

THE LIFE OF PROFESSOR JOHN H. WRENN

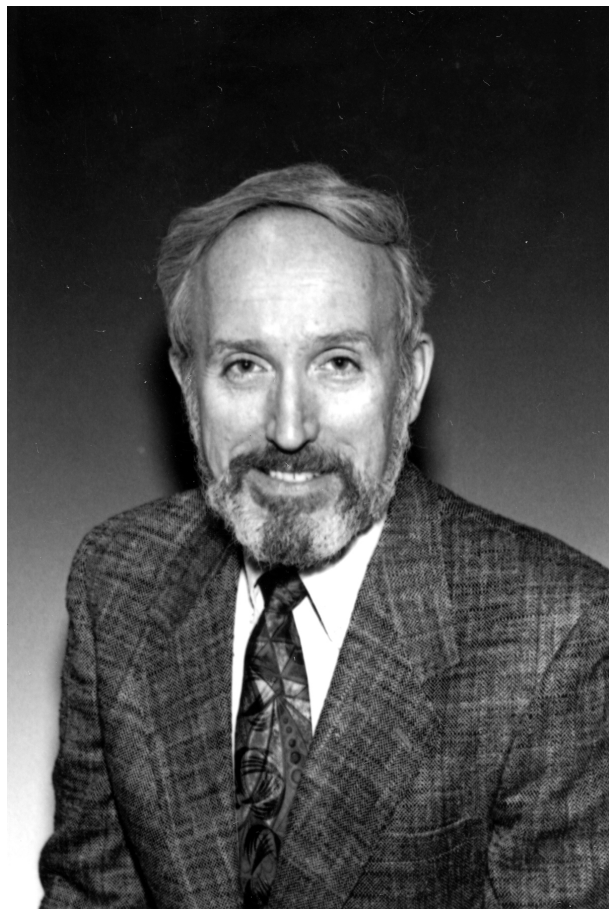
GEORGE F. HART

Department of Geology
Louisiana State University
Baton Rouge, Louisiana 70803
U.S.A.
e-mail: zulu@mric.coop

PETER WEBB

School of Earth Sciences
Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio 43210
U.S.A.
e-mail: webb.3@osu.edu

'On a cold day at Port Hudson National Cemetery last week, I shivered as a pair of Marine sergeants solemnly folded an American flag. My friend John Wrenn had lost his battle. He was 62 years old. He had recurrent pancreatic cancer.... Following a simple, richly personal service, the U.S. Marine Corps paid the veteran final respect, standing at attention through the haunting playing of taps, carefully folding the flag from his coffin and presenting it to his widow.' Laurie Smith Anderson, Journalist, The Advocate, Baton Rouge, December 8th, 2006.



John H. Wrenn

John Harry Wyckoff Wrenn was our former student and our friend. He was born in Jackson, Michigan, and spent his younger years in Arlington Heights, Illinois, where he was known by most of his school friends as Jack. His father, Webster Wrenn, was much older than his mother and was a veteran who had been stationed in China during the Boxer Rebellion. Jerry Orgler, John's childhood buddy, remembers well that 'Web' was a conservative and tough father who believed in protocol and in following the rules. Web's military experience fascinated John, and by his freshman year in high school he began talking non-stop about joining the military. After his graduation he volunteered for the United States Marine Corps, and was stationed at Camp Pendleton, California from 1962 to 1965. During his time at Camp Pendleton, he was sequestered for the weeks of basic training and by January 1963 he confided to his friend Jerry that his belief in the value of the military was still strong, and he was proud of his service, but military life and the Marines were not for him. To George he once said the Marine Corps was an important period of his life that taught him a lot: especially 'never volunteer for anything in the future'!

John had been an armorer in the Corps, maintaining and repairing weapons; and after his three years of service he considered employment at a gun shop or opening his own gun store in Illinois. However, he now had an active appetite for further education! During his time at Camp Pendleton he began to further his education, taking night classes off-base for the next 2.5 years. Late in 1965 he enrolled in a radio broadcast engineering program at DeVry Technical School of Chicago, where he completed a 14-month course in 10 months, and went to work for WGN Radio in Chicago. At the time, the salary for radio technicians was surprisingly low, and John soon began searching for a better paying job. He and his friend Jerry had worked together prior to John's enlistment on many part-time jobs, such as bus boys, gas station attendants, and construction workers. Jerry's dad owned a construction business and built mainly commercial structures, such as schools and office buildings. He had contacts in various labor unions and offered to get John an apprenticeship. This is how John became a structural iron worker. The apprenticeship program consisted of on-the-job training and 16 hours per week of classroom work. John, ever outstanding, was named the Chicago Area Apprentice of the Year after his first year. He worked all over Chicago doing structural concrete reinforcing work, and in less than two years was a journeyman and promoted to foreman. As happens with many of us, so with John. His connection with his friends in Illinois began to move along separate paths, although he and his friend Jerry continued to converse over the phone once or twice a month for the next 40 years. It was the pre-

academic period in the Chicago construction world that brought John into close contact with the real world of humanity, and it contributed to the humility that was an important aspect of his persona.

All the time since leaving the military, John had taken night-school classes with an eye on a degree in Geology. He enrolled at William Rainey Harper College, Illinois, where he completed an Associate Bachelor of Science degree in 1972. From there he went on to complete his B.Sc. in 1974 at Northern Illinois University (NIU), and it was during this period that John came under the influence of the Antarctic—a continent that was to enthral and bind him to its wondrous world. Commencing with his first 3-month expedition in 1973–74 as a drilling site geologist and field assistant with the NSF Office of Polar Programs in their Dry Valley Drilling Project (DVDP), John continued to work on Antarctic material until his untimely death. In the DVDP, John had his first exposure to polar environments and drill core logging, a combination that was to strongly influence his career in later years.

At the time John returned from Antarctica, the Department of Geology at NIU was acquiring a new Chairperson: Peter Webb from New Zealand. John needed an advisor and a research topic for his M.S. thesis work, and Peter was searching for his first micropaleontology graduate students. They quickly discovered each other and initiated a friendship and research association that was to last three decades. It was a period in which he learned the basic 'nuts-and-bolts' of the micropaleontological trade, as he began to work on late Miocene–Quaternary foraminiferal biostratigraphy from the DVDP drill sites in the Taylor Valley paleo-fjord of Antarctica. His M.S. was completed in 1976, but from 1975 he was co-authoring publications with Peter and traveling to symposia to present their work on the Antarctic in Japan, New Zealand and across the U.S.A. These early publications are now counted among the pioneer efforts in the Cenozoic biostratigraphy of Antarctica. As the foundation student of the NIU micropaleontology program, John Wrenn proved a strong influence on later students with his ever-generous and helpful support.

From Illinois, John moved in 1978 to Louisiana State University (LSU) at Baton Rouge to undertake his Ph.D. under the supervision of George Hart. Using a suite of Upper Cretaceous to Paleogene samples from Seymour Island, lying on the fringe of the Antarctic, John switched his interest from foraminifera to dinocysts. He completed his Ph.D. on *The Dinoflagellate Biostratigraphy of Seymour Island, Antarctica* in 1982. During his doctoral studies, John worked for a geochemical company (Carbon Systems Inc. of Baton Rouge) that George part-owned. At Carbon Systems, he learned the basic principles of maceral analysis using a method developed during the early 1970s. This



John during one of his excursions to the Antarctic.

work gave John access to hundreds of marine surface sediments that had been taken from the offshore west coast of the United States, extending from the Mexican border to Alaska; and allowed him to use the technique of maceral analysis in his Ph.D. studies. Later he continued to work for Hartax International Inc., Baton Rouge, during his spare time, on maceral assemblages. It was during this period that he worked on the geochemistry and distribution of particulate organic matter from the depositional environments of the Mississippi River Birdfoot Delta. John and other students played an active part in the fieldwork and sample analysis. John often commented that the field season in the Mississippi Delta was one of the most enjoyable summers he ever spent.

Dinoflagellate biostratigraphy became John's major area of research after finishing his Ph.D. as he continued to study the distribution of palynomorphs in the southern high latitudes from the Cretaceous through Holocene. He was particularly interested in their evolutionary response to climatic and tectonic changes. Although his work was primarily on Neogene deposits, and remained the center of his activity for most of his career, his professional move to AMOCO Production Company (1981–1993), initially to Tulsa as a research scientist, followed by a stint as geolo-

gist/paleontologist in Houston, Texas, allowed him to work on material from Europe, South America and the Asian Far East (Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand).

When he moved to LSU as an Associate Professor and Director of the Center for Excellence in Palynology, he began to direct his research programs towards the Gulf Coast of the U.S.A. It was during this period that it became apparent what an excellent team player he really was. Most of John's publications were jointly authored, and in numerous cases he provided skilled professional services to other scientists who needed the aid of a palynologist, biostratigrapher, or editor to complete a study or apply for a grant. This can be seen as one of his outstanding attributes by assessing his complete vitae, where his name is associated with the work of more than 70 different authors. He was especially interested in understanding the distribution of palynomorphs in the Neogene–Holocene coastal, fluvial, and lacustrine facies of the Gulf Coast. He continued to work on the biostratigraphy of the Antarctic, and was involved in the Cape Roberts drilling program between 1997 and 2000 where, at the Crary Laboratory, McMurdo Station, he again worked with Peter Webb. Both his foraminiferal M.S. thesis and his dinoflagellate Ph.D. disserta-

tion became important anchors for understanding the biostratigraphy of the Antarctic: and therein lies his major contribution to our science. As a teacher, John served on more than 30 thesis and dissertation committees and directed five Ph.D. and two M.S. students. In addition, he served as an external examiner at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and in Belgium.

John served the American Association of Stratigraphic Palynologists (AASP) in various ways from 1986 onwards. He edited its newsletter from 1986 to 1988, served as President-Elect, President, and Past-President from 1991 to 1993, and was awarded AASP's Distinguished Service Award in 1998. As a skillful and patient reviewer of manuscripts and editor, he provided his talent to many colleagues and through a variety of publications.

John's recognition included the Antarctic Service Medal of the U.S.A., awarded by the National Science Foundation in 2000; the LSU Athletic Foundation Undergraduate Teaching Award in 2002; and the Division of Environmental Geosciences Research Award from the American Association of Petroleum Geologists in 2003.

At the time of his retirement he was pursuing more detailed studies of the integration of palynomorphs, phytoliths, microscopic particles, and historic records applied to dating very young sediments. He retired for health reasons in August, 2006 after 13 years as Director of the AASP Center for Excellence in Palynology.

John's interests were many and varied. He was a collector of postage stamps and a student of military history, archaeology, and art. John's watercolor work has adorned George's home for many years and its execution was a passion of his. Even after being told that the chemotherapy procedures were no longer working and his cancer was spreading, John continued painting watercolors and drawing with pen and ink. He battled chemotherapy for six years prior to his death on November 28th, 2006.

John Wrenn was a man of conservative thought, who loved science, photography, painting, the outdoors; and was devoted to his family. Many of his concerns were liberal politics and the over-empowerment of government, the decline of national values; and, passionately, 'why everyone does not understand that Chicago makes the best hot-dogs on Earth'. Jerry Orgler summed-up John as well as anyone could: 'he was tenacious, moral, forthright, honest, and not corruptible. He said what he meant and meant what he said!' Peter Webb remembers sitting at the McMurdo Station, well after midnight and long after the last of their colleagues had headed off to bed, having long and somewhat philosophic discussions about the events of their lives, people they had known, students they had trained, places they had been, progress in science, and where it would all lead one day. 'It was during these quiet

and unguarded journeys into the past that an advisor and his first student came to understand a friendship and journey that had endured for three decades. He was a classic case of the understated man, who even to a close friend never showed any sign of wanting to reveal all.'

John changed little over the time we knew him. A man of strong convictions and principles that he maintained quietly but firmly, he was quietly spoken, understated, modest and humble. Those who knew him well saw a person with a rarified sense of humor, which often showed itself at unexpected moments. He was deeply thoughtful, understood people and their actions very well, was reluctant to criticize openly, and usually chose to share these thoughts with trusted confidants. He never forced his belief-system on others but it was always clearly apparent where he stood on issues of the moment. Above all, he was a sincerely compassionate person. John was truly our friend. We enjoyed every moment of our relationship with him.

John Wrenn is survived by his wife Allison and daughter Margaret Kathryn; by his daughter Lora Lee Margaret (Drevline), and granddaughters Mallory Taylor (Drevline) and Alexandra Merrill (Drevline); by his brother William; and by his mother Phyllis. His father, Webster Blazo Wrenn; his sister, Lucille Wrenn Bjorgo; and his son, Zachary William Wrenn, preceded him in death (Anonymous, 2006).

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