



PETER T. FLAWN

1926–2017

Elected in 1974

“Leadership in the development of environmental geology and engineering.”

BY WILLIAM L. FISHER AND BRIDGET R. SCANLON

PETER TYRRELL FLAWN died May 7, 2017, at home in West Austin, Texas. He was 91.

He was born February 17, 1926, in Miami, Florida, but grew up in New Jersey. In 1943, at the age of 16, he was admitted with a full scholarship to Oberlin College. During the next 6 years, he completed an undergraduate degree at Oberlin despite a stint in the US Army Air Corps, worked a summer for the US Geological Survey, and completed a master of science degree and residence requirements for doctoral study at Yale University. At age 23 he embarked on a career as a research geologist at the Bureau of Economic Geology at the University of Texas at Austin. Such remarkable productivity was to be the hallmark of his many decades as a scientist and administrator.

Peter’s initial research at the bureau focused on the complex Precambrian rocks and associated mineral deposits of the Trans-Pecos region in Texas. Some of this research related to pegmatites of the Mica Mine area and became the subject of his dissertation at Yale, where he received a PhD in geology in 1951. One of the interesting aspects of his field work throughout his life was his immersion in the local culture, including attending six-man football games on Friday nights and participating in square dancing.

His Precambrian outcrop work evolved into a much larger study that included subsurface work and surface geology in the Franklin Mountains and Sierra Blanca area of Texas. The results of this research were published by the bureau in 1956 under the title *Basement Rocks of Texas and Southeast New Mexico*. That year the American Association of Petroleum Geologists established a basement rock committee and Flawn chaired it.

His work in the US Southwest expanded later into Mexico, where he studied metamorphic rocks in the Sierra del Carmen of Coahuila. His love of Mexico and its metal mineral resources was a longtime affair. He became fluent in Spanish and in 1964, as a visiting professor of geology at the Instituto de Geología, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, proudly lectured in his acquired tongue.

In the late 1950s he pursued an extensive study of the Ouachita System, a largely concealed belt of deformed Paleozoic rocks that borders the southern edge of the Central Stable Region of North America in the same way that the Appalachian system delimits the eastern margin. The findings of this seminal effort were published in 1961, a few years before plate tectonics was introduced to North American geologists. The Ouachita monograph¹ is perhaps Peter's most significant geological contribution given its regional scale and the politics involved. At the outset, it was not clear that industry sources would be cooperative, but upon learning of the comprehensive undertaking, numerous companies contributed to the success of the project in much the same manner as the collaboration between academia and industry continues to this day at the Bureau of Economic Geology.

In the fall of 1960, after bureau director John Lonsdale died suddenly of a massive heart attack, Peter Flawn, at age 34, was named the bureau's fifth director. At the time the bureau had a research staff of ten, five at the doctoral level. Though modest in size, it had a number of prominent geologists on its staff over the years and a long history of publication. During

¹ Flawn PT, Goldstein A Jr, King PB, Weaver CE. 1961. *The Ouachita System* (PB6120). Austin: Bureau of Economic Geology.

his 10 years as director, Flawn continued the strong tradition of basic and applied research while moving the bureau into policy areas and later into environmental geology.

He maintained his own research and lectured frequently, coloring many of his talks with titles like “Borehole Myopia,” “Granite Wash Is Hogwash,” and “Too Much Oil in the Eyes of Texas?” He also wrote two books while serving as bureau director: *Mineral Resources: Geology, Engineering, Economics, Politics, Law* (Rand McNally, 1966) and *Environmental Geology: Conservation, Land-Use Planning, and Resource Management* (Harper and Row, 1970). Also in 1966 he published a paper, “Geology and the New Conservation Movement,”² that anticipated the national concern about environmental issues.

When he was appointed bureau director he was also named a professor in the Department of Geological Sciences. He taught a course on mineral resources, supervised a number of graduate students (mostly doctoral aspirants), and was an active participant in the affairs of the department.

In 1970 he left the bureau to launch what was to become an impressive career in higher education administration. That year he was appointed UT Austin’s vice president for academic affairs and in 1972 he rose to executive vice president. In 1973 he was appointed president of the new University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), where during his 5-year term he transformed the campus from rental offices with a few planners and administrators to a beautiful 600-acre campus with 300 faculty, 8800 students, and all infrastructure in place. The first classes began in 1975, and 4 years later he presided over the first commencement, reenacting a historic moment by signing the first diploma against Rep. Frank Lombardino’s back just as Gov. Preston Smith had signed the legislation that created UTSA in 1969.

Peter returned to Austin in 1977 for a research leave 19 years in the making, but in short order he was serving as acting director of the University of Texas Marine Science Institute and acting chair of the Department of Marine Studies. In 1979 he

² *Science* 157(3709):409–12.

was appointed president of UT Austin by the board of regents, a position he held through 1985.

During his tenure he pushed the university to pursue greater academic rigor and excellence. He convinced the regents to establish a program of matching private gifts to the university, and during the Centennial Celebration Campaign, which he launched, the number of faculty endowments rose from 112 to 851. Sponsored research grew to \$100 million. The undergraduate library next to the main building was renamed the Peter T. Flawn Academic Center in 1985 when he retired as president emeritus. Much of what the University of Texas at Austin is today owes to the perceptive direction, guidance, and insight of Peter Flawn.

At 60, retirement was not his style. He wrote four books: *A Primer for University Presidents: Managing the Modern University* (University of Texas Press, 1990); a memoir of his days as Texas geologist at the Bureau of Economic Geology; another on his experience heading the Texas National Research Laboratory Commission and the quest for the Superconducting Super Collider; and a book recalling his sojourn in northern Mexico and the opening of a silver mine with his good friend Phil Beckley.³

He remained active in affairs of the university and the state and kept in touch with Texas and university leaders, who frequently sought his counsel. He served on 15 corporate boards of directors and on some two dozen nonprofit, state, and university advisory and governing boards.

In 1997, at age 71, he agreed to serve as interim president while UT Austin began a search for a new leader. He resigned from the many corporate and nonprofit boards on which he was serving and accepted a salary of \$1. He launched another capital campaign with the ambitious goal of raising \$1 billion. He dealt with the fallout from the *Hopwood v. Texas* decision banning racial considerations in admissions and left Larry Faulkner, the incoming president, with no unmade decisions.

³ Flawn PT. 2002. *Silver in the Sierra Madre: The Story of the Santa Cruz Mine and Philip W. Beckley*. Eakin Press.

Peter was always involved in professional geological societies, serving as president of the Association of American State Geologists, the Geological Society of America, and the American Geosciences Institute. He also was the first president of the Austin Geological Society when it was founded in 1965.

Appropriately, Peter was honored by his professional peers. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering and the Texas Academy of Medicine, Engineering, and Science. He received the Condecoración de la Orden del Sol del Perú (1984), Wilbur Lucius Cross Medal from Yale (1985), Ben H. Parker Memorial Medal from the American Institute of Professional Geologists (1989), Ian Campbell Medal from the American Geosciences Institute (1993), Santa Rita Award from the University of Texas System (2000), and Mirabeau B. Lamar Medal from the Association of Texas Colleges and Universities (2001). At UT Austin he received a presidential citation (2000) and held the L.T. Barrow Chair in Mineral Resources and the Regents Chair in Higher Education Leadership.

Perhaps his greatest achievement was convincing the engaging and vivacious Priscilla Pond to marry him in 1946 and be his life's companion and counselor for 70 years. He would be the first to say that without her he would have accomplished but a fraction of what he did. Priscilla and his second daughter, Dr. Laura Brooks Flawn, preceded him in death. He is survived by daughter Tyrrell E. Flawn (John P. Howe III) and a host of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Peter Flawn was a prominent geologist, a prolific researcher and author, and a renowned leader in higher education. The epilogue of his 2002 memoir captures his essence:

The Mexicans have an old saying. Translated it says, if you want to know what is in the road, you have to get down from your horse. Extended to our time, it means that if one really wants to know the country, one has to get out of the car. That is one of the great benefits of being a geologist.... It was a great life.