

Wilson M. Laird (1915-1997)

Wilson Morrow Laird, State Geologist of North Dakota from 1941 until 1969, died on May 14, 1997 in Kerrville, Texas at the age of 82. He is survived by three sons, Douglas, David, and Donald, and one daughter, Dorothy. He was preceded in death by Reba (Latimer) Laird, his wife of 50 years who died in 1989, and by Margaret (Ray) Laird, who died in 1996.

Born in Erie, Pennsylvania on March 4, 1915, Wilson Laird received his B.A. from Muskingum College in 1936, his M.A. from the University of North Carolina in 1938, and his Ph.D from the University of Cincinnati in 1942. He was also awarded honorary D.Sc. [doctorate of science] degrees by Muskingum College in 1964 and by the University of North Dakota in 1984. Wilson Laird came to North Dakota in September, 1940, from the University of Cincinnati and he was named State Geologist in 1941 at the age of 26. Wilson was nationally known and respected for his work in geology. His research included work in Ohio, Pennsylvania, North Dakota, Minnesota, Alaska, Manitoba, Germany, and Turkey. He worked as a petroleum geologist for Carter Oil in Montana and for Hudson Bay Oil & Gas in Calgary. He also consulted for the USGS and for Beers and Heroy.

Wilson published extensively on subjects as diverse as biostratigraphy, regional geology, limnology, mineral deposits, glacial geology, groundwater geology, and petroleum geology. His work included a great number of diverse geologic projects in the Williston Basin of North Dakota involving rocks ranging in age from Paleozoic through Cenozoic.

Wilson received many honors during his long and distinguished career. In 1948 he shared (with his friend and colleague, Larry Sloss) the President's Award of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists for work on the Devonian stratigraphy of Montana and he received the AAPG Public Service Award in 1981. In 1992 he received the first Arthur Gray Leonard Medal, the highest honor awarded by the University of North Dakota Department of Geology, which he chaired for many years.

Wilson served as Vice Chairman of the Interstate Oil Compact Commission and as Chairman of the Research Committee of the IOCC. In 1948 he was elected Vice President of the Association of American State Geologists and in 1950 he was elected President. He also served as President of the North Dakota Academy of Science for the 1952 term.

Wilson Laird is credited with the foresight that oil would one day be discovered in the Williston Basin in North Dakota. To insure that North Dakota avoided the problems that had beset some oil-producing states, he had legislation introduced in 1941 that resulted in a model oil-and-gas conservation law being in place ten years prior to the discovery of oil in North Dakota. He also recognized the necessity of establishing a facility for the storage and study of oil and gas core and samples.

In 1980, the State of North Dakota recognized Wilson Laird's diligent efforts in collecting the information obtained from oil and gas wells by naming a new core repository after him. This North Dakota Geological Survey building is located on the campus of the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks.

During his tenure, the North Dakota Geological Survey grew from a staff of one (himself) to over 40 employees. The larger staff was needed to enforce the oil and gas

regulations and rules and to provide information and answers to the increasing number of questions concerning the geology of the state following the discovery of oil in 1951. Wilson initiated several new programs during the 1950's, including the innovative County Geology and Groundwater Resource mapping program, a cooperative program with the U.S. Geological Survey and the State Water Commission. This was the first program of its kind in the United States and it was adopted as a model by many states. Wilson also began many subsurface studies of the oil-productive Paleozoic and Mesozoic rocks and economic studies of the mineral resources of North Dakota.

In 1969, Wilson left the North Dakota Geological Survey and moved to Washington, DC to become Director of the Office of Oil and Gas in the Department of Interior. He subsequently served as Director of the Committee on Exploration of the American Petroleum Institute. Wilson retired from that position in 1979, but remained active for many years as a consulting geologist from his home in Kerrville, Texas and his summer home near Bemidji, Minnesota.

More than any other person, Wilson Laird shaped the North Dakota Geological Survey into the kind of agency it is today. A Memorial Service was held at the Alumni Center at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks on July 3, 1997.

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