Reflections of Murray F. Hawkins, Jr.

On joining the petroleum engineering faculty at LSU in 1947 I had no idea that I had thereby become a part of a most unique and dynamic industry, one which in a few decades would routinely commit itself to operations comparable perhaps with launching and recovering space shuttles on a daily basis, and one which would come to hold important, even critical, economic and political implications for the world. It was about this time that U.S. energy usage of petroleum first exceeded that of coal and United States entered the Age of Petroleum. My professional career since then has been spent in keeping abreast of and making some contributions to rapid developments in petroleum engineering and its attendant technology and imparting some of this knowledge to students.

By 1947 the important scientific foundations of petroleum engineering had been established, and happily for me, were contained in a relatively small number of publications, as I was entering the profession with no formal coursework in the area. Further, industry operations were just starting to utilize the established fundamentals and replacing the not-inconsiderable practical wisdom of tool pushers and superintendents. Petroleum engineering was in fact very largely a post-World War II phenomenon, and at that stage of development coincidentally well suited to many veterans who had become used to an outdoor, rough-and-ready sort of life. In view of the above, I was able to enter the profession near “ground level.”

LSU was among the first universities to offer a petroleum engineering curriculum, in the late 1920s. As chemical engineering grew out of chemistry, petroleum engineering at LSU was spawned by geology. The curriculum has retained accreditation by the Engineer’s Council of Professional Development since accreditation started in 1934. For several years during the 1950s, enrollment in the petroleum engineering curriculum was the largest among curricula offered by the College of Engineering, not to be so again until the
Concerning the future, there are many predictions for the industry, both for the United States and for the world. The gloomiest extend the Age of Petroleum well into the next century, and the more optimistic to the end of that century and beyond. Basic to its continuance is a fact marked by Dr. Edward Teller in discussing oil and the atom: “A gallon of gasoline is a convenient, concentrated, easily portable package of energy which will not be easily replaced.”

The petroleum industry and LSU’s petroleum engineering curriculum are today far advanced from those of 1947. It is a pleasure to see the growth and vitality of LSU’s Department of Petroleum Engineering since I retired in 1977. Both it and the industry are, I believe, well equipped to handle future changes and challenges.