Trevor Rhys Cuykendall

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Trevor Rhys Cuykendall came to Cornell from the University of Denver as a graduate student in physics in 1929 and retired as the Spencer T. Olin Professor of Engineering Emeritus in 1972. During the major part of his long tenure at Cornell, Trevor Cuykendall played a central role in developing and sustaining the excellence of the innovative curriculum of engineering physics in the College of Engineering.

Finishing his doctoral research in the field of high-energy X-ray physics, he showed an early interest in areas of engineering that were strongly based on physics, such as photoelastic modeling of structural shapes, on which he worked with Professor S. C. Hollister. However, it was in his work at the Naval Ordinance Laboratory, and then at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, during the war years that he came to realize the need for a new type of engineering curriculum. During those years he worked very closely with hundreds of young engineers and physicists on widely varying projects that required background training in both engineering and physics. He quickly sensed that very few of his co-workers were properly trained for the demands set by the fast pace of the war-time effort. He realized that generally a combination of engineering and physics training would continue to be in demand long after the war. This realization was the basis of his deep commitment to the development of engineering physics and its undergraduate teaching and administration.

Returning to Cornell in 1946, Cuykendall found this same understanding among the other physicists who were returning to Cornell from their war work. With the effort given direction by Lloyd P. Smith, chairman of the Department of Physics, and the strong support of S. C. Hollister, then dean of the College of Engineering, a Department of Engineering Physics, with Lloyd Smith as director, was established in the College of Engineering. They saw this course of undergraduate study, an engineering curriculum combined tightly with physics and mathematics, as the necessary basis for the postwar education of future engineers, who would have to deal with an ever innovative, changing, and expanding technology.

Trevor Cuykendall and Henri Sack were co-opted as the primary faculty members in the establishment of the new department. In their complementary ways, and with a small group of faculty members from physics-, chemistry-, mathematics-, and science-oriented faculty in the College of Engineering, they developed a unique undergraduate program that set the highest standards of excellence, combining a strong core of courses in the physical sciences and mathematics with engineering courses. Trevor Cuykendall was director of the Department of Engineering

Physics from 1956 to 1962. Under his guidance the department grew, taking on new faculty members in areas of solid-state physics and nuclear engineering, strengthening the teaching in the undergraduate program, and establishing a strong graduate Field of Applied Physics. He taught several key courses and was particularly active in the development of the program in nuclear engineering and research in reactor physics. Through his efforts the TRIGA reactor was brought to Cornell as a teaching and research tool, which was housed in a building specially constructed for it, the Ward Laboratory.

Nationally he played a significant role in promoting the teaching of reactor physics and nuclear engineering as a consultant to the Atomic Energy Commission and as the chairman or member of a number of the commission's committees and panels on nuclear engineering education and training. From 1962 to 1966, when engineering physics and materials science were one department, he became the associate director in charge of the undergraduate curriculum and student advising. In 1967, when engineering physics and materials science and engineering were separated, he again became the director of engineering physics. He continued to guide the undergraduate program until his retirement in 1972. During this period of leadership he made engineering physics a strong, unique program that to this day continues to attract many of the best undergraduate students in the College of Engineering.

His outstanding success in pursuing his commitment, in guiding students and faculty members alike, was due in large part to his "unflappable" personality—to the knowledge whereof he spoke, to his unfailingly quiet, encouraging sympathy toward everyone. Unobtrusively persuasive and always helpful, he is and shall be forever cherished with affection by all who have been fortunate to have entered his sphere of influence.

We will also remember his joy in the beauties of nature, especially his native Rocky Mountains. His love of the varied American landscape was beautifully expressed in the paintings of Muriel Fetterly Cuykendall, Trevor's first wife, who died in 1968. Some of her paintings now add warmth and character to the engineering physics student lounge in Clark Hall. Muriel Cuykendall, a physician for many of the public schools of the district, is remembered with Trevor and their children, Mary and Robert, for the friendly hospitality they shared with their many friends and colleagues.

Trevor and his second wife, Helen, moved to Englewood, Florida, shortly after they both retired from Cornell. There she cared for him through his later years of declining health and long illness.

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