



Joel M. Leathers

Joel Franklin Monroe (Levi) Leathers

1920-1987

By Raymond F. Boyer with assistance from numerous others

Joel Franklin Monroe (Levi) Leathers, considered to be among the world's outstanding process engineers as well as a great innovator in research, pilot plant, production, and management, died June 1, 1987, at the age of sixty-seven. Levi Leathers spent his entire career with Dow Chemical Company, where in 1941 he began as a second-class oiler in the power house of the old Texas Division and in 1976 was named vice-president of Manufacturing and Engineering Technology, assuming worldwide responsibility for ensuring the coordinated development and use of Dow's most advanced manufacturing and engineering capabilities. As he is described affectionately, Levi Leathers was the genuine article, a bear of a man whose accomplishments loomed larger than life and whose brilliant mind led to major improvements in Dow's manufacturing operations. As Levi liked to say, "If it doesn't work, there is a reason why. If it does work, there is a way to make it work better."

Born and raised in Guy's Store, Texas, Levi received his B.S. in chemistry in 1941 from Sam Houston State University, Huntsville. He then joined Dow in the Power Department of the Texas Division in Freeport, Texas, and later that year transferred to Dow's Central Laboratory at Freeport as a control chemist. Between 1943 and 1945 he worked in several Texas Division laboratories as a chemist, and from

1945 to 1947 he held a variety of Texas Division technical management positions including project leader, assistant plant superintendent, and assistant laboratory director. Continuing on at the Texas Division, Levi was named director of the Organic Pilot Plant Laboratory in 1954, director of Research and Development in 1961, and general manager of the Texas Division in 1966.

Then, as it is said, Texas wasn't big enough to hold Levi. He became director of operations for Dow Chemical U.S.A. in 1968, a Dow Company vice-president in 1970, a member of the board of directors in 1971, and executive vice-president of Dow U.S.A. in 1971.

In 1978 Levi was elected to the National Academy of Engineering for his "leadership in large-scale chemical processes which advanced the U.S. chemical industry into a world leadership position." He was also a member of the American Chemical Society, American Institute of Chemical Engineers, Society of Chemical Industry American Section, and Technology Assessment Advisory Council of the Office of Technology Assessment. In 1972 he was presented an honorary doctor of engineering degree from Michigan Technological University, Houghton, Michigan, and in 1977 a Distinguished Alumnus Award from Sam Houston State University.

He served as a member of the boards of directors of Cordis Dow Corporation of Miami, Florida, a Dow associated company; the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company of St. Louis, Missouri; and the Magma Power Company of Los Angeles, California. A. L. Johnson, president of Magma, recalls Levi's broad range of concerns for chemical engineering and power generation. Before Levi served on the board of directors of the power company, which was located in the Imperial Valley of California, hot brine (with 200 parts per million of dissolved salts) was pumped from the earth and flash evaporated to produce steam for power. Levi was especially challenged by the attendant corrosion problems, and Johnson considered Levi a tremendous technical asset to

Magma's operations. One of their power plants is named "The J. M. Leathers Plant."

During the period 1959 to 1977, Levi was the inventor or co-inventor for eight U.S. process or apparatus patents assigned to the Dow Chemical Company. He always longed for the Texas-size challenge. When it came, he was ready. In 1973 he took on the energy crisis with his war on British thermal units. Under his leadership, Dow technology not only survived the crisis but also emerged leaner and more competitive.

Fellow board member H. D. Doan, a grandson of H. H. Dow and former president of Dow Chemical, knew Levi for over thirty years and described Levi as the most dedicated man he had ever met. He noted that we are all better off if we believe in something bigger than we are—religion or country or home. He said, for Levi it was Dow. Levi loved his wife, Katie, and his children. He also loved Dow. He had an instinctive rapport with people who put Dow above themselves. That was a requirement—and he did not think that was very complicated.

It is Dow's strategy to be the best in commodity chemicals and to add to that base several specialty lines. That strategy is proclaimed at the top, but it is in reality a reflection of Levi's leadership in process work that allowed others to adopt it. It also was Levi and Ben Branch, retired head of Dow International and president of Dow Chemical Company, who pushed that process work all over the world so that today that strategy is working. That can remain a lesson for us today. It is always genius down below that makes strategy possible—not the other way around. And genius does not care who gets the credit—as long as the work gets done. And that was Levi.

However, a retired engineer who worked closely with Levi at the time when he was general manager of the Texas Division remembers his outstanding characteristic as "a lasting concern for people." Levi realized that personnel in a large industrial organization might have personal problems related to work, home, or individual traits, problems that

were counterproductive. This engineer recalled that Levi had a special ability to sense the existence of such problems and would encourage such an individual to talk. He always warned the person seeking his advice that "I can do one of three things: I can help, or I can't help, but I can certainly sympathize."

His colleagues recall his zest for life and friends, which often became apparent at dinner meetings, during business trips, or at other group occasions when he eventually would lead the group in singing, with or without piano accompaniment. Among his favorites were "The Yellow Rose of Texas," "Release Me," and others of that vintage and genre. Life was never dull with Levi around, whether in work or play. He was tough, but he had a heart much bigger than his tough exterior. He did "good" in the best and most real sense of the word.

