

Reflections of O. Charles Roddey

Having elected recently to retire from “active duty,” I find myself doing what I expect most everyone does under similar circumstances – reflecting back on my career. And since so many of these reflections have an LSU origin or connection, I wanted to share a few of them.

To begin with, my career, perhaps not too remarkably, bears little or no resemblance to those plans I had so many years ago. What may be a bit more unique is my conviction that I would not have changed one iota of that career.

I can hardly imagine having a career more exciting or professionally satisfying than one that included projects as diverse as grassroots refineries in Malaysia, Germany, Brazil, Northern Canada, the Arabian Gulf, and South Texas; subway systems in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Iraq; copper production in Australia, Mexico, Iran, and the Yukon; first-class airports around the world; gas-processing plants in Western Canada, Iran, Scotland, and Iraq. Throw in

nearly two decades of providing the crude-oil processing facilities at Alaska’s Prudhoe Bay, several hundred sulphur-recovery plants all over the world, and a current assignment to provide a new industrial city of 150 thousand people on the Red Sea of Saudi Arabia.

It has always seemed to me that the engineering construction business requires an extra measure of flexibility and pragmatism. And as I think back on them now, that’s exactly what my days and years at LSU were full of.

I showed up on campus as a 16-year-old kid fresh from the country; you can imagine my awe of my peers, all of those smooth sophisticates from Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Those first few weeks were strictly happy, and I now remember everything as being fun. That probably means that a passage of nearly 50 years has smoothed the rough edges. But without any question, it was the most exciting time of my life.

The experiences were all new – big-time football, rush week, the military, and learning that self discipline was to play a much larger role in this new educational experience. Adding a marvelous grace note was the exposure to more good-looking girls than I'd dreamed could be assembled on any one campus.

My class at LSU was strongly affected by World War II. In the weeks following Pearl Harbor, many classmates elected to enlist in one or the other of the services; many of us, in or approaching advanced ROTC, were counseled to be patient and wait until the Army called. Our chief concern was that the whole affair might be finished before the call came. Come it did, though, and off we went for three years or so. Most of us survived relatively undamaged and many returned to LSU to complete a degree. That's when we learned just how much we had aged in three years!

Those of us fortunate enough to have received a college education appreciate that it is the sum total of a wide variety of relationships and experiences. At the core, though, must always be the academic process. I thought during my residency, and I think now, that LSU is outstanding in this aspect.

I wish I could recall and give credit to all those teachers who imparted knowledge in those formative years, but I remember vividly my mentors in the Department of Chemical Engineering, since the curriculum required that we spend the majority of our waking hours with them. I recall with affection and appreciation Professors Horton, Coates, Keller, and Pressburg – though the dominant emotions in those early years were fear and trepidation.

The Department of Chemical Engineering in those days followed a practice that has significant relevance to our widespread concern today with ethics in the marketplace, government, the professions, church, and even academia. At term final exam time – the exams were three hours long – the professor dropped the exam off and left the classroom. He had to be sought out in his office for questions. In all my years there I never observed any improper activity whatsoever.

In the past three years, I have been privileged to be a member of the advisory board of the LSU Department of Chemical Engineering. I have concluded that today's students come in smarter, have a tougher curriculum, work harder, and leave better prepared than we old-timers. All is well.