forest ecosystems, the role of invasive species and fire in ecology, and the effects of climate change on forest succession.

According to Burton Barnes, one of Steve's Michigan students and now the Stephen H. Spurr Professor of Forestry at Michigan,

"Steve was an inspiring teacher of enormous breadth, enthusiasm, and ability to communicate. He could penetrate to the heart of the matter without beating around the bush. He was extremely quick-witted with a marvelous sense of humor that made his classes lively and exciting as well as substantive. He also had a remarkable ability to retrieve and organize information from the literature and thus was always on top of the latest developments in many fields. Steve was always accessible to undergraduates and graduate students and patiently helped them with theses and manuscripts. He participated widely in school activities and was an enthusiastic leader of trips to the southern United States to see forestry research and practice."

Steve remained a fierce competitor in handball and as a member of the Flounders, the Michigan faculty water polo group. Steve also played with the Ann Arbor Recorder Society.

Spurr was an Oberlander Trust Fellow in Germany in 1950, a visit that led to a series of articles on forest management practices in post-war Europe. The German visit allowed Steve to re-establish ties with his mother's German family and, eventually for Pat and Steve to adopt their daughter Jean. Steve was designated a National Science Foundation Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley in 1957-58 and served as a Fulbright Research Scholar in New Zealand and Australia in 1960.

Upon returning to Michigan in 1960 Steve began a shift of focus to academic administration by serving as half-time assistant to Executive Vice President Marvin Niehaus. Within two years Spurr had been inducted to serve
simultaneously as Assistant to the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of the School of Natural Resources. By 1964 Steve was also Dean of the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies.

During the decade of the 1960's Steve played a significant role both at Michigan and as a forester; space limits allow citation here of only a few of his contributions of that period. He oversaw Michigan’s transition to year-round operation, served on the Board in Control of Intercollegiate Athletics, and sought to recruit African-American students and faculty to Michigan. He led a study team to analyze the proposed Rampart Dam in Alaska for the National Resources Council. He was a member of the President’s Advisory Panel on Timber and the Environment as well as the National Academy of Science’s Committee on Renewable Resources for Industrial Materials. He helped develop the Inter-University Organization for Tropical Studies, a consortium of 26 universities offering combined programs in the tropics in various environmental sciences, and served as its President in 1967-68. He was active in the Society of American Foresters, The American Forestry Association, and the Ecological Society of America, serving on many committees. Steve spent six years on the Council of the Society of American Foresters and later served as its President in 1980-81.

Steve Spurr’s administrative term at Michigan was marked with notable success. Academic administrators, however, rarely receive excellence awards, nor are they the normal recipients of medals. Too bad. Steve Spurr’s extensive career as a campus administrator was productive and significant largely because he took universities seriously and knew that guiding them is a worthy and significant undertaking. At Michigan Spurr did develop programs, make key appointments, and sympathetically heed the needs of the various constituencies in a large university. An Ann Arbor colleague (with a loose grasp of metaphor) explained:

"Steve Spurr has a green thumb for administration--but what else would you expect of a forester?"

On July 1, 1971, after nineteen years at Michigan, Stephen Spurr was appointed President of the University of Texas at Austin and also Professor of Botany and Public Affairs. He remained as President until forced out in 1974, too short a period for many of Spurr's high hopes for the University to materialize. Nonetheless, he left a
triple legacy to his successors: an emphasis on the recruitment of minority students; support for environmental studies; and an emphasis on making The University of Texas academic standards more rigorous. Dr. Spurr remained a professor of botany and public affairs until his retirement in 1983, when he was designated Professor Emeritus.

Steve Spurr's presidential style was collegial. A student all his life, an insatiable yet discriminating reader, a man deeply concerned with the constant ferment of research, Spurr identified both with undergraduates and with advanced students. A born teacher, he never stopped thinking of faculty members as colleagues; what went on in the classroom he properly regarded as the heart of the university. Because he understood research so well, he was sympathetic to the multiplicity of demands on the life of the average professor and anxious to use administration to facilitate rather than to dictate.

Beyond that, Steve Spurr was an institutional loyalist. Once he had committed to Texas as its president, he never lost the sense of affiliation both with the campus and with university alumni and friends beyond. In the autumn before he died, Steve could be seen at every home football game, attentive, informed, involved. Given the brusque circumstances of his departure from the presidency, that degree of loyalty was in no way mandated.

In 1981, Stephen Spurr reflected on his administrative career in an exchange-of-letters interview with David Turney. He wrote that

"On the positive side, . . . my 14 years in university administration was the most stimulating and learning period of my life. I had to achieve an understanding in some depth of a great many subjects and issues and this made me a better educated and more aware individual. Secondly, on the positive side, I found that my concern was to help others in developing their interests while as a professor I had been primarily involved in my own interests. Rather than pushing my discipline, my research, my teaching, my graduate students, etc., as a president I became totally involved in enhancing the disciplines, research, teaching, and students of the other members of the faculty. I devoted myself to the welfare of all the various constituencies of the university to the best of my ability. I found this change of roles, from that of an entrepreneur to that of public servant, very stimulating and rewarding."
If the preceding paragraphs suggest that Steve Spurr as UT president was a sensitive and responsive administrator, this is true. But if it suggests that he did not have his own agenda and the willingness to pursue it, that would be an incorrect reference. For those who knew him in his days in the Tower, it was a loss for the University that he did not have more time to pursue these goals. Why was he fired? No clear answer was ever given: rumor had it that the major complaint was that he substituted a more modest buffet for the lashing of beef traditionally served at the receptions for distinguished guests before football games.

Perhaps a more serious problem was that Steve Spurr was a quiet man, a reserved man, not given to florid discourse. He wrote of himself in a reflective moment:

"... like my father before me, I am basically an introvert. Not only am I not prepared to disclose everything, but I choose not to let myself dwell on many facets of my life that have been pivotal."

The things that mattered to him—people, ideas, literature, forests and the natural word, the quest for excellence at all levels—were masked by his reticence, his low-key style. Was a slight speech impediment a factor? Perhaps—but he could be remarkably eloquent, as shown, for example, in his comments when awarded the Pinchot Medal at a time when Parkinson's disease had already brutally entered his life. And not even Parkinson's could check Spurr's lifelong compulsion to make some of the worst puns on record—as well as some of the best.

It is tempting to say Steve Spurr came to Austin at the wrong time, that his years here were largely a time of disappointment. But his initiatives—emphasis on human rights in the field of education, a passionate concern with the environment, and insistence on academic excellence at Texas—were no mean accomplishments.

Steve Spurr was that rare academic who remained equally comfortable as a teacher, a researcher, and an administrator. His success in the classroom was symbolized by the Teaching Excellence Award his LBJ School students gave him in 1981. His distinction in the field of forestry research was capped with the Gifford Pinchot Medal awarded to him in 1985 by the Society of American Foresters. Among the other many honors he received are the Distinguished Service Award of the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources (1980), the Wilbur Cross Medal from Yale University (1978), the Stephen H. Spurr award of the Florida Society of American Foresters (1982), the Distinguished Service Award of the American Forestry Association (1982), and the Forest Farmer Association's Annual Award (1984). Professor Spurr received honorary degrees from the University of Florida (1971) and the University of Michigan (1988). He held distinguished lectureships at the University of California-Berkeley, the University of Washington, Texas A & M University, and Michigan State University. In 1987 the faculty of the Michigan's School of Natural Resources established the Stephen H. Spurr Professorship in Forest Ecology.

Those who knew Steve Spurr were grateful for his presence and always the better for his company. A gutsy, gallant man, Steve Spurr. Tough, intellectual, rigorous, and fair. We could use more like him.

Robert M. Berdahl, President
The University of Texas at Austin

H. Paul Kelley, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee of Professors Lodis Rhodes (Chair), Elspeth D. Rostow, and David J. Eaton.