Dr. Carey Thompson, Professor Emeritus of Economics, died on July 10, 1998, at the age of ninety. He is survived by his wife, Louise Paxton Thompson, their daughter Helen Louise, and her husband, Charles Lohrmann.

Although we know Carey as a person of great ability, a devoted teacher, and an adept chairman of the economics department, we remember him best as a man of exceptional character, a person to be trusted who was always honest in his dealings with colleagues and strangers. His long professional life was one of lasting contributions to the University of Texas, to the people of his native state of Texas, and to the nation — not only as a teacher, scholar, and administrator, but also as a volunteer in public service who used considerable energy in advising state legislators and governors of Texas. What follows provides a sample of these contributions, though only a suggestion of his broad and lasting influence.

Carey Carter Thompson, the son of George B. and Claire Finney Thompson, was born March 12, 1908, in the tiny East Texas town of Malakoff. He was raised in a religious setting and his mother had hoped that he would someday become a minister. But that was not in the cards for this precocious child who learned to read at the age of four and who graduated from Malakoff High School when he was only fourteen years old. Somewhat out of character for such an excellent student, Carey took a job involving hard physical labor despite encouragement from some of his high school teachers to go on to college. He soon learned that his teachers had a better idea and enrolled in the University of Texas when he was sixteen years old.
Scholarships and other financial assistance were scarce at that time so the young man had to work his way through college. A classmate of his at the University, Dr. F. J. L. Blasingame, who became a renowned physician, loves to tell about the conversations he had with his friend as they washed dishes together at the UT Commons. Despite the necessity to work, Carey excelled in his studies and graduated in 1928 with a B.A. degree in economics and business. One of his proudest achievements was his election to the Phi Beta Kappa Society. He remained at the University to complete a master’s degree in economics and government, a joint interest he was to maintain many years later. We know that he was greatly influenced by Professor Robert Hargrove Montgomery (Dr. Bob to most) and, very likely, by Professors Edward Everett Hale and E. J. Miller. After finishing his M.A. degree in 1931, he accepted an academic appointment as instructor at Amarillo College where he taught until 1938.

Convinced that education would be his lifetime work he enrolled in the Ph.D. program in economics at the University of North Carolina. During his first year at UNC he was awarded a teaching fellowship. His stay at Chapel Hill was limited to a full academic year, 1938-1939, a summer session in 1940 and another in 1941. He accepted a position as assistant professor at Furman University for the school year 1939-1940 teaching economics and business. His graduate student career was cut short when he returned to Amarillo College as dean in 1940, a position he remained in until he took leave in 1942 to join the U.S. Navy. But he held the title of dean at Amarillo College until 1946.

Carey entered the U.S. Navy with the rank of Ensign. His temperament, educational background, and experience as a teacher made him an ideal candidate to train future naval officers. He served as officer-in-charge of various ground training schools for naval air cadets.
It is evident that his service was valued as he rose through the ranks to Lieutenant Commander. He was released from active service in 1946 but continued his affiliation with the navy as a reserve officer, participating in the reserve unit at the University of Texas (a research group). He advanced to the rank of Commander before retiring from the navy in 1962.

His long detour from academic life paid off in several ways. The skills he picked up in the navy through his dealings with many and different kinds of people would serve him well as he assumed administrative duties in the Department of Economics. More important though, he married his former student, Louise Paxton, along the detour. They were married in December 1943 and formed a very successful partnership for the rest of his life.

After release from the navy, Carey returned to his former position at Amarillo College. He did not stay there long as several opportunities opened up for him in Austin. In response to entreaties by the Director of the Texas Employment Commission, he took a position as research consultant to the commission for one year; it was during the one-year appointment there that he developed an intense interest in problems of unemployment. He published his first refereed paper, entitled “Experience Rating in the Texas Unemployment Compensation Program,” in March 1947. Others were to follow.

After his demonstrated potential for research, he was offered a position as assistant professor in the economics department at the University of Texas starting in the fall semester, 1947, even without a Ph.D. degree. After two years of teaching, he took leave to return to Chapel Hill to finish his Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina. His dissertation, “Some Financial Aspects of Unemployment Compensation with Special Reference to Texas,” was completed during the summer of 1951 and he returned to Austin to take up his duties as a faculty
member. But he didn’t stay long. In 1953 he was off to Harvard to study for a year courtesy of a Ford Foundation Fellowship. Old-timers who remember the strict, precise, and highly dedicated chairman of economics at the time, Professor Edward Everett Hale, speculate on how the chairman viewed this on-again off-again behavior of his former student. Hale undoubtedly encouraged Carey to take the Ford grant because he saw it as a good career move. Even so, we can imagine a few words that the chairman might have spoken to the returning professor, “Time to settle down, Carey!” Well, we don’t know, but Carey never left again after his stint at Harvard.

He did settle down and it was not just to teach and do academic research. If one were forced to state the activity for which Professor Thompson is best known, the most likely answer would be his long chairmanship of the economics department. Beginning in 1959 he was appointed successively to the posts of assistant, associate, and acting chairman. Those of us who were here in that period recall that despite the qualifying adjectives, he was the de facto chairman in those years. The nominal chairman, Professor Higgins, a renowned scholar in the economics of developing countries, was away most of the time in consulting roles related to his subject. Someone else had to do the work of the department. That someone else was Carey Thompson. When Higgins resigned in 1962, Carey replaced him as chairman and served eight years in the position. He proved to be an excellent chairman, quietly and efficiently performing all of the duties of the position. He took the designation “chairman” literally. He considered it his duty to preside over a body of equals and to execute their collective will; and it was a busy time for him and the department. He was outstandingly successful as a recruiter, bringing to the department a large number of young people who were to have distinguished careers, mostly at
Texas, but some elsewhere. Despite the obvious changing of the guard that occurred during his
tenure as chairman, the change did not result in any major disputes. Building his department
while maintaining a congenial faculty was a test of his leadership that he passed with flying
colors.

His effective chairmanship over an eleven-year period took its toll on his research
activity and to a certain extent on his teaching activity as well. Prior to his effective
chairmanship Carey had been very active in research, which is reflected in his list of publications
appended. At one time he taught as many as four classes a semester. Even as chairman he
continued to be the supervisor of the 50 or so sections in freshman economics. His usual menu
of teaching consisted of principles of micro- and macroeconomics, the introductory course in
public finance, the second or higher-level course in public finance, and a graduate course in
public finance. After hiring younger faculty to teach in public finance he gladly accepted the
assignment of teaching large sections of principles of microeconomics. He seems to have
enjoyed working with beginning economics students and, we think, had a major impact on the
way they reasoned in economics. Also, as chairman he continued to attend professional
conferences and meetings, and following his chairmanship he served the department as graduate
advisor. He served on the editorial board of two economics journals and was active in a number
of professional organizations. His name appeared for many years in Who’s Who in America and
Who’s Who in American Education.

Besides his duties in the economics department, he served on university and outside
committees too numerous to list in this short resolution. The range includes Faculty Council,
Executive Committee for the UT Institute for Public Affairs, Parking and Traffic Committee, and
several committees dealing with employment, personnel, OASI, insurance, education, and budget (all in his specialties). He served for many years as the economics department’s representative to the National Bureau of Economic Research.

A major part of Carey’s service to the state was his tireless work as an unpaid consultant to state legislators, committees, and other officials. He continued to consult on issues of unemployment compensation long after he had left his post with the Texas Employment Commission, but his primary interest shifted to the pressing problem of inadequate state revenues to meet the needs of the rapidly growing state of Texas. The fear of taxation, as many officials felt it in the 1950s and early 1960s, was that any general source of revenue would slow the growth of income in the state. Carey was largely successful in his papers and oral arguments in convincing legislative committees that general sources of revenue had not slowed the growth of rapidly-growing states which did depend on general sources. Of the choices available at the time—income tax, corporate tax, sales tax—Carey came down on the side of the sales tax, not because he personally preferred it, but because he was astute enough to know that it was the best that could be done in the existing political climate. One does not need to exaggerate the role played by Carey in the outcome, but it was clear at the time that he played a major role. It was not for nothing that Governors Price Daniel and John Connally together appointed him seven times as Texas’s delegate to the annual conferences on taxation of the National Tax Association.

Students might have viewed this thin, balding and didactic professor as all work and no play. They probably would not have been surprised to learn that Carey was a top-notch bridge player, who regularly participated with Louise in duplicate bridge matches, because many consider bridge an intellectual game; and like his work, he took the game seriously. Some might
have been surprised, however, to learn that he enjoyed playing golf, and, in fact, was quite good at it. He and his close friend Wendell Gordon were regular attendees at UT baseball games and Carey kept a close eye on UT football and other sports as well. He certainly knew the players by name and the coaches in person. Ask him questions about Bibb Falk, Cliff Gustafson, Ed Price, Darrell Royal, and noted quarterbacks, running backs, pitchers or home run hitters and one would learn that he could recite the history of sports at UT with related statistics. Why, it is very likely that he knew Uncle Billy Disch! After all, he had been a student at Texas in the 1920s.

Forecasting was not his specialty in economics, but he seems to have had a sense of what might happen in football. He told Ed Price not to take the head coaching position for Longhorn football, citing the famous cautionary remark, “Beware the ides of March.” Perhaps it was not exactly the ides of March, but poor Ed was able to win only nine games in his three years as head coach and did not win a single game in 1956, the year he resigned.

In 1975 Carey went on modified service but continued to be a valued member of the department by doing what he did best and what was in the best interest of the department, teaching Economics 303, Principles of Microeconomics. He taught his last course in 1981.

An account of Carey’s life, even a brief one, would not be complete without noting his involvement in Democratic Party affairs. The leadership role he played in academic life carried over to his political life. A departmental colleague who attended some party meetings with Carey wrote about Carey’s influence on a group of West Austin Democrats.

“The group looked to him and it looked up to him. One reason was that everyone understood his total integrity. A second reason was his, call it, ‘devotion’…. In a meeting of peers Carey would sit silent for a long while, never thrusting himself forward, but merely quietly observing. At some of those meetings he would rise to speak, always with total confidence. Everyone gave rapt attention—he conveyed sincerity,
perspicacity and authority. Usually the group quickly decided. Despite his power, Carey practiced it modestly and unselfishly."

But, it was not party affairs or leadership of the Department of Economics that Carey would have ranked highest as his accomplishments. He was very proud of the role he played in advancing the causes of blacks and other minorities at the University. In 1957, for example, Barbara Smith, a young black student of obvious operatic talent, was cast in the leading role opposite a white male in a University production of *Dido and Aeneas*. The president of the University, under considerable political pressure, used his influence to have her removed from this role. As a former member of the Faculty Council, Carey stood before the group to praise the “vigor of the reaction” by a substantial number of students on behalf of Ms. Smith while attacking the administrative action of the University as unjust and unwise. Of course, it is well known that Barbara Smith Conrad became a famous opera singer and was recognized eventually by the University as a Distinguished Alumnus. He was also proud of the role he played in extending Social Security coverage to UT faculty members. Public finance was his primary interest as an academician and Social Security advocacy at a time when it was not yet universal was one way of bringing his academic thinking to the real world. Finally, colleagues remember that he stood up for principle as chairman of the economics department in the 1960s when a powerful chairman of the Board of Regents attempted to dictate the position that the University should take on some controversial political issues.

In public life, Carey Thompson made contributions as a respected consultant. In private life, he enhanced the lives of others as family man, congenial sportsman, and conscientious citizen participating vigorously in the process of political democracy. In academic life, he made important contributions as teacher, scholar, and administrator. But primarily, he will be
remembered as a teacher who touched the lives of his students. It is fitting, then, to conclude this memorial resolution with comments from several former students of Professor Thompson. A few years after Max Brown had taken Economics 302, he wrote a letter of appreciation stressing the way that Carey’s class had influenced him. “The discipline which was required to make an ‘A’ in that course set a pattern for me for the remainder of my years at Texas. The academic success I enjoyed in other areas and in other courses was largely derived, I feel, from the responsibility I learned to accept in your course.” Donald Dacy, a severe critic of teaching performance, was enrolled in the very first class Carey taught at UT. Even with the passage of fifty-two years he remembered Professor Thompson well, and wrote, “He was serious in his scholarship but unpretentious in life, and the focus of his classroom was always the topic at hand, and never the speaker before the class.” We think that all who knew Carey would agree that he ranked his ego as a poor second to his performance. Among other qualities, this one made him a very pleasant colleague, and it was a pleasure to have him with us for so long.

Larry R. Faulkner, President
The University of Texas at Austin

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

This Memorial Resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of professors Douglas C. Dacy (Chair), Stephen L. McDonald, and Daniel C. Morgan.
Publications


