

IN MEMORIAM

JOHN A. FOCHT

Focht's Birth in Sweetwater, Texas

John was born on February 15, 1894, to Israel Shell (Tuck) Focht and Mattie Hill Arnold Focht. His father was born in Water Works near Lebanon, Pennsylvania, on July 10, 1851, and his mother was born in Prescott, Arkansas, on December 19, 1871. He married Fay Goss of Abilene, Texas, on September 6, 1920. John Arnold Focht passed away on September 11, 1991.

Sweetwater Water Supply

Sweetwater, Texas, in 1894 had no water supply; the water from wells was gyp water; it served as stock water, but was too mineralized for domestic purposes.¹ Everyone was dependent upon the water that ran off the roofs of their houses. Many families had underground cisterns while others had galvanized tanks above ground. John's family had both. Because of the very low rainfall, it was essential that they conserve their water in every way possible. He described the system they used as composed of a gutter system on the house that carried the water through a down spout to a filter about 18 inches in diameter and three feet deep, containing coarse gravel and charcoal. His father usually stored the winter rains in a cistern and the summer rains in a galvanized tank. It always bothered him to see people waste water. He said he was eight or nine years old before his family had running water in their house. This experience probably caused him to want to study sanitary engineering.

Going to College

In telling of his experiences on going to college, he writes of these developments, "My parents had been talking about sending me to college. Since we were Methodists, my mother thought I ought to go to Southwestern at Georgetown, or Polytechnic at Ft. Worth, but the school superintendent, M.B. Johnson, told her to send me to

¹ John A. Focht, *An Engineer Remembers*, Private Printing, December 1, 1978.

The University of Texas. He told me the University is a place for grown people—you are no longer a boy. When you go down there they expect you to behave, and bring up your lessons. No one is going to keep after you to do your school work. At the end of the term you will get your grade on what you have done, and if you do not do it, you will fail; the professor is not going to be warning you from time to time to bring up your work. I had not given any thought to what subjects I would take in college, and I was just going on the assumption that it would be a general academic course. However in the middle of the summer when I got back from my uncle's ranch in Stonewall County, I found a little bulletin from the Registrar at the University describing the College of Engineering. I found out later that the young man high school teacher in our senior year had sent my name to the Registrar. At that time there were two branches of Engineering—Civil and Electrical. After reading the bulletin carefully, I chose to take Civil Engineering. I am indebted to this teacher for sending in my name; this one little incident has affected my entire life."

Longhorn Band

Music was a source of great pleasure in John's life. Although young John was directed by his father to practice on a violin, he did not enjoy it, but did take to his horn which he carried with him to the University in 1910. When he arrived on the campus he checked around and found out when the University band would meet, and he went to the meeting. The band hall was in a shack close to the water tower. Dr. Eugene Schoch started the University Band in 1900 and served as its director. When John reported the first night of practice, Dr. Schoch put out a sheet of music and each player was to play it by himself. John took one look at it, packed his horn, and left. Walter Hunnicutt later took over the band that year and, on running into John on the campus, persuaded him to make another try. From that time on, John played his cornet in many bands beside the Longhorn Band, particularly the Ben Hur Band, the church, and the Longhorn Alumni Band. One of the incentives for playing in the Longhorn Band was to be able to make out-of-town football trips.

Ram's Horn Watch Fob

He wrote in his book of an impressive event that took place in the Spring of 1913 when Dean T.U. Taylor completed his 25 years with The University of Texas. Dean Taylor was the first person to have served the University for 25 years; all of the people who were on the faculty when he came to the University in 1888 either had

died or resigned. In order to observe and celebrate this important event in the history of the College of Engineering, and The University of Texas, the faculty, students, ex-students and friends of the College of Engineering planned a big party. It consisted of a parade from the Capitol, where arrangements had been made to borrow a cannon from the armory and take it to Clark Field, the site of the present Taylor Hall, where salutes were fired from the cannon. Speeches honoring Dean Taylor were made. That night there was a banquet in the Crystal Ballroom of the Driskill Hotel where more speeches were made honoring Dean Taylor. Professor Focht commented that, "Since then I have attended many important dinners where there were ten times or more as many people attending, but not one ever made the impression of grandeur on me that this banquet did. It was at this banquet that Dean Taylor gave out his 'Ram's Horn Watch Fob,' which was, and is, cherished by every person who received one.....Also, in those days the workmen usually referred to their boss as 'The Old Man.'.....They called Dean Taylor 'The Old Man,' and he liked it." He had a watch fob made of brass about one-and-one-half inches square, the front side of which was inscribed with the following words:

THE
OLD
MAN'S
ENGINEERS
1888-1913

and with a Ram's Horn worked around the letters. On the back side was inscribed the Engineer's yell that had been developed several years earlier:

T U Taylor
T Y TY
 $X^2 Y^2$
2 XY.

Dean Taylor said he would give a Ram's Horn fob to every person who had been a student under him during his twenty-five years of service at the University of Texas. He gave one to each of his former students at the banquet, and he gave one to other former students when he had the opportunity. Dean Focht said he wore his until he retired

from teaching in 1975; then his pocket watch was replaced with a wrist watch that was given to him by his friends at a retirement party.

These stories illustrate the spirit that developed among engineering students as a result of Dean Taylor's enthusiasm. Later, as Dean Focht, he provided much of the linkage with the traditions of "THE OLD MAN'S ENGINEERS."

Graduation

John Focht graduated from the University in June 1914 with a C.E. degree. Jobs were scarce, so he went back to Sweetwater. In the winter of 1913-14 the City of Sweetwater voted a bond issue to build a complete water system—dam, pipe line to town, stand pipe, and distribution system. John got a job as Assistant Engineer. It was in May of 1915 that the Water Commissioner of Sweetwater resigned. The mayor worked it out so that he could serve both as Water Commissioner and City Engineer. The Water Commissioner position was elective, so John was in politics briefly. He lost the race for Water Commissioner, which he did not campaign for very hard. The City Engineer job which he retained paid \$100 a month while the Water Commissioner job paid only \$25 per month.

Return to the University

As the summer of 1915 progressed he could see that the work was drawing to a close; the water mains were all laid, and the stand pipe was almost completed. Water from Lake Trammell had been flowing in the water mains for several months. Also, he had become interested in Sanitary engineering, so he decided to return to the University and take some courses in Organic Chemistry and Bacteriology. In September of 1915 he went back to the University and registered. He found Bacteriology a most interesting course; the lab for this course was in the west wing of the third floor of the Old Main Building, and he spent a lot of extra time there. In the spring of 1916 he learned that Sweetwater was going to build a new sewage disposal plant. He made application and was selected for the job to be the Engineer. To accept the position, he had to leave the University before the end of the term. He had completed all of the class work except for the final exams. He felt that he had obtained all of the good from the courses, and since he was not working for a Master's Degree (in fact, they were not giving Master's Degrees in Engineering at that time), he withdrew from the University and took the job. He had no intention of ever coming

back to the University or needing the credit for the work he had taken that term; he had equipped himself to go to work out in the field. But ten years later, 1926, he came back to the University to teach, and Dean Taylor insisted that he complete his work for a Master's degree, which they were offering by that time. Dean Taylor managed to get John credit for nearly all of the work he left incomplete in 1916. He completed the work for an M.S. in C.E. in 1929.

Officer's Training Camp

On finishing up the work on this new disposal plant in the spring of 1917, he could see that there would be little more work for him in Sweetwater any time soon. The United States was getting into World War I, and the government was starting up Officer's Training Camps over the country. He was young, single, and had no responsibilities, and he could see that with the draft that was being proposed, he would be one of the first to be selected to go into the Army. An army officer came to Sweetwater recruiting candidates for the first camp, and he applied. He was accepted, so he resigned his job as City Engineer and went to the First Officer's Training Camp at Leon Springs on May 10, 1917.

World War I

By the end of 1917, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant of engineers in the 90th Division. Shipped to France in 1918 to support French and British troops, Lt. Focht and his engineers strung barbed wire entanglements, erected barracks, and acted as traffic cops in Verdun and the Argonne Forest. In combat in the St. Mihiel drive and the Argonne Forest, Focht was slightly wounded as he carried injured men from a shelled area; for this action he was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross and later promoted to First Lieutenant. A few months later on Nov. 10, 1918, the eve of Armistice, shrapnel from a nearby exploding shell lodged in his left hand, nearly destroying two of his fingers. This shell fragment was the only memento of the war which he kept. One of the last soldiers to be wounded in World War I, Dean Focht was sent back to the States in early 1919 and soon went to work for the Texas Highway Department to help build a concrete highway across Rockwall County.

Rockwall

Immediately after his discharge from the army he headed for Rockwall to appear before the Commissioners' Court. The Commissioners received him very cordially, and he left with the satisfaction of having a job.

He reported to Rockwall early in May, about two weeks after his visit with the Commissioners' Court. When he reported for duty, Julian Montgomery, County Engineer, already had rented an office, which was a big room that had been a club room on the second floor of a building over Leonard Brothers Drug Store, which was in the middle of the block on the south side of the square. The first job was surveying the location of the Bankhead Highway. Mr. Montgomery picked out the control points, and John ran the instrument. The big problem they had was taking the short cuts across the property; the farmers wanted the road to continue along the property lines. It was not long until Julian Montgomery hired Marvin Nichols as his second assistant, and they worked as fast as they could to get the plans ready for approval by the Texas Highway Department and the Bureau of Public Roads. It might be of interest to know that these three men and Hal Wilson continued in engineering and became very successful. Montgomery later became State W.P.A. Engineer, State Highway Engineer, and a prominent consulting engineer; in a few years Nichols became a partner in the consulting firm of Hawley, Freeise, and Nichols, which enjoyed an excellent reputation; Hal Wilson went to work for the Santa Fe Railroad a few years later and rose to become the Assistant Chief Civil Engineer for the Santa Fe system by the time he retired; Focht later became Professor of Civil Engineering at The University of Texas at Austin, Assistant Dean of the College of Engineering for nine years, and Counselor in the College of Engineering for five years.

In June of 1920 Julian Montgomery resigned the job of County Engineer of Rockwall County, Texas, and accepted the job as City Engineer of Wichita Falls, Texas, which was getting ready to begin a big improvement program. The Commissioners' Court was very good to Focht, for they promoted him to the job of County Engineer of Rockwall County at the same salary that Julian was receiving—\$400.00 per month. Focht inherited a big problem in connection with the foundations of the piers of the bridge across the East Fork of the Trinity River.

University Faculty

Shortly after World War I, Dean Taylor realized that highway construction and maintenance was going to be an important phase of a civil engineer's education and that he should hire, as a professor, an engineer who had been out in the field building highways. He asked several of his older graduates who were working for the Highway Department to give him a list of three or four of the outstanding younger engineers who were working for the Department and gave promise of future development. Evidently John's name was on several of these lists, and since

Dean Taylor remembered John from his student days in 1922, he offered John a teaching position as Instructor at a salary of \$1,800 for nine months. At that time John was making \$4,800 a year, so he wrote Dean Taylor and thanked him very much for the consideration and confidence in him but that he was making so much more that he was not interested. This must have made an impression on Dean Taylor and also strengthened his desire to get John to come back and teach. Over the next few years, he made additional offers raising the rank and salary, but John still wasn't interested. In the summer of 1925, Dean Taylor sent an offer of a position as a full professor at \$3,600 for nine months. John decided he would make the financial sacrifice and accept Dean Taylor's offer if he could be allowed an additional year to advance the projects in Nolan County before he left there to teach. John wrote Dean Taylor that he would accept his offer if he could be granted a year's leave of absence and start teaching in September 1926. This was approved by Dean Taylor and the President of the University. Thus, John began his long tenure as perhaps the only person to start his teaching career as a full Professor at The University of Texas after having been granted a year's leave of absence before he started.

John was given a heavy teaching schedule, including at least one lecture class every morning and a laboratory each afternoon. He taught courses in his specialty of highway engineering, including surveys and plans, bridges, construction, highway materials testing, and administration. He also taught courses in Surveying, Mechanics, Strength of Materials, Strength of Materials Laboratory, Hydraulics and Hydraulics Laboratory. He also taught the first course in Soil Mechanics offered in the southwest in the late twenties.

He helped the Texas Highway Department organize and sponsor the First Traffic Engineer's Conference held in Texas in July 1940. He helped the General Land Office of the State of Texas organize and sponsor the First Texas Surveyors Short Course, which led to the formation of the Texas Land Surveyors Association in December 1940. He discussed with the District Engineer of the U.S. Geological Survey about establishing gauging stations to record rainfall and runoff from Waller Creek. These talks planted the seeds which some twenty years later led to the construction of those stations which provide rainfall-runoff data for small watersheds—information so vitally needed for design and construction of engineering structures on small streams.

Faculty Advisor

Professor Focht's contact with students was not limited to the classroom. In addition to thousands of hours of

office meetings with students, he served as Faculty Advisor to the student chapters of ASCE, Tau Beta Pi, and Chi Epsilon and as Assistant Dean and counselor for the College of Engineering.

The student chapter of The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) was established at The University of Texas in 1921. It was not long after John returned to teach at the University that he became Faculty Advisor for the chapter. Soon he began planning inspection trips for the members of the chapter, primarily to Houston and San Antonio, to visit manufacturing plants and construction projects. Activities were not confined to technical subjects only, for John with his wife Fay sponsored many picnics and other social activities for the students and their dates.

John served as Faculty Advisor for Tau Beta Pi, an honor society for engineering students, for some twelve years. Mr. William J. Murray, who later was very active in the petroleum industry of the state and served on the Railroad Commission as member and chairman, was a student in a Strength of Materials class of Professor Focht. Bill was also President of the Texas Chapter of Tau Beta Pi and in 1935 proposed John for membership, and it was approved. John had graduated in 1914, and the Tau Beta Pi Chapter at The University of Texas had been installed in 1916. The selection of a faculty member for membership in Tau Beta Pi is judged by the students on his knowledge of his subject and his teaching ability; the grades he made in college were not necessarily considered, but John was proud that his college grades were above the minimum required for membership in Tau Beta Pi. It was with great pleasure and satisfaction to Fay and John that both sons, John Jr. and Tuck, were elected and initiated into the Texas Chapter of Tau Beta Pi.

The Chapter of Chi Epsilon, national honorary society for Civil and Architectural Engineering, was established at The University of Texas in 1934. In 1935 John was elected a Chapter Honorary Member and almost immediately was elected as Faculty Advisor to the Chapter and served in that capacity for some 20 years. It was an interesting experience, and John enjoyed it very much. Fay and John became closely acquainted with members of the chapter. They soon made it the practice to have the students and their wives, or dates, over to their house for a chili supper every year and also sponsored a picnic every semester. Fay and John also experienced the pleasure of seeing their sons, John Jr. and Tuck, initiated into Chi Epsilon. John's involvement with Chi Epsilon extended far beyond the Texas campus. He was elected as Councillor for the Southwestern District of Chi Epsilon in 1952 and served as national Secretary-Treasurer from 1958 to 1972. He made a number of close, lifelong friends on the council and felt

very close to the students at other universities with whom he came in contact through the office as Councillor. In the fall of 1971 John was nominated for National Honorary Member, and on April 22, 1972, he was elected to be the 36th national Honorary Member of Chi Epsilon. In 1972, when he retired from the Supreme Council, the members of the conclave elected him Councillor Emeritus.

Dean Woolrich appointed John as Assistant Dean of Engineering in September 1950. The Assistant Dean devoted half-time to the Dean's office and half-time to teaching. Dean Woolrich used his Assistant Dean to deal primarily with students who had problems. The Assistant Dean called in those students for conferences who were reported by the instructors as having too many absences, low grades, or any other delinquencies. It was also his duty to place on scholastic probation those whose grades at the end of the semester were below the required average, and if improvement was not made the next semester the student was dropped from the rolls of the University. John's title was changed to Counselor in 1959, because the University had a rule then that administrative officers had to retire from administrative positions at the end of the school year in which they attained their 65th birthday. Dean Haggerty, who had succeeded Dean Woolrich by that time, told the President of the University that he wanted John to continue dealing with the students as he had been doing. They arrived at the designation of Counselor, and John served the last five years as Counselor until he retired in 1964.

John met the most brilliant engineering students in the honorary scholastic societies of Tau Beta Pi and Chi Epsilon. He met the students less gifted academically as Assistant Dean and Counselor. He treated all the students with respect, fairness, and a sincere desire to help the person become a better student, a better engineer, and a better person.

In the last paragraph of his autobiography, *An Engineer Remembers*, John states that he was very happy that he had accepted Dean Taylor's offer to come to the University to teach. He closes with this sentence: "I have no regrets except that perhaps I could have done more for my students."

American Society of Civil Engineers

Professor Focht was a strong supporter of the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), and the Society was an important part of his professional life.

During his days as a student at The University of Texas (1910-1914) and the first 12 years of his professional

life, he had no contact with the ASCE. When he became Professor of Civil Engineering in 1926, he was asked by Dean Woolrich to attend the meetings of the Student Chapter of ASCE, which had been established in 1921. He regularly attended meetings of the Texas Section of ASCE and in 1933 was elected second Vice President of the Texas Section. He served as first Vice President in 1934 and was elected to President in 1935, and he served as a Director of the Texas Section in 1936 and 1937. He was elected as Secretary/Treasurer in 1938 and also served as Editor of the Texas Section publication, *The Texas Engineer*.

During the ten years he served as Secretary/Treasurer and Editor of *The Texas Engineer*, he was also a self-appointed official photographer for the Texas Section. At each of the biannual meetings, one in the spring and one in the fall, he was present with his flash bulbs, a 4 x 5 Speed Graphic camera, and huge carrying case, taking pictures of dignitaries, speakers, and members actively enjoying the events. The pictures added interest to *The Texas Engineer* and made a wonderful record of the meetings. He was well known for his firm directions in arranging groups to be photographed, but also for taking action pictures of members eating, talking and socializing. He sent a copy to each person who appeared in his photographs, giving the names of each person in the picture. It was a service very much appreciated by everyone and also helped the members become better acquainted.

When he ended his term as Secretary/Treasurer/Editor, the Texas Section of ASCE presented Professor Focht with a very advanced 16 mm movie camera and a resolution expressing "...its sincerest thanks and appreciation for the magnificent service rendered by its retiring secretary..."

Professor Focht was a major influence in building the strength of the Texas Section and its good relation with the National Society. He became well known and highly regarded both in Texas and the National Society.

Professor Focht's influence during those years was a significant factor in laying the ground work for close ties with the National ASCE and led to four members of the Texas Section becoming President of the National Society. In November 1975 he was made an honorary member of ASCE, an honor credited to only 277 members of 71,512 members of the Society at that time.

A signal honor for John Focht and his son, John Jr., occurred at the national meeting of ASCE in New Orleans, Louisiana, October 8-11, 1989. John Jr. was installed as National President of ASCE, and Dean Focht was chosen to pin the President's Pin on his son. According to the best information available, this was the only time in

the 140 years history of the national ASCE that a father and son had this pleasure. To make it even better, Dean Focht's 33 year old grandson, John Focht III, also a civil engineer, was present to watch the event, along with his family and many friends from Texas.

Focht's Record of Experiences

Professor John A. Focht was an engineer who saw and contributed to the early history of The University of Texas College of Engineering. Fortunately he chronicled much of this history in an autobiography titled *An Engineer Remembers*, by John A. Focht. In the Introduction, he reports that his father used to tell his children of his experiences as a young man. His father was 43 years old when John was born and apparently was a very good storyteller. When John became old enough to appreciate fully the importance and value of these stories, his father had passed on. Young John decided that he would write down some of his experiences to pass on to those who followed him. As he would write down his experiences he would put his notes in a box. In about 1975 he started arranging these stories. He recounts in his book that he experienced much pleasure from this undertaking. He also reflected that he felt that some of these recordings were rather trivial. Those who were privileged to receive a copy of his memories recognized that such trivia, as he called it, was a wonderful record of the time when he lived and also showed how human John Focht was.

The final paragraph of the introduction to his book shows his realization of developments during his life. "What dramatic changes have taken place in my lifetime. In Sweetwater, where I was born and raised, we had no running water, no telephones, no electric lights; I well remember the first automobile I ever saw; of course there were no airplanes, no radio, and no TV. Today we put men on the moon, and brought them back safely to earth. What a wonderful experience to have lived in this period."

The Church

Immediately after Mr. Focht came to Austin in 1926 he joined the University Methodist Church. For several years the Fochts were so involved with raising children, taking care of his teaching job, and working with the students that they did not have much time to give to the church. A men's Sunday School class was organized, meeting in the University Y.M.C.A. John joined it and started playing his cornet for the singing; he continued playing for this class until about 1980. Later the class moved from the Y to the Varsity Theatre—24th and

Guadalupe Sts. Shortly after Judge J.E. Hickman moved to Austin in 1935, he was persuaded to become the teacher; the attendance grew to around 300 when Gerald Mann was president.

Professor Focht served on the Board of Stewards, which is now the Official Board, for about 20 years. He was a member, Secretary, and Chairman of the Board of Trustees for a period of ten years or more. He served as an usher at the 11 o'clock service for 30 years.

Family

In addition to his many achievements in university education and administration, the engineering profession, and his church, Mr. Focht gave a high priority to his family. The pictures and stories in his book, *An Engineer Remembers*, reveal the love and affection he had for his wife, three children, and 11 grandchildren (three of whom were tragically killed in an automobile accident on October 29, 1956, in Houston). He tells of childhood experiences, birthday parties, gatherings of family and friends, and family trips over a period of many years. On many of these trips in later years Fay and John were accompanied by one or two of their grandchildren, and occasionally joint family trips were made with one of their children and their family.

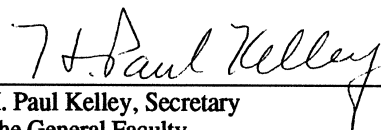
A quotation from his book, *An Engineer Remembers*, sums it up beautifully where he writes, "And now as I come to the end of this project, I want to say that we are most proud of the accomplishments of our children. What wonderful memories we have of their childhood, their college days, their going into society and making the enviable record they have."

Conclusion

Dean Focht will be remembered as an educator with intense interest in his students, who imparted much more to them than just mechanics, highway design and surveying. He practiced in life a technique used in surveying of orienting on a back sight and then projecting on a forward sight. He truly benefited from the past and helped others to do the same. He will be remembered by many for his unpretentious manner of performing little extra-curricular services for the College of Engineering, the Civil Engineering Department, the engineering profession, his church, and particularly for his students. He will be greatly missed by his associates, colleagues, and students.



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 consisting of Professors Walter L. Moore (Chair), Carl Morgan, and J. Neils Thompson.