


Reflections of Joseph "Guy" Thibodaux, Jr.

I arrived at LSU in September 1938, a youngster not quite 16 years old, with few social skills and hardly dry behind the ears with the intention of studying chemical engineering. My father's salary was \$165 per month and he had a small inheritance of \$300 upon his father's death. We learned that tuition at LSU was \$62 a year, room rent was \$6 a month and that I could eat three meals a day for \$15 a month. I received a National Youth Association Scholarship with the help of one of Senator Long's associates, Earle Christenberry, which paid 30 cents an hour for 50 hours of work – with that covering all of my meals, I was off to LSU.

It was 1938 and probably the lowest ebb in the University's history. Following Senator Long's assassination, numerous state and university officials were under indictment for various forms of criminal activity. The president of the University was caught trying to escape to Canada with the university airplane. The governor was going to Angola in a striped suit and others committed suicide rather than face the disgrace. The University


was about to lose its accreditation, and differences of opinion about the curriculum between the head of the Chemical Engineering Department and the dean of Engineering made it uncertain whether, upon graduation, I would receive a degree from the Engineering College or the College of Pure and Applied Sciences. This was not the recipe for a great start.

Fortunately, this had nothing to do with the qualifications and abilities of the outstanding faculty, as I was to learn over the next four years. One never knew what type of industry and organization they would work for, therefore my professors laid out a curriculum and concentrated on teaching me all of the fundamentals which would allow me to work in any industry. The professors in the various departments provided me with a solid foundation in inorganic, organic and physical chemistry, physics, electricity, statics and mechanics, mathematics, chemical thermodynamics and chemical engineering unit operations. In May 1942, I received a ROTC Commission, but could not graduate because I needed to complete a course in



Chemical Engineering Plant Design as my work schedule did not permit me to take that course when it normally was offered. I roomed with another student, Max Faget, who was enrolled in mechanical engineering with an aeronautical option. We soon discovered that we were students with similar outlooks. We were more interested in methodology than procedures, in learning as well as being taught, and abhorred learning by rote. We rebelled at doing things that could not be explained by logic. During finals while other students were cramming for exams we were shooting snooker and attending movies on Chimes Street. I don't think we ever made the honor roll.

We were about the same size and build, enjoyed wrestling, weight lifting, running and playing handball. We decided that if we survived the war, we would get together and look for a job. We kept in touch while he was a Naval officer patrolling the South Pacific in a submarine and I was an Army officer building airports, roads and bridges in the rain forests of North and Central Burma. We were separated from the service about the same time. Then, one day in June 1946 the phone rang and Max was on the line. "Let's go look for a job," he said, "my dad says I can have his car." Our first stop was Langley Field, Virginia, home of the Langley Aeronautical Research Laboratory of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) across from Norfolk where Max had



specialists who had far more detailed knowledge in those fields than I had. I may not have known all the answers, but I knew what questions to ask.

I learned organization, management and motivation skills from the brilliant leaders at NACA by observing what they did. They provided me with the finest tools and facilities and equipment; they also provided moral support and promoted team work, respect for everyone on the team, responsibility to one's self and the team, courage of one's convictions, and willingness to share one's expertise and experience. There was no room for selfishness or inflated egos. Your rewards were respect of the other team members as well as everyone else at the center. Whatever respect you received was not conferred, it was earned. Your ideas were converted into physical models on which you conducted tests, as you were provided with the best