



August W. Meigs

DWIGHT FOX METZLER

1916–2001

Elected in 1973

“For development of innovative techniques of environmental quality control and wastewater renovation; leadership in water resources and waste management.”

BY STANLEY T. ROLFE AND ROSS E. MCKINNEY

BORN ON THE Metzler family farm near Carbondale, Kansas, on March 25, 1916, Dwight Metzler was a true Kansan and a professional engineer of the old school who started at the bottom and worked his way to the very top, accumulating titles along the way. He was a sanitary engineer, chief engineer for the Kansas State Board of Health, executive secretary for the Kansas Water Board, secretary of the Kansas Department of Health and Environment, and chief of water systems development in the state of Kansas. He was also professor of sanitary engineering at the University of Kansas. From 1966 to 1974 he served New York State as deputy commissioner of health and then deputy commissioner of environmental conservation. He even had time for special missions to India and Russia. Dwight Fox Metzler died in Topeka, Kansas, on October 30, 2001, at the age of 85.

Growing up on his parents' farm, Dwight learned early how important weather is to a farmer's success and whether he has a good year or bad year. His early schooling was in a one-room schoolhouse that was typical of rural Kansas. One year, Dwight found himself the only student in his class, as the other two were sick all year long. He went to Carbondale High School and graduated in 1933. The Depression of the 1930s was hard on everyone in Kansas, including the farmers, and Dwight

worked on the family farm for three years before going to the Engineering School at the University of Kansas (KU) to study civil engineering. He quickly realized that civil engineering offered a better future than farming.

Dwight was one of the top students in his class when he graduated in 1940. He met his future wife, Lela Ross, at the university, and they were married on June 20, 1941, in Dover, Kansas, on the Ross family farm. Dwight's first job after graduation was assistant sanitary engineer for the Division of Sanitation, Kansas Department of Health, which had been housed on the KU campus in Marvin Hall, with the Civil Engineering Department, since 1909.

As World War II heated up, Dwight Metzler accepted a commission as assistant sanitary engineer in the U.S. Public Health Services Reserve Corps. When he was called to active duty, he was dispatched to Chicago, Illinois, to work with the Federal Public Housing Authority constructing housing for defense workers brought from all over the country. At that time, defense workers had as high a priority as the military, which was in no position to fight a major war without the equipment they produced.

After receiving his discharge from active duty in 1946, Dwight returned to Kansas to work in the Division of Sanitation for the State Health Department. He received his civil engineering degree in 1947 from KU based on his work experience, but he knew he needed further education at the graduate level. In 1947, he gained admission to Harvard University to study sanitary engineering under Professor Gordon Fair.

The Sanitary Engineering Program at Harvard was closely associated with the School of Public Health, and its students received a broad public health education, rather than the engineering-design approach offered at other graduate schools. Dwight received his M.S. in sanitary engineering from Harvard in 1948 and returned to Kansas where he was promoted to the chief engineer's post in the Division of Sanitation. Putting his graduate education to good use, he began teaching courses in sanitary engineering for the Civil Engineering Department at KU.

As chief engineer of the Kansas State Board of Health, Dwight was able to visit regional engineers in the field and see some of their projects. The 1951 flood on the Kansas River was a major disaster, but it gave Dwight an opportunity to develop the leadership qualities necessary to handle a crisis. Under Dwight's direction, people affected by the flood were moved to safe quarters; he then oversaw the repairs to the water supply and wastewater systems.

No sooner had the water distribution systems become operational, however, than the water supplies began to run dry, the result of a five-year drought. The water shortage required that 169 communities restrict their water consumption, which adversely affected about 600,000 people.

When the Neosho River, the source of water for one Kansas town, Chanute, dried up completely in 1956, the city constructed a temporary dam downstream, below the wastewater treatment plant, to capture wastewater effluent. The effluent was pumped above the town's normal water intake pipe and then into the municipal water treatment plant. The use of recycled wastewater effluent lasted about five months and demonstrated that it was possible to survive on recycled wastewater with proper treatment.

The experience of those years had demonstrated that the Sanitation Division needed facilities to conduct research, rather than trying ideas out in the field. Congress had passed legislation to provide 50 percent of funding for health research facilities, and Dwight easily persuaded Dean John McNown and Chancellor Franklin Murphy to back his idea. The university's grant application was approved, and the Environmental Health Research Facility was completed and opened for research in 1961. By that time, the Sanitation Division headed by Dwight had been transferred to Topeka, the state capital, where the rest of the State Board of Health was located.

In 1960, Dwight was invited to India as an international expert to advise the Indian government on water problems and their solutions. He also went to the Soviet Union to evaluate its environmental health programs. In 1962, when the executive secretary of the Kansas State Water Board resigned, Dwight

moved into that position. In 1964, he was elected president of the American Public Health Association.

His national exposure caught the attention of Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York, who, in 1966, persuaded Dwight to leave Kansas and come to New York as deputy commissioner of public health to help develop a large water resources project. The governor put Dwight in charge of the \$1.7 billion Clean Waters Program in New York state—quite a jump from Kansas.

In New York, Dwight learned to wear many hats, as problems seemed to multiply. There was the water supply, treatment, and distribution problem; air pollution problems from cars and industrial sites; the problem of wastewater collection, treatment, and return to the environment; and the problem of solid waste collection from every source, processing of solid wastes, and their disposal. In addition, political winds were constantly changing direction.

In 1974, Dwight returned to Kansas as secretary of the newly reorganized Department of Health and Environment. He developed a strong organizational structure for his new department, combining the health and environmental programs in an effective agency that was responsive to the needs of the people of Kansas. He organized statewide emergency medical services, added communication networks, upgraded and trained ambulance personnel, and improved emergency vehicles and equipment.

Dwight developed a physician-recruitment program for underserved areas in Kansas and secured funds from the Kansas legislature for the University of Kansas Medical Center. He restructured the Kansas Crippled Children's Program and completed the first State Health Plan for Kansas. He dramatically increased the number of counties covered by home health services, and during his tenure, the number of deaths from hypertension alone was reduced by 38 percent.

In 1979, a new governor asked Dwight to head the Water Systems Development Program. Dwight was given free rein, but he only had time to bring all of the major stakeholders

together and set the ground rules for water development before he reached mandatory retirement age. After retirement, he was always ready to discuss public health and water issues with groups of friends and in "Letters to the Editor" in the *Topeka Capital Journal*. He testified before the Kansas legislature on water quality concerns and spoke in opposition to corporate hog farming in Kansas. He also served as an expert witness at the Love Canal trial.

Dwight Metzler was active in many professional organizations: the American Public Health Association, American Society of Civil Engineers, American Water Works Association, Kansas Engineering Society, Royal Society of Health (in Great Britain), Kansas Public Health Association, and the Kansas Water Pollution Control Association. He was president of the American Public Health Association in 1964–1965, and he received the Crumbine Award from the Kansas Public Health Association, Distinguished Service Award from KU, Distinguished Engineering Service Award from the KU School of Engineering, and Sedgwick Memorial Award from the American Public Health Association. He was elected a member of the National Academy of Engineering in 1973.

Amid the challenges and achievements of his professional life, Dwight shared with Lela a great joy in family life. As parents they were never too busy to help their four daughters with a challenging homework assignment, to encourage music practice, or to attend a sports event. Their daughters' love of nature was nurtured during many excursions to the Metzler family farm, picnics at area lakes, and summer camping vacations in Colorado and South Dakota. As their daughters left home to pursue education and work elsewhere, Dwight and Lela faithfully kept in touch with them through letters, phone calls, and ultimately e-mail. In his last few years Dwight took particular satisfaction from the closeness he observed among his daughters, commenting that anyone who challenged one of them would have to answer to all four. Dwight maintained strong ties to the family farm and drove around its 80 acres on the garden tractor when his legs became unreliable.

His youngest daughter was always relieved when his engineering skills helped him to get out of any situation created by his adventuresome nature.

Dwight and Lela Metzler's four daughters are Linda Diane Metzler, Brenda Metzler Castañón, Marilyn Anne Metzler, and Martha Jeanne Metzler. Their two grandchildren are Gregory David Castañón and Laura Anne Castañón. Lela died in 1991, and Dwight married Helen Telfel in 1998.

Dwight Metzler was a public health engineer of the first order, who raised the traditions of Dr. William Thompson Sedgwick of Massachusetts and Dr. Samuel J. Crumline of Kansas to a higher level. A true servant of the people, he achieved the rare satisfaction of a good job well done.

