In Memoriam

John A. Wilson

John A. (Jack) Wilson, professor emeritus of geology at The University of Texas at Austin died, October 21, 2008, at the age of 93. Jack was born November 3, 1914, in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He received a B.A. degree in 1937 and a Ph.D. in 1941, both from the University of Michigan. The doctoral degree was one of only two directed by the preeminent vertebrate paleontologist Dr. E. C. Case during his long career. After receiving this degree at Michigan, he taught geology and paleontology at the Idaho School of Mines, Moscow, Idaho, until he joined the U.S. Navy in 1943. He served on the aircraft carrier USS Hancock in some of the great naval battles of the Pacific Theater.

In 1946, Jack joined the faculty of the Department of Geology at UT. During the next 30 years, he taught a variety of courses, including historical geology, stratigraphy, history of geology, and a two-semester graduate course in vertebrate paleontology; supervised 16 M.A; theses; six Ph.D. dissertations; served on numerous University committees; and carried out research in vertebrate paleontology. He was known as a demanding but fair teacher.

Upon his arrival in Texas, he had the opportunity to work on the extensive and largely unstudied collection of fossil vertebrates amassed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). He began by working on material from the Permian and Triassic deposits, a continuation of his early interest in Permo-Triassic vertebrates. However, the large collections of mid-Cenozoic mammals from the Gulf Coastal Plain soon claimed his attention. This material came from several stratigraphic units that enabled him and his students to set up a biostratigraphic sequence for Miocene units of this region. Jack was also among the first vertebrate paleontologists to explore the fabulous fossil deposits of the Big Bend National Park in Texas, finding remains of ancient mammals in Paleocene (previously thought to be Cretaceous), Eocene, and Miocene rocks that had long been declared barren of fossils by other paleontologists.

When Professor Ronald K. DeFord began his extensive mapping of the geology of the Tierra Vieja, or Rimrock country in Trans-Pecos Texas, Jack seized the opportunity to obtain fossil vertebrates from well-documented stratigraphic contexts and to obtain radiometric dates for the fossiliferous deposits. In cooperation with Steve Clabaugh, Fred McDowell, and a number of students, Jack was able to establish an Eocene faunal sequence in that region. One of the more interesting discoveries was the finding of a well-preserved skull of an early primate, which he named Rooneyia after the rancher on whose land the fossil was found. Because of its excellent preservation, well-established age, and Old World affinities, it attracted worldwide attention. All told, Jack’s research produced some 24 scholarly publications on the fossil vertebrates from the Big Bend region.

During the 1970s Jack, with parties of colleagues and students, was the first to collect fossils from the still poorly accessible drainage of Alamo de Cesario Creek in the Agua Fria country, north of Big Bend National Park. The sequence of Eocene faunas he recovered, and accompanying radiometric age determinations, allowed useful correlations between the Vieja and the National Park, and correlative rocks to the north in Wyoming and Montana.

One of Jack’s most important contributions to vertebrate paleontology was the establishment of the Vertebrate Paleontology Laboratory at The University of Texas at Austin. This involved the merger of three separate
collections and acquisition of proper storage, staffing, laboratory space, equipment, and technicians for the care, preparation and study of the fossils. This has resulted in one of the preeminent research collections of fossil vertebrates available for study in the United States.

In 1957, he received the Best Paper award at the Society for Sedimentary Geology (SEPM) Dallas meeting. He was an American Association of Petroleum Geologists (AAPG) distinguished lecturer for 1960–61 and an American Geological Institute (AGI) visiting lecturer, 1960–63. Jack was a visiting researcher for a semester at the Mexican National University (Departamento de Paleontología, Instituto de Geología, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) in 1969. He and his student, Dr. Ismael Ferrusquía Villafranca, discovered Miocene mammals in Oaxaca.

Jack was a member of the Texas Academy of Science, the Society of Economic Paleontologist and Mineralogists, Society for the Study of Evolution, the Geological Society of America, Paleontological Society, the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a charter member of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology (secretary-treasurer, 1949–1951; president, 1952). In October 2000, he was awarded the highest honor of the society, the Romer-Simpson Medal, in recognition of his many contributions to vertebrate paleontology.

Jack will be remembered for his hospitality at the house on Lake Travis. His margaritas were legendary, the barbecue exceptional, and the swimming in the lake was good.

Jack’s first wife, Marge, predeceased him in 1991. He is survived by his second wife, Ruth Moore Wilson; three sons, Ken, Steve, and Chris; and their wives, Verena, Kay Nell, and Carol; seven grandchildren and five great grandchildren; and his two brothers: Sid Wilson of Omaha, Nebraska, and Bob Wilson of Dover, New Hampshire.
This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Ernest L. Lundelius, Jr. (chair), Wann Langston, Jr., and James B. Stevens.

Distributed to the dean of the Jackson School of Geosciences, the executive vice president and provost, and the president on June 22, 2009. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.