MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS EUGENE N. CAMERON

Eugene N. Cameron, Charles R. Van Hise Professor Emeritus of Geology and Geophysics, passed away on April 21, 1999 in Madison, Wisconsin. Thus ended a remarkably full life that had been dedicated to the geosciences, public outreach and education, and his family.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia on August 10, 1910, the son of a lumber businessman, Gene’s family moved often and he attended 13 different elementary and secondary schools in the East and South. Throughout his childhood he received encouragement toward higher education from his parents even though neither had attended college. In 1927 Gene enrolled at New York University, receiving his B.S. in 1932, and then went to Columbia for graduate work under Paul Kerr, completing his M.S. in 1934 and his Ph.D. in 1936.

Gene’s interest in geology was by accident; he was late registering at NYU and all the biology courses were full. Two engaging geology teachers soon had Gene hooked; thus began his lifelong appreciation of excellence in teaching. His career as a lecturer (’36-’39) and instructor (’40-42’) at Columbia ended when Gene decided to support the war effort by joining the U.S. Geological Survey’s mineral resource studies.

Gene became one of the world’s experts on pegmatites (deposits bearing rare elements) which culminated with a seminal monograph in 1949. This type of mineral deposit became the first of six scientific areas to be forever changed by the hand and mind of Gene Cameron.

During World War II, the Department of Geology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison shrank to three faculty members, so that between 1945 and 1950 R.C. Emmons oversaw 10 new appointments, including Cameron's in 1947. Gene revived one of Wisconsin's long standing traditions of strength in the study of mineral deposits.

Gene Cameron is perhaps best known for his three decades of work, begun in the 1950’s, on the Bushveld Complex in South Africa. This is arguably the single greatest ore deposit system in the world and Cameron and his students published numerous papers, still cited today. His collection of Bushveld samples was unique and was donated to the Smithsonian before his death. Parallel with his interest in a wide variety of ore deposits, Gene was one of a handful of scientists worldwide who brought the science of reflected light microscopy to maturity. His book “Ore Microscopy” was widely used in the 1960s.

His reputation in reflected light microscopy propelled him into a role as a principal investigator examining samples returned from the moon by the Apollo missions between 1968-71. As research instrumentation advanced, in 1966 Gene brought the first electron probe microanalyzer instrument to Wisconsin.

He made his final foray into a new area of science when he was asked to collaborate with a nuclear fusion technology program here on campus. Although fusion reactors have yet to reach the energy break-even point, one of most likely eventual fusion fuel mixes requires the use of a rare isotope of Helium. This material is negligible on Earth but is present in the solar wind and has been, over the eons, implanted in portions of the lunar surface. Between 1986 and 1992 Gene served as a consultant to the fusion program as he undertook a reconnaissance study of the amount and distribution of this isotope of Helium on the moon.

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Gene had an abiding interest in resource issues and, in particular, communicating to the public the importance of natural resources, our reliance upon them, and the realities of their distribution and extraction. From this was born the yearly course that Gene taught until his retirement – Minerals As A Public Problem. Enrollment waxed and waned over the years but Gene felt that this was a critically important subject especially as the world became more technologically dependent and the numbers of humans with more than subsistence farming needs increased exponentially. Gene then wrote and published a book on the subject after his retirement -- *At the Crossroads: The Mineral Problems of the United States.*

Over time, Gene became involved in campus governance. As chair of the Department of Geology from 1955 to 1960, he presided over another surge of growth. In 1966 he began a term on the University Committee as the Vietnam War came to the campus with increasingly violent protests. During the most violent period in ‘67-‘68, Gene was chairman of the committee and so saw much intense overtime duty dealing with a vociferous student movement on the one hand, and a deeply divided faculty on the other. The campus was polarized to a degree never before or since faced by a University Committee. Cameron was a steadfast chair, earning both praise and scorn. He held that it was the committee's responsibility to maintain academic freedom for all viewpoints, and to do so, the university must not ally itself with one particular political cause. History shows that the committee succeeded, and in the aftermath of those tempestuous days, most of the faculty felt a debt of gratitude to the Cameron committee.

Gene Cameron believed, first and foremost, that good teaching was THE most important aspect of any university and that it should not be taken for granted nor discounted and relegated to a secondary consideration when evaluating the contributions of faculty. The legacy of a college or university is ultimately the students it produces and to a significant degree these students’ successes are traceable to the education and mentorship that they received during their undergraduate and graduate careers.

From 1951 to 1981, Gene advised a total of 78 students in their M.S. and Ph.D. degree programs. He worked alongside his students, burning the midnight oil when necessary. He became known affectionately as “SuperGene,” a play on the term describing a type of especially valuable ore deposit.

Gene Cameron is survived by his wife of 59 years Adrienne, a daughter, Beatrice, and two sons, James and Donald. Gene’s family and colleagues alike will miss him greatly.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
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