

Professor continues work at 72

by Cheryl Burke
Battalion Reporter

Employees of Texas A&M are required to retire at age 70. But Dr. J. George H. Thompson, 72, has no intention of retiring and some of his former students have no intention of letting him.

Thompson, who taught mechanical engineering at Texas A&M for 45 years, has been allowed to continue his work with students and faculty through a gift fund established by former students. Although he no longer teaches, he goes to work at 8 a.m. every day to his small office in Zachry Engineering Center.

Students now go to Thompson for help, advice, counseling, or just a good talk over a cup of coffee. He works with young faculty members as well, trying to close what he calls a "cleavage" between old and new staff.

Dr. Thomas Kozik, professor of mechanical engineering and an associate of Thompson's for 20 years, describes Thompson as an "ebullient, optimistic, young old man."

"Dr. Thompson is the perfect prototype of a university professor," Kozik says. "He looks like one, sounds like one, walks like one. He considers his profession as a University teacher — he does his best to produce educated, aware young men and women. He has the enviable

quality of being able to motivate his students, and pull out all their potential to expand them and expand their minds."

Thompson says a University professor has two purposes. "First he must pass useful infor-

"Coming to Texas A&M was one of the few great things I ever did." — J. George H. Thompson

mation on to the next generation — that's instruction," he says. "Then he must participate with the student in a maturing process. When he combines instruction and maturity — that is education.

"I think Texas A&M over-emphasizes instruction. Maturing is a result of the impact of personalities on personalities. It's many cups of coffee and long talks with students. Often the teacher may be the recipient of more value than the student. The huge classes here make that nearly impossible."

Thompson also says today's students must approach learning differently than they would have decades ago, and teachers must adjust to the changes.

"Fifty years ago, you could give an engineering student all of the knowledge he would reasonably have to know in his lifetime. Now, five years after graduation, a young engineer could be confronted with a problem concerning knowledge that was not even known to man when he was in college.

"We need to teach them to study by themselves, to be continually learning — not to make them encyclopedias. We have to cover the basic principles, give them solid basic theory first, and then use comprehensive details as a tool. They have to be prepared for jobs 20 years from now, not just for the challenges of tomorrow."

Thompson himself spent seven years in industry after graduating from Pennsylvania State University in 1933. He worked in machine shops in Philadelphia for six months and then worked for Ludlow Manufacturing Co. in Pennsylvania until 1938, when he began teaching at Texas A&M.

"Coming to Texas A&M was one of the few great things I ever did," Thompson says.

During his 45 years at Texas A&M, Thompson served in several capacities. He was head of the design division of mechanical engineering and was director of the University Honors Program. He was adviser to the campus chapters of Phi Eta Sigma, a freshman honor fraternity; Pi Tau Sigma, a mechanical engineering honor society; and Tau Beta Pi, an engineering honor society. He worked with the Undergraduate Fellows Program as well as the National Science Foundation, an organization of the top juniors in secondary school science programs

across the country.

He is now president of the Texas A&M chapter of Phi Kappa Phi and regional vice president of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

Thompson's desk is covered with the designs of some machinery he is working on for DOW. He also is a consultant for AMACO, and has traveled to Tulsa, Okla., several times this year to teach a short course to employees of the company.

He also has had several awards named in his honor. One is given yearly to an untenured faculty member at Texas A&M who has shown compassion to students and high quality in teaching. Another is presented to an outstanding senior

Students now go to Dr. Thompson for help, advice, counseling, or just a good talk over a cup of coffee.

in mechanical engineering, recognizing distinguished achievement in machine design and mechanics.

The Gulf-Southwest region of ASME presents a regional award in Thompson's name to an outstanding young faculty member exhibiting those qualities for which Thompson is recognized — compassion and excellence in teaching.

Thompson will readily admit that he has had his share of disagreements with administrators and other faculty, but he holds

fast to his belief that his purpose is to satisfy the needs of the students, not the administrators.

One of his favorite practices in his classes was what he called his "sermonettes." These were short lectures on various topics, such as getting along with bosses and co-workers. He also provided a "baby bonus," an extra letter grade on final grades to any student who had a baby during the semester he was taking Thompson's class.

He is called "Alphabet," because of his abundance of initials, but another of the names his co-workers have applied to him has a bit more of a story.

The nameplate on his office door reads "Flash," a nickname which was the result of his habit of snapping to attention when addressed and the fact that he recently lost several pounds and a few inches around his waist without adjusting his pants to fit.

"I was so embarrassed when that happened," Thompson says. "I went straight home and I thought I would never be able to show my face here again. But the next day, I managed to come to work, and they had taken my name off the door and had the name Flash up there. It usually takes three weeks to get a nameplate made, but they had that one overnight. Now I can see that it was funny, and I'm not embarrassed by it anymore."

Thompson says he considers slowing down in the future, but he just enjoys everything he does too much to give it up.

"I feel that my life has been well-spent and purposeful, but now I'm able to take time out for my wife and myself. There isn't anything I have to do, I can just take time out and enjoy life."



photo by Alma L. Echols

Floating cares away

Senior management major Mike Peterson from Dallas sips on a soda while relaxing in the fountain behind Harrington Complex. He is accompanied by junior finance major John Cook, also from Dallas.

TV reporter notices changes in network

United Press International

NEW YORK — Neil Hickey, who has covered a television news beat longer than just about any reporter in the business, has watched the networks rise like Rome, and while he doesn't expect them to fall the same way, he says their day of ruling tv world definitely is over.

"When I first came in, we had this network-affiliate structure and it somehow seemed that was what God wanted — three networks with about 200 affiliates each and a little batch of independents," he said.

"We exist now in a period of TV history that's a whirlpool of change. The three networks are losing audience, there's no gain-saying that nobody has quantified exactly where it's all going."

Hickey is New York Bureau Chief for TV Guide — the world's first television specialty magazine — a publication that

certainly has not suffered the fate of the networks where audience is concerned.

TV Guide, owned and operated by conservative millionaire Walter H. Annenberg, was born April 3, 1953, with a circulation of 1.5 million and first-year ad revenues of \$760,358. Today, its circulation tops 17 million and its advertising take last year was \$241.5 million.

Hickey has been aboard since 1964, and in that time he has written articles probing the effect of television on everything from children to the conduct of war, politics and presidential elections.

Above all things, he has seen change at a speed unprecedented in history.

Much of that change has had to do with a phenomenon called cable, and Hickey said while it has fragmented network audiences, it also has multiplied the audience for public broadcast-

ing by giving it an FCC-mandated "free ride."

"About two-thirds of them (PBS stations) are little UHF stations you'd have to be a safe-cracker to find on the dial in a lot of parts of this country," he said. "But as soon as cable comes into the area, public stations become just one more button to push."

Hickey said network audiences are down from a 1978 high of 93 percent to 80 percent and "by their own figures they're going to go down to about 65 percent by 1990," but he advised nobody to plan a wake.

"I don't think anybody foresees the passing of the networks, but the change is going to be enormous and the (change in) program content could be great," he said. "It's an evolutionary thing that's going on right now and that's absolutely fascinating."