

Memorial to Thad G. McLaughlin 1913–2002

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Thad McLaughlin, a retired U.S. Geological Survey hydrologist, died September 25, 2002, in Denver, Colorado, at the age of 88. Thad made major contributions to the understanding of groundwater resources in Kansas, Colorado, North Dakota, and the Middle East during his long career. He began his geologic career with the Kansas Geological Survey as a groundwater geologist in 1939. In 1942, he joined the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and became the District Geologist for the USGS Ground Water Branch in Colorado in 1951. In 1967, he was appointed Regional Hydrologist for the Rocky Mountain Region of the USGS, and in 1972 he was appointed Assistant Director of the USGS in the Central Region. He was instrumental in implementing the USGS training center.

The University of Kansas conferred the Ph.D. on two candidates in science in 1939. One of the newly-minted Ph.D.s was Thad G. McLaughlin, and the other was Clyde W. Tombaugh. Both achieved international recognition in their chosen careers. Dr. Tombaugh's discovery of the planet Pluto is said to have been one of the triumphs of modern astronomy.

Thad's route to academic achievement was extraordinarily difficult. He was born with cataracts so severe that his vision was limited to peripheral. From the time he entered grade school until he completed his graduate studies there were neither surgical procedures nor optical remedies to correct his vision. He did well in school, however, with the assistance of a loving family and caring friends who read to him, understanding and helpful teachers, a keen mind, undaunted determination, and, in later years, a magnifying glass. When called upon to read in the first grade, he pretended to read, but actually recited the passages from memory. He had memorized the entire book.

Thad was born October 16, 1913, near Valley Center, Kansas. After graduating from high school in 1931, he enrolled at the University of Wichita, graduating in 1935 with a major in geology and a minor in history. He then entered the University of Kansas graduate school, majoring in geology and physics. Dr. Landes, head of the Department, quickly recognized Thad's exceptional abilities and selected him as his assistant instructor in mineralogy, physical geology, petroleum geology, and field geology. While in college, Thad was elected to membership in the honorary science fraternities, Sigma Gamma Epsilon, Delta Epsilon, and Sigma Xi.

Thad's long-time ambition was to work for the United States Geological Survey. While in graduate school, he took the U.S. Civil Service Commission's exam for geologists and passed with



flying colors. Unable to meet the Civil Service Commission's vision requirements, he was denied a job with the USGS upon completion of graduate studies. Thad did the next best thing—he went to work for the Kansas Geological Survey on cooperative groundwater studies in the USGS Lawrence office. By this time, surgical procedures for cataracts were becoming available to improve vision. Following surgeries in 1941 and 1942, Thad was able to meet Civil Service Commission requirements for vision and was soon an employee of the USGS. In fact, 1942 was a banner year for Thad: beneficial eye surgery, realization of his long-time goal of USGS employment, and, he married Phyllis F. Forshee.

Thad and Phyllis remained in Lawrence until 1945 when he was asked to transfer to Denver to help with a new groundwater program. The Colorado program grew rapidly. By 1971, it was large enough to merit District status, and Thad was promoted to District Geologist. A new position of Branch Area Chief was created in 1959; Thad was selected to fill that position for the Ground-Water Branch in the Rocky Mountain Area and moved to the Region Office in Lakewood.

Thad's first foreign assignment was to review the Azraq project in Jordan for the United Nations in 1963. This opened a new chapter in Thad's career. For the next several years, and even after his retirement from the Survey, he gave technical assistance to countries in the Middle East, including Greece, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

By the early 1970s, the surgical procedures to remedy severe cataract problems had greatly improved, so Thad had his final eye operation, involving the implantation of a plastic lens in each eye, resulting for the first time in near normal vision. With Division reorganization in 1965, The Branch Area Chief positions were eliminated, and Thad became Staff Hydrologist in charge of projects and reports in the Rocky Mountain Region. In 1967, Thad became Regional Hydrologist, Rocky Mountain Region, where he remained until 1972, when he was promoted to Assistant Director, Rocky Mountain Region. He was the first person to serve in that position. He retired from the Survey in 1975 and joined Tetra Tech Inc., where he supplied his expertise to the solution of groundwater problems in the Middle East. He recruited hydrologists for the Omani Public Authority for Water Resources. Many of the recruits were former USGS retirees. He retired for a second time in 1985.

Thad was a Senior Fellow of the Geological Society of America, President of the American Water Resources Association, and was listed in American Men of Science and in Who's Who in the West. He received the University of Kansas Erasmus Haworth Distinguished Alumni Award. He was also given the Department of Interior's Meritorious Service Award to recognize his contributions to groundwater hydrology and technical administration of USGS water resource programs.

Thad is survived by his wife, Phyllis, and his sister, Marcia, who lives in Tucson, Arizona. It was a great privilege and honor to have been his friend and colleague.

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