

IN MEMORIAM

JOHN J. MCKETTA JR.

John J. McKetta Jr., known to friends and colleagues as “Johnny,” passed away on January 15, 2019. He was 103.

Born October 17, 1915, in Wyano, Pennsylvania, John grew up in Pennsylvania coal towns, speaking only Ukrainian until he attended first grade. After graduating from high school, he followed in the footsteps of his hard-working father and older brother and mined coal for two years. Said John, “I couldn’t wait until I went into the coal mines...until the first day I went in the mine, and I hated it!” His brother gave him a book on coal carbonization, and John decided that he “would rather make chemicals from coal than dig coal!” His coal-mining career ended at age twenty, when he applied to fifty-four colleges for an education in chemical engineering and a job at the university to pay for the tuition. His 54th letter received a response. He attended Tri-State College (now Trine University) in Indiana. He subsequently attended graduate school at the University of Michigan where he met Helen Elisabeth Smith McKetta (aka “Pinky”), who would become his beloved wife of sixty-seven years.

Highly recruited after graduating with his Ph.D., John joined the faculty at The University of Texas as Assistant Professor in 1946; the next year he was promoted to Associate Professor. During these years, John established an extensive research program in high-pressure phase equilibrium and thermodynamics. John also placed his imprint on the Unit Operations Laboratory and Industrial Chemical Calculations (ChE 317) by introducing the concept of an English department grader for laboratory reports. This practice continued through the 1980s, with other UT engineering departments adopting this approach to developing writing skills.

From 1949 to 1951, John chaired the department. During this time, John McKetta, Kenneth Kobe, William A. Cunningham, and Matthew Van Winkle worked closely together as a team of leaders and advocates for the Department of Chemical Engineering. Dubbed the “four horsemen,” they reportedly would “march up the hill to the President’s office, bypassing all intermediate officials.” And they reportedly usually returned with favorable results.

In 1952, John took a short break from his professorship to serve as Editorial Director of *Petroleum Refiner* at Gulf Publishing Company in Houston. There he led the creation of the publication’s replacement, called *Hydrocarbon Processing*, which focused on the rapid growth of petrochemicals and refining. Returning to UT in 1954, John was invited by Dean of Engineering Willis Woolrich to serve on the Dean’s study committee. The committee urged Dean Woolrich to establish an Engineering Foundation composed of distinguished professional engineers who would solicit funds for salaries, grants, and fellowships; coordinate curriculum evaluation; and advise the Dean on current educational trends. The goal of the Foundation was to encourage new research and foster academic development in the College. The Engineering Foundation was authorized by the Board of Regents in 1955, and was fully operational by 1957. Professors Cunningham, McKetta, and Archie Straiton worked with each department to establish permanent endowments. Today, all engineering schools in the United States have such foundations to connect students with industry and fund relevant research.

It was also during this time that the tradition of an annual April picnic began at John and Pinky’s home near Mount Bonnell. Johnny and his wife Pinky are remembered as a deeply generous couple who not only opened their Austin lakeside home to students, but also welcomed everyone they met into their family. John’s picnic at the “Place on the Lake” (as dubbed by students) was a beloved tradition that continued until 2010.

From 1958 to 1963, John served once again as Chair of the Department of Chemical Engineering. He was active in developing new faculty, encouraging curriculum improvements, and soliciting funds for the UT engineering program. The 1990 publication of the history of the UT chemical engineering program entitled *Chemical Engineering at the University of Texas: 1910-1990*, said that “[Johnny’s] influence kept the common academic disease of overseriousness from ever gaining a foothold in the chemical engineering department at UT.” Johnny was known for practical jokes, throwing chalk at sleeping students, fifty-second quizzes, engineering rules of thumb, wearing his burnt-orange suit to meetings, writing his weight on the chalkboard when he was trying to go on a diet, flashing peeks of his burnt orange underpants, and inspiring his students to become the best people and engineers possible. As Chair, he was receptive to suggestions from the faculty and open to implementing new and innovative ideas. In 1958, the Chemical Engineering Evaluation Committee report was submitted, which held recommendations for the department and met the charter obligations of the Engineering Foundation formed a few years prior. This report, along with close contact with industrial leaders, led John to propose a permanent Visiting Committee. The Committee would meet annually to study and discuss department issues and make recommendations. This advisory committee (now External Advisory Council) has continued to meet annually, providing invaluable feedback and suggestions for improvement.

In 1961, John was elected National President of the American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE). Over the course of that year, usually on the weekends, he visited every local AIChE chapter in the U.S., speaking to them about the state of energy while also speaking very highly of the UT Department of Chemical Engineering. He was widely in demand to give invited talks because of his ability to entertain yet also provide audiences with useful information. His

travels proved valuable, as knowledge of the UT chemical engineering department spread nationally and the reputation of the University was greatly enhanced.

John was appointed Dean of Engineering in 1963 and held this position until 1969. In this role, John worked to strengthen the Engineering Foundation Advisory Group and continued to solicit outside funds for the College of Engineering. He used charisma and connections to share his deep loyalty for The University of Texas at Austin with engineers worldwide. He was known as a firm and good-natured leader, always with an eye for how he could better serve his students. With them in mind, John set out in the 1960s to improve pedagogy in the Department of Chemical Engineering. He hired education expert Dr. James Stice from Arkansas to come to UT Austin to teach engineering professors how to improve classroom teaching as a part of his new initiative, the Teaching Effectiveness Program. John expressed his perspective in the following comment:

When one accepts a position as a university faculty member, he should expect to write proposals for research, equipment, and special projects; to publish articles, reports, papers, and books; to keep up-to-date in his professional field; to serve on councils, boards, and committees; to maintain the best possible relations with alumni, legislators, and the business and industry of the region—in short, to be a responsible member of the community and to participate in many of its activities. But we all know that these many activities must never overshadow our greatest concern—the student. If our responsibilities to, and concern for, the student ever become secondary, we will be violating the trust we accepted when we joined the faculty.

In 1969, Harry Ransom, the Chancellor of the UT System, offered John an unprecedented third term as Dean of Engineering. Desiring to return to his fourteen Ph.D. students, his research, and the classroom, John declined the offer. Ransom then upped his offer, asking John to serve as Vice Chancellor of the UT System and assist him in starting four new universities in the upcoming year by overseeing all of the Presidents in the rest of the system. The year-long commitment was fraught with administrative challenges for the University, seeing the resignation of Harry Ransom

and Norman Hackerman (then UT Austin's President). But Johnny maintained his post in order to fulfill his duty to the University he so loved. In the year that followed his Vice Chancellorship, he received over thirty offers from universities to become their President, and many offers from oil corporations for the position of President as well. His loyalty to UT Austin prevailed once again. He was proud of what he had built and the relationships he had forged.

In the 1970s, John received numerous public-speaking requests. His reputation preceded him as an expert on energy issues, and the U.S. was facing a near-future energy shortage. Elisabeth Sharp McKetta's 2017 biography of his life, *Energy*, references his "famous energy lectures" during this time as a natural summation of his work thus far. He had a "prime vantage point to see and understand the entire issue of how America was gaining and spending energy." It was during this period that he began receiving requests from Presidents of the United States, starting in 1972 with President Richard Nixon. Nixon appointed John chair of the newly established National Energy Policy Commission, which was composed of seven national energy experts. During the next presidential term, President Gerald Ford asked for John's advice, and John happily shared his opinion that "he wanted tighter regulations on how American citizens used energy, and he wanted looser regulations on how American chemical engineers could create it." When Ronald Reagan was governor of California, he Reagan sought John's advice, and when he was elected president, he continued to call upon John for his expert advice on energy and how America should use and generate it. Other requests came from Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush.

During the 1980s, the Department of Chemical Engineering at The University of Texas at Austin began a steady rise in quality to become a top-five department in the country. Current UT Austin President Greg Fenves said of John's influence on the department: "One can follow the arc of success of the Department of Chemical Engineering and see that John was one of the enablers

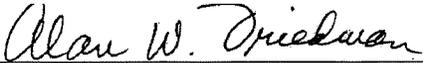
of that.” Current Department Chair Tom Truskett shared his view of John McKetta’s involvement with students and faculty members: “He believed in people. He had high expectations of them, and he was cheerleading them every step of the way.” In 1989, Johnny was awarded the Hoover Medal, which recognizes “great, unselfish, non-technical services by engineers to humanity.”

His sense of humor and work ethic touched and inspired thousands of students and colleagues. UT’s Texas Exes named John first on its 2013 list of the Top 10 Best and Most Inspiring Professors. John’s journey from coal miner to noted leader in chemical engineering has been the subject of hundreds of articles and interviews, a biography, and a documentary film. He was editor of a sixty-eight-volume encyclopedia, author or editor of twenty other books, author of 400 technical papers, and elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1970. Thousands of his former students raised more than \$28 million to celebrate his contributions to their lives and to chemical engineering. In 2012, The University of Texas at Austin rechristened his home department the John J. McKetta Jr. Department of Chemical Engineering.

Above all, he dedicated his life to his former students, whom he phoned each year on their birthdays. John McKetta was deeply devoted to the University and its students. To this day, students don burnt-orange t-shirts with John’s message on the back: “A student you befriend is your friend forever.”



Gregory L. Fennes, President
The University of Texas at Austin



Alan W. Friedman, Secretary
The General Faculty

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Thomas Edgar (Chair), Roger Bonnezaze, Michael Poehl, and Thomas Truskett.