IN MEMORIAM
CLAUDE R. HOCOTT

Claude R. Hocott, a pioneer in research to improve the discovery and production of oil and gas, whose career spanned the modern oil industry, died in Austin, Texas, September 9, 2001. He was born in Excelsior, Arkansas, in 1909. After his family moved to the Rio Grande Valley, he lived the remainder of his life in Texas. He attended Edinburgh Junior College and later transferred to The University of Texas at Austin where he studied chemical engineering, which at the time was a relatively new discipline in the College of Engineering.

Hocott's studies were interrupted when he was forced to leave college for a semester to earn money. Although he lived with his brother and sister, both of whom attended the University, he needed to pay his share of the expenses, so during the semester he grew an onion crop. The proceeds financed his remaining undergraduate studies. Whenever the subject of the Great Depression and the hard times it engendered were mentioned, Hocott enjoyed telling the story of this enterprise. When he harvested the onions, he discovered that the large produce buyers had no need for onions. Hocott, a very resourceful individual, recalled loading the onions into a truck and starting north from the Valley, going from town to town and house to house selling onions until he had sold the entire crop. Based on his own experiences during the Depression, he always disagreed with the proposition that the many Americans who joined the Communist Party were hungry intellectuals. Hocott was one of those rugged individualists so prominent in Texas in the Depression years. It was because of his South Texas background that Hocott retained a lifelong interest in Latin America, traveling there frequently and learning to speak Spanish.

When Hocott graduated with his bachelor’s degree in 1933, Professor E. P. Schoch, a chemistry professor of great vision who founded the Department of Chemical Engineering, persuaded him to enroll in graduate school. He taught classes in chemical engineering and helped with Schoch's pet research project—the production of acetylene by passing an electric arc through natural gas. Schoch was greatly disturbed by the sight of the massive flares lighting the Texas Gulf Coast that burned unwanted methane coproduced with the crude oil. Schoch considered this a great waste of an important Texas resource and resolved to do something about it. Hocott stayed to research the Schoch process, earning a PhD in chemical engineering in 1937.

Shortly before Hocott obtained his PhD, Humble Oil Company, on the recommendation of W. K. Lewis, a professor at MIT, had formed a research laboratory entirely devoted to researching methods for finding and producing oil and gas. Hocott was hired as a research engineer to work in this new laboratory. Since this laboratory was the first of its kind in the world, there was no shortage of interesting and important problems to be researched. Hocott's early publications related to issues of crucial importance for reservoir engineering. Researchers at the Humble Laboratory did pioneering work that was to become the basis for modern exploration and production technology. The success of the production research laboratory is perhaps best measured by noting that, by 1948, every major oil company in America, and many outside the U.S., instituted laboratories similar to Humble’s.

Hocott was appointed as director of the Humble Laboratory when Stuart Buckley, the codiscoverer of the Buckley-Leverett theory, retired. When Humble was merged with Esso to form Exxon Production Research
Co., Hocott was named the executive vice president of the newly-created company. He served in that capacity until he retired in 1974. During his years at Humble, Hocott became an important spokesman for the oil industry, serving as an oil and gas advisor to the Carter Administration and appearing on the McNeil-Lehrer Report. He held many offices in his professional society, the Society of Petroleum Engineers, including president in 1952, director in 1954, and distinguished lecturer in 1963 and 1987. He was an American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineering director and served on many national committees.

Hocott helped to found the Gulf Universities Research Consortium, a group of universities in states bordering the Gulf of Mexico having faculties in marine science and geology. He served as vice president of this consortium from 1979 to 1983.

When Hocott retired from Exxon, he elected to devote his time to higher education, which he valued as the most important activity to ensure the future welfare of Texas. He initially commuted between Houston and Austin, where, in addition to teaching classes in chemistry and chemical engineering, he helped to found the Institute for Christian Studies, now the Austin Graduate School of Theology. Hocott supported the institute through advice and financial support for more than 30 years, serving as chancellor at the time of his death. He was very interested in theological studies that encompassed a profound respect for Biblical studies and also scientific truths. His primary goal at the institute was to promote high-quality research through research and travel grants.

His dedication to higher education was severely tested when the then dean of the College of Engineering, Earnest Gloyna, asked him to come out of his partial retirement and serve as chairman of the Department of Petroleum Engineering. Hocott reluctantly agreed to take on this challenge, saying his first and most important task was to identify his successor. He was appointed as a professor of petroleum engineering and chaired the department in 1974-1975.

Even after a successor was found, Hocott did not return to full retirement. He became director of the Texas Petroleum Research Committee (TPRC), a research group under the auspices of the Texas Railroad Commission that funded petroleum engineering research at both The University of Texas at Austin and Texas A&M University. He was the director of TPRC from 1975 to 1979.

Hocott’s commitments to higher education, and to good applied research and the benefits it provides, were profound. It was not merely a topic for dinnertime conversation, but a passion—something truly worthy of his time, energy, and financial support. Claude and his wife, Billy, who died in 1979, endowed the Billy and Claude R. Hocott Distinguished Centennial Engineering Research Award. They also endowed the Hocott Lectureship in petroleum engineering.

Hocott received considerable recognition for his efforts on behalf of the oil industry, his profession, and higher education. He was named a distinguished graduate of The University of Texas College of Engineering in 1971 and elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1974. He was named an honorary member of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical and Petroleum Engineers in 1975. He received the DeGolyer Distinguished Service Medal (1980) and the Anthony F. Lucas Gold Medal (1981), both awarded by the Society of Petroleum Engineers.

Claude R. Hocott was dedicated to his country, his state, his profession, his religion, his two universities, and, above all, his family. He is survived by his second wife, the former Judy Mathews, whom he married in 1983, two daughters, Elaine Gainey and Gail Hancock, a brother, Dr. Floyd Hocott, a sister, Mable Ogle, five grandchildren, and five great-grandchildren.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Larry W. Lake (chair), Gary A. Pope, and Robert S. Schechter.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Engineering, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on February 19, 2002. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.