

Floyd W. Thomas  
1938 - 1990

PROFESSOR OF MECHANICAL ENGINEERING, EMERITUS

B.S.M.E., University of South Carolina; M.S.M.E., North Carolina State  
College of Agriculture and Engineering of the University of North Carolina;  
Ph.D., Mechanical Engineering, North Carolina State University, May 27, 1967  
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1969 To March 2, 1990  
Birth: April 7, 1938; Death: March 4, 1990

As Department Chair, but with all the charm of the southern gentleman that he was, Floyd welcomed me to Cal State Fullerton. Afterwards, he was a constant friend, a mentor and a colleague. His warmth and enthusiasm were powerful inducements to join the young Department of Mechanical Engineering, and his advice provided sure guidance in the academic environment. I shall always remember him first for these qualities.

Beyond his charm and friendship, and beyond his primary allegiance to his Department, Floyd was very much an early leader in the development of the Engineering unit as a whole. I think of Floyd as our ambassador to the campus. When not in class or at work on administrative duties, he was "out and about," serving on University committees, representing us at the Faculty Senate, or simply having lunch with colleagues from other departments and schools. He also liked to go out for a run with a friend, or a stroll which allowed him to talk quietly about business important to the other person. I'm sure he thought of these activities as just the small pleasures in life to be enjoyed, but to me they were an invaluable service to the School. Always a realist, he had a particular ability to see all sides of issues, so that he could express our position clearly to the University community, but also accept and convey other views back to his Engineering colleagues. But while attending his own administrative brief, he never forgot his own unit. He was a constant reminder that we in ECS were not alone, that our interests were firmly bound to those of a larger body, the University. He was a good representative.

In spite of his readiness to accept administrative responsibilities, Floyd loved to teach. His primary teaching specialization was in the thermal science area, particularly in the area of thermodynamics. He taught both applied and theoretical thermodynamics courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. However, he began to branch off from his major teaching discipline very early in his teaching career at Fullerton. He was involved with the early development of the senior Mechanical Engineering laboratory in the dynamics and controls area. Also, at a very early date he became active in the computer applications area of engineering. He began teaching courses in digital computation, numerical methods, engineering probability and engineering analysis. Going beyond the norms, he was one of the first to introduce and develop microcomputer based data acquisition systems for our laboratories. As a result of this early work Floyd became one of the first faculty members in M.E. to recognize the importance and potential of the personal computer in the academic setting. Although computers had long been a part of our

engineering program it was the unique aspects of the personal computer that provided this new potential, and Floyd soon became a true believer and advocate of this technology and never missed an opportunity to further advance and integrate it into the curriculum, as well as the professional activities of the faculty and students.

Floyd pursued the sciences of thermodynamics and heat transfer in professional practice and research as well as teaching. While still an undergraduate student he worked for Bell Telephone Laboratories (1961-1964). After his graduate degree, but before beginning his academic career, he worked in the aerospace industry, first at TRW Systems Group (1967-68) and later at McDonnell Douglas Company (1968-69). After joining the faculty at Fullerton, he maintained his professional practice by working summers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) (1970-72), and Hughes Aircraft Company (1981-82). This work helped him maintain currency in his field. For example, his work on software development at JPL enabled him to play a leading role in upgrading this element in the M.E. curriculum, and the senior laboratory course saw important improvements as a result of his work in vibration control in electronic equipment at Hughes. Our students greatly benefit from renewal of this kin, and Floyd felt this was well worth the sacrifice of his summer months. Floyd saw his work published in the Journal of Applied Physics as well as in industrial research reports.

Floyd thrived in the academic atmosphere, and nowhere was this more evident than in his service activities. To him, committee service, faculty governance, and administrative assignments were not merely duties, but activities to be approached with purpose, relish and enthusiasm. Barely three years after arriving at CSUF he took on the Chair responsibilities for the M.E. Department. This was immediately followed by a series of higher administrative positions within the Engineering unit, including Acting Chair of the Division of Engineering, Acting Associate Dean of the School of Mathematics, Science, and Engineering, and Acting Associate Dean for the school of Engineering and Computer Science. The latter position, which he held from 1986 until illness forced his retirement in 1990, was a particularly important one in that he was responsible for major portions of the early planning and formation of the School. Working closely with Dean Bilello, department chairs, and faculty committees, he helped plan, design, and equip the new Computer Science Building. One of the many features of this building influenced by Floyd was the benches attached to the planters in the quad. He pointed out that these would encourage congregation and make the ECS area a more attractive and integrated part of the campus. Of course he was right, as can be seen every day of the school year! He was also instrumental in development of the administrative structures of this new academic unit. In this work, while exhibiting sensitivity to views of all concerned, he left his image of how a school should be.

A strong believer in faculty governance, Floyd was extremely active in the Academic Senate. He served as an at-large member of the Senate and as a member of the Executive Committee from 1986 through 1988. Additionally, he served on numerous Senate committees, including Curriculum, Computing Affairs, and Academic Standards.

Floyd was also very active in community outreach. In 1976, along with Professor Paul Arthur of the University of California, Irvine, he initiated the MESA

(Mathematics, Engineering, and Science Achievement) program in the high schools of Orange County, an organization that has guided hundreds of students, especially minorities, into scientific studies. Another program which Floyd helped create was Internships and Cooperative Education. In 1975 he implemented the Cooperative Education Program in the Division of Engineering. One of his achievements in this area was implementation of the U.S. Navy Material Command Co-op Education Program at Fullerton. Floyd also initiated the Minority and women Recruitment and Retention Program in the Engineering unit in 1975, an organization now known as the Minority Engineering Program (MEP). While but one of the many things Floyd did towards promotion of the study of engineering and science, this achievement alone has enriched the careers and lives of hundreds of people over the years, and continues to this day. He was Acting Director of the University Center for Internship and Cooperative Education in 1976.

While the word "hobby" was lost on Floyd, being mostly devoted to his career, he did have an active interest in outdoor sports. His enjoyment of the outdoors drew him to deep sea fishing expeditions with friends and colleagues. However, while the Baja trips provided tales of mighty struggles with huge swordfish, trout fishing and hiking in the Sierra with his wife, Del, was really more to his liking. Their annual summer trek to the American Society of Engineering Educators conference was most often an extended camping trip, with rare usage of motels, and fishing and hiking gear always at hand. These trips took them to trails, streams, and lakes from British Columbia to South Carolina. While at home, Floyd kept busy with crafts such as furniture and clock building, and home renovation. His on-campus friends may not have known of these other recreations, but did know Floyd as a dedicated runner. He could often be seen jogging along the North campus access road, with a comfortable gait and thoughtful expression. Indeed, this is the last recollection I have of Floyd while he was still with us on campus. I wish I had found the time to join him.

The eldest of three brothers, Floyd was born and raised in South Carolina. His parents were both teachers, which may account for his early choice of an academic career. Indeed, his first job was driving a school bus, at the young age of 14! Continuing this industry, he worked his way through high school, college, and graduate school. One of his two brothers, Edward, was, like Floyd, an engineer, but pursued an industrial career. He succumbed to a brain tumor shortly before the same illness struck Floyd. His other brother, Henry, pursues a career in advertising in Lexington, S.C.

Floyd came West in 1968 as a bachelor and met Del here in 1972. She became his life's companion, and he hers, in 1974. They established a Scholarship in Floyd's name, which Del continues to oversee.

Submitted by  
Edward F. Sowell  
Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Professor of Computer Science  
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I wish to acknowledge Del Thomas and the faculty of the Department of Mechanical Engineering for their contributions to this tribute.