

# Remembering Dr. James (Jim) Wright



In the late afternoon of Monday, January 11th, 2010, I received a distressing phone call from my long time friend and fellow Newfoundlander, Dr. Bill Nickerson. Bill, like all friends, started our conversation with the familiar pleasantries of asking how my family and I were doing. Then, somewhat awkwardly, Bill sadly broke the news of the sudden death of our former colleague and friend, Dr. Jim Wright.

Jim received his Ph.D. in Geophysics at the University of Toronto in 1968. In 1969, he accepted a faculty appointment at Memorial University of Newfoundland and went on to spend 40 enjoyable and energetic years of teaching and research with Memorial's Physics and Earth Sciences departments. Jim retired from Memorial University in April 2009 but remained very active in the geophysical oil & gas exploration of Newfoundland's west coast and was the co-founder of a small Newfoundland-based oil and gas venture.

Being a former student at Memorial's Earth Sciences department, I was supervised by Jim for both my B.Sc. and M.Sc. theses and I had the great opportunity of working directly with him for 11 years in a research support role. During this time, Jim's mentorship consisted of gentle patience and constant encouragement and our professional relationship blossomed into a strong and lasting friendship. Upon my departure from Newfoundland, we stayed in contact with each other via e-mail, telephone and face-to-face conversations whenever Jim travelled to Calgary or we attended the same geophysical meetings in Canada and the U.S. I am greatly indebted to Jim for all my professional and personal successes and I am deeply grateful to have known and worked with him. I will miss him greatly. What follows is a collection of memorable words from some of Jim's former professional colleagues.

## **Dr. Jeremy Hall, Memorial University of Newfoundland**

Jim was a very close colleague and friend at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) for my 24 years here. He helped me during the recruitment process, hosted me during my first weeks in St. John's, and has always been strongly supportive of my research and service contributions over the years.

Jim's specialty, like mine, was applied geophysics. He had worked in his graduate studies on the anisotropy of thermal conductivity and electrical resistivity of rock formations. This was followed by a series of studies of electromagnetic soundings of the crust. This work overlapped with several studies of heat flow through the seafloor on both east and west coasts of Canada. He then moved into seismology, as if more proof were needed of his eclectic approach. In all these efforts he retained an interest in the development of techniques and

equipment, an interest he continued to pursue in retirement.

The Earth Sciences Department was formed in the early 80s from the amalgamation of the Geology Department (then in the Engineering Building) and the geophysicists in the Physics Department, located in the Chemistry/Physics Building. When I arrived at MUN in 1987, the geophysicists were still resident in the Chemistry/Physics Building. Jim was the key person around whom the geophysics group gravitated. When Dr. Chris Barnes

as Department Head over in the Carew Building wanted something done, as often as not, it was Jim whom he would call across the street, because he could rely on Jim getting the job done. More recently, President Meisen had Jim work as his informal right-hand person in helping to build up the research profile of MUN, especially in the areas of science and engineering relevant to the oil and mining industries. Dr. Meisen clearly recognized the same commitment in Jim that Dr. Barnes had 15 years previously.

Jim had an exceptionally strong commitment to Memorial University. He played a major role in the planning of the Alexander Murray Building, he chaired an advisory committee to the Vice President (Research) on the university's computational resources, he was Deputy Head of Earth Sciences in the 90s and later Head of Earth Sciences, prior to his appointment as Director of Major Research Partnerships, the position he occupied as he retired. That does scant justice to his many services within MUN, but we should also recall his professional contributions outside, for example, to the Canadian Exploration Geophysics Society, to the Professional Engineers and Geoscientists of Newfoundland and Labrador and, earlier, to the building of local talent in the Geological Survey of Botswana.

Getting back to Jim as a colleague: he could be quite assertive, his clarity of view supported by well-marshalled arguments. He worked exceptionally hard, he was almost always cheerful, and we always knew when he was around. Whether he was on the phone in his office or talking to a colleague down the corridor, the special timbre of Jim's voice resounded to reassure us that all was right with the world. We shall not hear that voice again. Many of us are still in shock that someone with so much energy and zest for life was taken from us so quickly.

## **Dr. Larry Lines, University of Calgary**

The Canadian Earth Sciences community suffered a loss on January 11th, 2010 with the passing of Dr. James A. (Jim) Wright, recently retired from Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). Dr. Wright had served MUN for 40 years (1969-2009) as a geophysics professor. He was well

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known to the Earth Science community for his research and teaching in the fields of applied seismology and electromagnetics. He rose through the academic ranks before serving as the Chairman of the Earth Sciences Department. Many of us will remember Jim as an amiable, optimistic and sharing colleague. In my own career, my choice to join the MUN faculty in 1993 was largely influenced by Jim Wright and Jeremy Hall, both senior geophysics professors in the Earth Sciences Department. During my time at MUN, Jim was in the adjacent office, and was always there with encouraging and humorous conversation, providing advice and guidance through the challenges of the day. There was an excellent team of geophysicists in the Department, one of the best in Canada. The work-life balance exhibited by Dr. Wright constantly impressed me. While working diligently at his profession, Jim always had time for friends and family. His wife, Elsie, and sons (Wilfred, Richard and Matthew) always provided a warm welcome to friends who visited their home. In fact, Jim's optimism and ambition was ideally suited for the difficult economic challenges in Newfoundland. He was always planning for success in his geophysical career, and not discouraged by the setbacks of the time. Jim was always trying to work on opportunities that involved cooperation in geophysics among academics, government and industry. He never hesitated to recruit or mentor new colleagues at MUN. In my departure from the "Rock", Jim was one of the people that I missed the most. It was always a pleasure to see Jim at a CSEG, EAGE or SEG meeting during his world travels. His energy and enthusiasm were continuously pervasive. Therefore, it was with shock and sadness that many in the geophysics community learned of Jim's passing this January. He will be greatly missed by all of his colleagues.

### Dr. Michael Enachescu, MGM Energy Corporation

The Canadian and International geophysical community and especially the Newfoundland and Labrador exploration community has lost, after a brief battle with cancer, one of its most active educators, professional geoscientists and exploration promoters. Dr. James Wright was not only a great mentor, friend and colleague to many of us, but also a brilliant example of a researcher dedicated to his beloved profession. His passing has left a deep chasm that will be very difficult to fill.

Dr. Wright's professional and personal accomplishments were many. From his volunteer activities with many organizations to his efforts to increase and improve the teaching of petroleum geophysics in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador, and his tireless promotion of the oil and gas potential of western Newfoundland, Jim was at the forefront dedicating his time, knowledge and skills to many organizations. Some of his more notable volunteer efforts included serving in various roles with the Newfoundland and Labrador Oil & Gas Industries Association (NOIA), his continued involvement with the Professional Engineers and Geoscientists Newfoundland and Labrador (PEGNL), his activity with overseas research and educational programs funded by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), his service in reviewing many grants for the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), the National Science Foundation (NSF) and other international granting agencies and, probably his most favourite, serving as mentor to numerous undergrad

and graduate students, young professionals and Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN) academic staff.

During his entire professional life Dr. Wright laboured to find new ways to increase geophysics educational and professional standards and lobbied federal and provincial governments for professional recognition for his peers. He also worked tirelessly to obtain significant research and exploration grants for petroleum geophysics programs that in total amount to more than \$25 million.

On a personal note, I met and befriended Jim starting in the 1980s when my focus on the exploration of the Newfoundland and Labrador offshore basins brought me to St. John's and MUN. Jim was then a geophysics professor with Memorial's Department of Earth Sciences, one of the strongest earth sciences schools in the country. We shared a common enthusiasm about Newfoundland's oil and gas potential and supported each other's efforts to "get the word out". In early 2000, Dr. Wright began lobbying Husky Energy to help support the teaching of petroleum geosciences at the Earth Sciences department. Jim and I worked together in defining the substantial donation that was finalized by the establishment of the Husky Energy Chair in Oil and Gas Research, an endowment of \$2 million and the first endowed research chair at MUN. In the summer of 2003, Jim also convinced me to come to MUN's Department of Earth Sciences as a Senior Fellow where he was now serving as Department Head. I have to say that without his encouragement and warm welcome, I would have never taken that position and dared to move my entire family (including two unhappy teenagers!) to "The Rock". Clearly without Jim's persistent and persuasive interaction with both Husky's and Memorial's executives to bring an "industry guy" to the university, I would have never left Calgary and thus missed a great adventure for my family and personally for me, a unique opportunity to teach petroleum geophysics and geology to many of the grad students at MUN.

Once I arrived at MUN, I had no idea on the exact role of a Senior Fellow in Exploration and what Jim and the University expected from me. As a means of dealing with this dilemma, I produced a two page memo entitled "Senior Fellow's possible tasks" which included teaching graduate courses, carrying out petroleum exploration research, organizing seminars with invited lecturers, publishing papers, gathering donated data and software from industry, and collaborating with oil companies. Later, I asked Jim several times what he thought about the memo but he never answered me. After about a month of waiting for his response I cornered him in my office to determine whether he was happy or not with my proposal. As my direct "boss" taking advantage of my academic naivety, he could have lectured me for hours and suggested an interminable list of "things to do". Instead, I was surprised to hear from him, "*Michael, I cannot tell you what your tasks should be. You know best what you can share with us. You are now in a Canadian University and it is up to you to decide what you want to accomplish while here. In no way would I infringe on your academic freedom.*" As someone who strongly appreciates freedom, I will never forget those words and I will always remember Jim as a great colleague and friend, who kindly helped me to adjust to a new teaching career in an environment not always friendly to an Industry Fellow.

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In an attempt to honour Jim, his life and his accomplishments, I will increase my efforts to follow Jim's example and carry on our work with MUN's petroleum geophysics graduate students. I will move forward where he left off in helping to investigate and promote the petroleum potential of Newfoundland's Palaeozoic basins. Dr. James Wright's contributions to the establishment and growth of the Newfoundland and Labrador oil and gas industry are outstanding and he will be forever missed. I am privileged to have known, worked with and to have had Jim as a colleague and friend.

### Mr. Ian Atkinson, Nalcor Energy – Oil and Gas

In 2000, as head of the Earth Sciences Department, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Dr. Jim Wright was instrumental in the preparation of a proposal to acquire an onshore/offshore transitional 3D seismic survey at Shoal Point, Port au Port Peninsula, Western Newfoundland. I had the privilege of working closely with him on this project. It was the first collaboration on a number of R&D projects we worked on together until his untimely death.

This seismic survey was acquired, processed and interpreted by Memorial and led to a re-evaluation of the offshore target that Pan Canadian had attempted to drill with the K-39 well. This was Jim's way – quietly working to improve our knowledge and understanding of geology, both in the petroleum sector and the mineral sector and having a huge impact through his efforts.

In 2001, Jim led the effort between Memorial, Dalhousie and UNB for the submission of a successful proposal to ACOA for the Pan-Atlantic Petroleum Systems Consortium (PPSC) project under the Atlantic Innovation Fund (AIF). This \$35 million, 5-year research and development project at the three universities strengthened their petroleum investigation initiatives by building research facilities, expertise and capacity. This project more than doubled petroleum research at Memorial with over 60 graduate students in geoscience and engineering directly benefiting from the funding it secured. New research facilities supported by this funding include the 3D Immersive Visualization Centre, a state of the art palynology facility, a core analysis facility, seismic data interpretation workstations, the Autonomous Underwater Vehicle Laboratory, the Instrumentation and Control Laboratory and investment in the Offshore Safety and Survival Centre. All of these research efforts have resulted in increased international R&D collaboration and international recognition for Memorial.

In 2004, Jim was appointed as the founding Director of Major Research Partnerships (MRP) in the Office of the Vice-President Research. In this role he was instrumental in the preparation and positioning of Memorial applications to three more rounds of AIF competitions. Included among the many proposals successfully funded during this time there were three more specific to

the oil and gas sector and Memorial's largest R&D project to date, the very successful INCO Innovation Centre. His vision has positioned the university well to build on the research capacity established by these many R&D projects, and to contribute to the growth of the Newfoundland and Labrador petroleum industry.

Dr. Wright's contributions to R&D in the private sector are equally significant. The importance of directional drilling technology to modern petroleum production wells cannot be understated. Horizontal drilling is now a standard practice. What few people know is that Jim contributed ideas to develop instrumentation used by the earliest directional drilling tools. This prototype was patented and later acquired and commercialised by Sperry Sun. Even after his retirement, Jim continued to work with R&D companies and was working on the development of new seismic receiver arrays and seismic source designs at the time of his tragic death.

### Dr. Chris Pike, Scotia Waterous Inc.

One could never fail to be impressed by Jim's energy and passion for geoscience especially as it related to Newfoundland and Labrador. While I had worked with Jim when we were both at Memorial University, it was not until 1999 that we began a long collaboration on several commercial ventures. Jim had been a long time supporter of oil and gas exploration in western Newfoundland and had assisted several junior oil and gas explorers by lending his expertise to their efforts to find commercial quantities of hydrocarbons. In 2001 Jim co-founded Ptarmigan Resources, a junior oil & gas explorer that subsequently secured an offshore exploration license north of Port au Port Bay. The geophysical analysis and interpretation on this license produced a better understanding of the large upside potential of the Cambro-Ordovician foreland basin. Jim travelled extensively, on his own time (and dime) to promote this play to an array of companies in Calgary, Houston and London and, as a result, raised the awareness of the area's petroleum potential. With legendary persistence, Jim almost managed to drill this exploration license but lost the opportunity due to circumstances beyond Ptarmigan Resources' control. While others might have considered this missed opportunity a lesson learned and given up, Jim, along with his partners, quietly put together a new plan and a new company, Ptarmigan Energy. Jim then spearheaded a bid proposal in late 2009 to re-acquire the offshore exploration license previously awarded to Ptarmigan Resources. Jim was overjoyed when he learned that Ptarmigan Energy was the successful bidder for this exploration lease. Jim was pursuing plans to complete what he set out to do in 2001: prove that there were large commercial quantities of hydrocarbons in western Newfoundland, when he suddenly passed away. While Jim's passing has left a void, his vision has inspired many. *R*