



PETER TYRRELL FLAWN
1926–2017

By William L. Fisher

Peter Tyrrell Flawn, a prominent geologist, a prolific researcher and author, a renowned leader in higher education, and an Honorary Member of the Association, died May 7, 2017, at age 91.

Peter Flawn was a native of Florida but grew up in New Jersey. In 1943, at the age of 16, he was offered admission and a full scholarship to Oberlin College. In just 6 years he completed a B.S. at Oberlin, which was interrupted midway with a stint in the US Army Air Corps, worked a summer for the US Geological Survey, and completed an M.S. degree and residence requirements for the Ph.D. 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 (UT). Peter Flawn was a quick mover early on, and he never slowed up.

Peter's first Bureau assignment was the Precambrian rocks and associated mineral deposits of the Van Horn area; it was completed in 1951. Results were published in

a Bureau of Economic Geology publication authored jointly by Flawn and Philip B. King. The first part of the study—Pegmatites of the Mica Mine Area, Culberson and Hudspeth Counties, Texas—was the subject of Flawn's dissertation at Yale, where he received his Ph.D. in geology in 1951. His Precambrian work evolved into an interest in basement rocks, where Flawn began subsurface work, coupled with surface geology work in the Franklin Mountains and Sierra Blanca area. The results of that work were published by the Bureau under the title "Basement Rocks of Texas and Southeast New Mexico." He chaired a major committee of AAPG compiling data for a basement rock map of the United States.

In the last part of the 1950s Peter pursued an extensive subsurface and surface 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. Results of that effort were published by the Bureau in 1961 as part of the University Publication series. Flawn was senior author with co-authors August Goldstein, Philip King, and C. E. Weaver. And Flawn was to initiate work in northern Mexico with a paper on metamorphic rocks in the Sierra del Carmen of Coahuila, Mexico. His love of Mexico and its metal mineral resource was a longtime affair. He became fluent in Spanish and in 1964 while a visiting professor of geology at the Instituto de Geología, Universidad Nacional

Autónoma de México, he proudly lectured in his acquired tongue.

In the fall of 1960 Bureau director John Lonsdale died suddenly of a massive heart attack. Peter Flawn, at age 34, was named the fifth director of the Bureau of Economic Geology in its 52nd year of operation. At that time the Bureau had a research staff of 10, 5 at the doctoral level. Though modest in size, the Bureau had a long history of publication and through the years had a number of prominent geologists on its staff. During his 10 years as Bureau director, Flawn managed to maintain the strong tradition of basic and applied research while moving the Bureau into certain policy areas and later into environmental geology. He instigated the first Annual Report, a series that continues today.

Flawn maintained 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?" Flawn wrote two books while serving as Bureau director—*Mineral Resources: Geology, Engineering, Economics, Politics, Law*, published in 1966 by Rand McNally, and *Environmental Geology: Conservation, Land-use Planning, and Resource Management*, published in 1970 by Harper and Row. He published a paper in 1966, titled "Geology and the New Conservation Movement," which anticipated the national concern for environmental issues that were to come in the late 1960s and later.

When Peter Flawn was appointed Bureau director he was also named a professor in the Department of Geological Sciences and would later

also serve as professor of public affairs in the LBJ School of Public Affairs. An active participant in the affairs of the department, he taught a course on mineral resources and supervised a number of graduate students, mostly doctoral aspirants.

In 1970 Flawn left the Bureau to launch what was to become an impressive career in higher education administration. That year he was appointed vice president for academic affairs and in 1972 rose to executive vice president at UT Austin before being appointed president of the new University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) in 1973. He would remain at UTSA for 5 years. When he arrived at UTSA, there were a few planners and administrators in rental offices. Five years later, UTSA was a beautiful 600-acre campus, with 300 faculty, 8800 students, and all infrastructure in place; first classes started in 1975 under Flawn's watch.

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 the Texas Marine Science Institute and acting chairman of the Department of Marine Studies. In 1979 he was appointed president of The University of Texas at Austin by the Board of Regents, a position he would hold through 1985. Peter Flawn pushed the University to pursue greater academic rigor and excellence. While president, Flawn 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, or \$225 million in current dollars. The Academic Center next to the Main Building

was renamed the Peter T. Flawn Academic Center in 1985 when Peter retired and became 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, Flawn knew that retirement was not his style. He found time to write four books— *A Primer for University Presidents: Managing the Modern University*, a memoir on his days as Texas geologist at the Bureau of Economic Geology, another on his experience in heading the Texas National Research Laboratory Commission and the quest for the Superconducting Super Collider, and finally a book recalling his sojourn into northern Mexico and opening a silver mine with his good friend Phil Beckley. He remained active in affairs of the University and the state and maintained close contact with Texas and University leaders, who frequently sought his counsel. He served on 15 corporate boards of directors, some while president of UT Austin, but most afterward. He also served on some two dozen nonprofit, state, university advisory and governing boards. And as if those activities did not fully occupy his time, in 1997, at age 71, Peter Flawn agreed to serve as president ad interim while UT Austin began a search for a new leader. He resigned from the many corporate and nonprofit boards on which he was then 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 new incoming president, with no unmade decisions.

Peter was always involved in the professional geological societies, serving as president of the Association of American State Geologists, the Geological Society of America, and the American Geosciences Institute, and first president of the Austin Geological Society. Appropriately, Peter was honored by his professional peers. He was elected to the National Academy of Engineering and the Academy of Medicine, Engineering and Science of Texas. He received an honorary doctorate from Oberlin and a Presidential Citation from UT Austin. He received the Cross Medal from Yale, the Parker Medal from the American Institute of Professional Geologists, the Lamar Medal from the Association of Texas Colleges and Universities, the Campbell Medal from the American Geosciences Institute, and the Santa Rita Award from The University of Texas System. Flawn also received the Condecoracion de la Orden del Sol del Perú. He held the Barrow Chair in Mineral Resources and the Regents Chair in Higher Education Leadership at UT Austin.

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 preceded him in death. He is survived by his first daughter, Tyrrell Flawn, and a host of grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

A geologist at heart, Peter Flawn left a legacy of exacting a standard for excellence and intellectual rigor in all his professional pursuits. It will be long before we see the likes of him again.