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Photo: Jane D. Albritton

Claude C. Albritton, Jr.
(1913 - 1988)

Memorial Issue

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"IDEA OF TIME" - THE IGC SYMPOSIUM

Dr. Albritton, to whom this issue of Earth Sciences History is dedicated, had a life-long fascination with the concept of time. In 1980 when he published "The Abyss of Time: Changing Conceptions of the Earth's Antiquity after the 16th Century," Professor Albritton opened that work with the opinion that he was confident that someday the concept of geological time would be acclaimed as one of the more wonderful contributions from natural history to general thought. He continued "the vast extension of our world in time ... has surely been no less revolutionary than the concept of vast stellar space emerging after Copernican astronomy." As he pointed out, it has not been only the scientists who have acknowledged geological time, but so too have the artists and poets. Recall, for example, the 1806 painting by Charles Willson Peale, entitled "The Exhumation of the Mastodon," that reflected the contemporary public appeal for the prehistoric; this was well before anyone had certain knowledge of the true age of the earth.

Perhaps the preoccupation with the notion of geologic time arises from the tension between "time arrested," as shown by a particular fossil specimen or rock outcrop, and "time elapsed," as recorded by a thick geologic sequence. On the one hand, consider a fresh bedding plane containing Cambrian trilobites that have not seen the light of day for half a billion years, and on the other hand, recall the yawning chasm of the Grand Canyon displaying thousands of feet of layered rock stretching across the geologic eons.

Those of us interested in the history of geology are also preoccupied both by "time arrested" as manifested by specific individuals and their accomplishments in our chosen field, and by "time elapsed" as represented by the history of the discipline itself. Contrast that last photograph of Wegener "arrested in time" shortly before his death with the "elapsed time" of the decade of the 1960s when key articles appeared that provided the evidence for sea floor-spreading and substantiation of Wegener's drifting continents.

It seems, then, both for the study of Earth history and for the history of that study, the task is to arrange the disconnected fragments which record the arbitrary flux of nature and people's lives into a unifying regular order that will provide sufficient meaning to allay our very human anxiety over what otherwise appear to be random occurrences -- ourselves and the rest of the physical world -- in deep space and deep time. The papers in this issue deal with different aspects of this human effort to make some sense out of the growing realization that both the Earth and humans have a long shared history.

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The geologist Claude C. Albritton over the years developed many facets of his chosen field. Not the least of these were his endeavors as an historian and a philosopher of science. In particular, he made signal contributions to clearer understanding of the mystery of geologic time. His last effort in this field was in planning, with his colleagues Cecil J. Schneer and Martin Guntau, a symposium to be presented at the 28th International Geological Congress. This was part of the overall program arranged by past-President Gordon Y. Craig of INHIGEO (International Commission on the History of the Geological Sciences) and coordinated by President Clifford M. Nelson of USHIGEO (United States National Committee for History of Geology).

Sadly, Claude Albritton died eight months before the symposium was presented. Dr. Léo Laporte graciously volunteered to carry out Claude Albritton's remaining duties and for much of the session presided, ably filling a role thrust upon him.

Until the time of Dr. Albritton's death, no plans had been made to publish, yet it seemed important that the efforts of so many people not be limited to those who attended the Congress. Further, it was appropriate that the History of Earth Sciences Society acknowledge a debt to Claude Albritton. Because of its international character, the society was organized to function primarily by mail, yet to adopt the Constitution and start the group formally, a meeting was needed. At the Geological Society of America meeting in New Orleans in 1982, Claude presided as President *pro tem*; he also served as first Chairman of the nominating committee, ensuring that we were properly launched.

The decision to publish this symposium could not have been made without the total cooperation of James E. Brooks and the Institute for the Study of Earth and Man (ISEM), Southern Methodist University. The notation on the cover that volume 8 (2) is a joint publication is a small indication of the moral support, wise council, and financial underpinning provided by ISEM.

First thanks for making this particular issue possible goes to B. H. Breithaupt of the University of Wyoming. The number had been promised for a symposium dealing with the history of vertebrate paleontology. However, when apprised of our desire to prepare a memorial issue as promptly as possible, Dr. Breithaupt and his prospective authors generously relinquished the issue.

Second thanks go to those who spoke in session K(1) of the Congress. It is one thing to prepare a talk and quite another to agree to produce a manuscript for publication within a short deadline. Everyone -- from three continents -- responded to my appeal; drafts of seven manuscripts were in my hands at or before the Congress.

On July 10, 1989, an audience of nearly 200 gathered at the Convention Center in Washington, D.C. to hear Guntau, Figueiroa, Hamilton, Carozzi, Yochelson, Milanovsky, and Schneer, speak on various aspects of geologic time; illness at home prevented Prof. K. S. Murty from attending, though his abstract was published by the Congress. By any measure one can devise, the symposium was lively, generating considerable discussion from those attending.

Meanwhile, as a result of the support of ISEM, it was possible to publish more pages than normal. Clearly, there were other aspects to the study of geologic time which could not be encompassed within the confines of the Congress symposium. Again, I appealed for assistance, and again colleagues responded. The papers by Brush, Heatherington, Kitts, Rainger, and Tracey are a result. Because of additional papers and minor revisions by speakers, the order of papers is revised from that presented in the symposium.

Even with these additions, it seems evident that the final words on the various implications of geologic time have not yet been written. It is a subject that is bound to continue to fascinate both historian and geologist. If the general population and the decision makers of our planet had a better understanding of the human time span and the implications of our activities, some changes in our daily life would surely result. In that regard, Claude Albritton would have been the first to urge that this symposium be distributed as widely as possible. In fact, it was his original intent that the symposium have more of a focus on geoarchaeology rather than the long span of geologic time; perhaps on another occasion, this will be possible.

Appreciation is also due Léo Laporte for discussions over the years on this topic, for acting as a reviewer of many of the papers, and for sharing a fascinating notion he presented at the start of the symposium. President Brooks raised money to pay the printer, but it was Jim Brooks, a colleague and friend of Claude Albritton, who has written to help us place in historical perspective the contributions of our late friend.

Finally, Editor Gerald Friedman and especially Managing Editor Sheila Kopaska-Merkel put all the pieces together. They carefully noted my requests and manifold ideas transmitted through many letters and frantic telephone calls, and then went ahead and did the work professionally. When one sits back to reflect, less than six months from presentation to publication is pretty good time!

Everyone cooperated to the maximum extent. I think Claude would have been as pleased with that aspect as he would have been with the final product.

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Claude Albritton moved on to new ground on November 1, 1988 after a few days' illness. His last book was finished and his portion of the Qattara Depression paper done and passed to others. No projects remained unfinished, except those in his fertile imagination. He had been in good health and enjoying life, active and vital until felled suddenly by the failure of a heart whose work was done. He was a complicated but remarkably simple person. His passion was new ideas - or new ways of looking at old ideas. His intellectual style was, at its root, uncomplicated, direct and elegant in its simplicity. This mindset was reflected in his lifestyle which was, also, simple but elegant; simple in his wants and desires, elegant in the quality he demanded of himself and of others.

Claude Albritton was born in Corsicana, Texas, in 1913. He grew up there, and, when he was ready to enter Southern Methodist University in 1929, the family moved to Dallas. Undergraduate years at SMU were those of contact with a strong teaching faculty in many fields. Ellis Shuler in Geology and Edwin Foscoe in Geography were especially stimulating, and his intellect began to concentrate on these subjects. Graduation from SMU with majors in these subjects prepared him well for graduate work in Geology at Harvard University. There he sampled widely across the geological sciences but was particularly influenced by Marland Billings, under whom his dissertation research in Trans-Pecos Texas was carried on, and by Kirk Bryan, with whom he did field work in Trans-Pecos Texas and New Mexico. It was here that his interest in landforms began and, of equal importance, his interest in the geology of archaeological sites; these were interests to which he returned many times in his professional career.

Completion of the Ph.D. paved the way for his return in 1936 to a faculty position in the Department of Geology at S.M.U. World War II interrupted many lives, including Albritton's. Service with the U.S. Geological Survey in the Military Geology Branch and in the Strategic Minerals Branch provided the opportunity to work with many distinguished geologists. Among them were Bill Rubey, Tom Nolan, Tom Lovering and Jim Gilully, with all of whom he continued lively professional and personal contacts throughout his career. In 1946, after the war, Claude resumed his faculty position at S.M.U. and when, in 1949 the SMU Chapter of Phi Beta Kappa was established, he was a charter member.

Claude was the consummate academician - a superb scholar-teacher and administrator. It is entirely safe to say that the very significant gains in the quality of academic programs at SMU during the decades of the fifties, sixties and seventies were largely the result of his leadership. These include the building of a strong program in the geological sciences, the acquisition of an equally strong department in archaeology from another institution, the launching and nourishing of five, now-strong, doctoral programs, the building of a distinguished science library, with especial strengths in the geological sciences, the acquisition of the DeGolyer Geological Library and the DeGolyer Western Library (history, economics, politics) and even the building of accompanying physical facilities for the sciences (The N. L. Heroy Science Hall) and for the libraries (The Science Information Center).

Besides these largely administrative accomplishments, he was a superb teacher at all levels, from Freshman to Ph.D. student. Organized and articulate presentation of often new information characterized his lectures. The stimulating and seminal questions, coupled with writing projects that demanded clear and parsimonious expression, were the hallmarks of his seminars. Occam's Razor was his weapon, and the Principle of Simplicity, his guide.

Despite high and unrelenting standards, he was held in

universal respect and affection by his students. His relationships with them were life-long. Many sought him out for personal and professional counsel, long after they were well-established in their own careers.

It was research, of course, that fueled his teaching. And his research interests and writings ranged widely. In the bibliography that follows, for example, titles include papers on structural geology, paleontology, and the geology of impact craters. Most would agree, however, that Claude's most significant contributions are in the history and philosophy of geology. The several books that bear his name are in this area. *The Fabric of Geology* was, of course, the Seventy-Fifth anniversary volume of The Geological Society of America. *The Abyss of Time* was runner-up for the best book in science for The National Book Award. The significance of these books lies in the fact that they examine the fundamental philosophies which undergird the earth sciences and trace the history of these basic ideas and their impact on the science.

Throughout his career Claude was also interested in the geological interpretation of archaeological sites. This led to important field work and ensuing publications in the American Southwest and in Egypt and Ethiopia. Here, as in The History of Geology section, he played a key role in the founding of The Geological Society of America section that deals with Archaeological Geology. It was this sense of the importance of interdisciplinary research that led to the founding of The Institute for the Study of Earth and Man, embracing anthropology, geological sciences and statistics, at his academic home.

Although he has left many tangible monuments in scientific papers and books written, in institutions built, and in libraries nurtured to a high level of quality and recognition, Claude's greatest monuments are in the lives he touched - students, colleagues, and friends.

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