

# Wallace Prescott, Ph.D. (1920-2013)



## **The right man at the right place at the right time: Wallace Samuel Prescott**

(COOKEVILLE, TENN., Dec. 31, 2013) -- Back in the early 1940s, when Wallace Samuel Prescott enrolled in Tennessee Tech's engineering program, no one -- least of all Prescott himself -- could foresee the impact he'd have at the university. As a student, then a teacher and researcher, then dean of faculty and vice president, then interim president, Prescott was the right man at the right place at the right time.

During World War II, he taught map-making to military trainees. After the war, he taught the hundreds of veterans coming home to resume their studies. During the 1960s, as building after building was either remodeled or constructed, he designed trusses and drew maps of the rapidly expanding campus.

When Tech President Everett Derryberry most needed a close colleague and confidante, Prescott accepted the position of vice president. Even after retirement, when Tech needed an interim president, Prescott accepted the position. He did the same when Middle Tennessee State University found itself in a similar situation a few years later.

But if it hadn't been for a lucky break as a young man, he would have done none of those things. If the Depression taught him nothing else, it taught him to be resourceful and to never say no to opportunity.

Wallace Prescott grew up in the Chattanooga Valley. He thought he wanted to become a doctor, but he had to work to pay for school, and working while attending medical school was frowned on.

So he enrolled at a two-year school, West Georgia College, with the help of a National Recovery Act program that paid his room and board while he worked part time and studied part time. His first job was picking cotton. His second was helping construct a steam plant in the school's cafeteria building. By the time he graduated, he was postmaster for both the school and town, meeting the train everyday to pick up the mail, sort it, and sell stamps.

It wasn't a good time to graduate. The Depression was ending, but there was still little work to be found. Prescott took on a variety of odd jobs.

"I had all kinds of jobs to support myself," he said. "One was to pick up clothes to be dry cleaned every night and deliver them the next morning. I had one student who owed me \$20, and he was about to graduate, and I said, 'Could you possibly pay me some of it before you leave?' And he said he didn't have a penny, but would I take a set of German drawing instruments, because he'd flunked out of drafting class and didn't want to see them again and I could maybe pawn them for \$20.

"I walked the streets of Chattanooga looking for work, and I saw a sign advertising training for defense industry drafting, and I had these new tools, so I started school there, and about six weeks later, the personnel officer from TVA came by and said, 'You're pretty good,' and I went to work for them. TVA was building dams as fast as they could for electricity to make aluminum for airplanes and so forth, and each dam would result in a big lake, and we had to know where property lines and shore lines were, so I drew the contour maps showing elevation and where the shore went."

It was the closest Prescott could get to military service, because of a childhood illness that left him with permanent damage to his legs and spine.

"I was so happy to work for TVA," he said. "I saved enough money in three years to go back to school and by then, I knew I wanted to be an engineer and had heard of Tennessee Tech."

He enrolled at Tech in 1943 -- at a time when four-year student enrollment had plummeted because of the war, but short-term military training was filling the gap. Prescott was put to work immediately in field supervision for student trainees in map-making.

He was also put to work almost immediately as a photographer for The Oracle and Eagle, Tech's student newspaper and yearbook.

"I was an amateur photographer, and I was going across campus one day with my camera, and this very pleasant young lady said, 'I'm the editor of both the school paper and annual and I need someone to do photography for me.' So I worked with her while she was getting those two publications ready for printing, and we started dating a little, and after a time, she said, 'I've been dating this other boy a long time, but you're the one I want to marry.' I almost fell over."

Wallace Prescott and Margaret Belle Hale married the same year they graduated and moved to Nashville, where Margaret worked in social services. Wallace, who had already been working summers in the bridge division of the state highway department, went to work for the Nashville Bridge Company.

But Nashville didn't suit them, and when Tech's director of engineering, James Henderson, called to offer Wallace a position on the faculty, the Prescotts moved back to Cookeville.

Classrooms were full at Tech, as veterans came home to finish their studies. Wallace taught surveying, and Margaret taught English.

"I had five classes in lecture and lab, and boy, was I busy," he said. "All those veterans coming back -- why, each class had about 40 students, and we both took papers home to grade every night and piled them up all over our little apartment. I had a number of students who were older than me. They were very mature and knew what they wanted. Some started out making Cs and ended up making As. They just had to catch up a bit, being out of school because of the war."

Prescott taught for 16 years, spending summers and a leave of absence in graduate studies, earning a master's in 1952 and doctorate in 1962. He had just accepted a National Science Foundation post-doctoral position at Oklahoma State University when President Derryberry called him over to the administration building.

"I knew the chairman of civil engineering was reaching retirement age, and I thought eventually I might get to be chair," Prescott said. "President Derryberry talked for a long time in a rambling way, which was kind of unusual for him. Then he said, 'Some people can make their contributions in the classroom, and others can make their contributions in leadership,' and I thought, 'President Derryberry, you're trying to tell me I'm not going to be chair.' But then he said, 'I want you to be dean of faculty, the chief academic officer,' and I didn't know what to think of that."

Of all his friends on campus, when he needed help with a tough decision, Wallace's most trusted advisor, for 60 years, was his wife. "Margaret and I talked it over, and she said, 'Well, let's have a go at it,' and it suited both of us very well."

It suited President Derryberry very well, too. He'd been searching for a new dean of faculty, and having an engineer with advanced degrees could help in Tech's bid for engineering accreditation. Prescott, with his new credentials, was a magnet for offers from other schools; the dean's position at Tech might be a way to keep him home.

Over the years, the investment paid off. Derryberry had not only a trusted colleague, but one who was instrumental in taking the engineering program to the next level. He brought in the school's first external funding: a bridge-widening project for the state highway department. He recruited continually for faculty with PhDs, because he was convinced that was the direction Tech

should take. He was respected as much for his work in civil engineering as he was his administrative skills.

By 1983, Prescott decided to retire from the university -- but not from public life. He'd always been active in his church and with civic and professional organizations. Among the dozens of volunteer responsibilities he took on was Cookeville General Hospital's Board of Trustees. A director for 10 years, one of Prescott's biggest contributions was helping the hospital finance its most ambitious expansion to date in 1980. He and board chairman Fred Roberson flew to New York, hoping to secure a favorable bond rating for the project.

"Fred said, 'You've had some experience with that at the university; we'll go together to Standard & Poor.' We get there, and Fred said, 'You've got more experience with presentations,' and I didn't have any notes! But I got up there and talked about the fact that Cookeville was in the unique position of being at a crossroads in the state, with Interstate 40 and Highway 111 being built, and our town and area growing. We'll have no problem paying off the bond in time, I told them."

Prescott was soon to be chairman of the hospital board when Tech's governing body, the Tennessee Board of Regents, approached him about a new appointment. In 1985, Tech President Arliss Roaden accepted a new position as executive director of the Tennessee Higher Education Commission. Prescott was asked to step in while a search for the university's new president was under way. He retired again, in 1987, when Angelo Volpe was appointed president of Tennessee Tech ... only to be tapped as interim president of Middle Tennessee State University in 1990, a position he held for one year.

It's interesting, the things you remember. Among the stories Wallace Prescott remembered, at 93 years old, were about his teachers -- that one of his high school teachers, Miss Royal, "wore six-inch heels and still wouldn't come up above my shoulder and didn't weigh 80 pounds, and she'd say 'Mend your speech, lest it mar your future.'"

He remembered that engineering dean James Henderson was the first person he met when he came to Cookeville in 1946. "It was a Saturday, because I was working five days a week, and I went to Mr. Henderson's house on Dixie Avenue. He had overalls on and was washing windows, and his wife invited me to sit down in an old cane-bottomed chair and brought me a glass of lemonade. That was a very human touch to the beginning of school for me. His wife was just a doll, she was so friendly and laughed a lot -- a lot more than he did."

He remembered when women started taking engineering courses. "I had a surveying class, and we had what we called 'chains' -- 100-foot long tape measures -- and we were out working in a field just covered in wild onions,

and the fellows would drag this young lady holding that chain to measure, and she said, 'I'll never get this smell out of my clothes,' and I said, 'You'll have to use it.' That young lady was a good student. She had to study alone, since she was the only female, and girls had to be in by 8. The boys had each other to study with at night, but she didn't."

Fifty years of professional work, and Wallace Prescott never said no. If he didn't know how to work a problem in engineering, he kept at it until he did. And he never forgot those lessons.

"One of my professors in civil engineering was tough -- tougher than I thought any professor ought to be," Prescott said. "I remember his exams. If you had time to sit still long enough to figure out what he was really asking, the tests weren't as hard, but with a time limit, that was pretty hard to do. I remember a test in hydraulics, I made a 52, the lowest I ever had; I was just crushed. I got home that night, and once I'd thought about it a while, I realized what he was after.

"He gave us our grades the next day and said, 'I thought you men were about ready to graduate, but after this test, I wouldn't recommend you as a dogcatcher.' He gave us the same test again, and this time, I made a 96. He didn't say a word, just went on with the next lesson. After class, we were walking down the hallway, and he bumped me on the shoulder and said, 'I'll recommend you now.'

Somewhere in his papers is that hydraulics test; he kept it all these years. He also kept some of his father's papers.

"My dad never finished the 2nd grade, but he was an avid reader," Prescott said. "We couldn't afford to buy a newspaper, but sometimes he'd find a Sunday edition and bring it home and read it all the way through. He would say, 'Bud, you can tell a lot about this country by reading the want ads -- what people are trying to buy and sell.

"He took correspondence courses in applied electricity for a while, whenever he could afford them. I remember him sitting up at night under an old kerosene lamp. He'd draw, get a grade, work some more, draw, get a grade, and so forth. I've still got some of his drawings. It was pretty remarkable, but I didn't think too much about it at the time, because I thought my dad could do anything."

Many years later, as a professor and provost, Wallace Prescott counted among his best friends Bethel Carrington, "the only law enforcement officer we had, and he worked at night, because the students used to do a lot of crazy things then." And he was utterly devoted to one of the first lab technicians on campus, Charlie Hunter, who did everything from install the school's first computer to build furniture. "I don't think I've ever liked a non-

family member better," he said. "A lot of people thought it was peculiar, because here he was, working in his overalls, and here I was, dean of faculty. But we talked the same language."

While his best friend was James Seay Brown -- his first professor at Tech, then his colleague and his neighbor for 60 years -- he also admired and respected Bethel Carrington and Charlie Hunter as people who were useful in ways outside the classroom or board room. Wallace Prescott was useful in every way -- especially for a young campus trying to build a distinguished engineering program.

For a man like Wallace Prescott, though, any time would have been the right time, and any place would have been where he could be of use. That was the kind of man he was.

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