



James Shelby Thorp

February 7, 1937 – May 2, 2018

Professor James Shelby Thorp passed away on May 2, 2018 in Blacksburg, Virginia. He was predeceased by his son, Jeffrey Thorp, and is survived by his wife Jane Thorp, his daughter Betsy VanAlstyne, his son Gregory Thorp, stepdaughter Erica Shoemaker, and grandchildren, Alex Bruce, Kelsey Bruce and Emma Lamoureux.

He was born on February 7, 1937 in Kansas City, Missouri son of Joseph Chester and Ruth Vefe (McNamara) Thorp. After graduating from Kansas City Central High School in 1954, he entered Cornell University where he earned a Bachelor of Electrical Engineering degree in 1959, a Master of Science degree in 1961, and a Ph.D. degree in 1962.

Post graduation he remained at Cornell as an Assistant Professor in the School of Electrical Engineering (1962-1966), Associate Professor, (1966-1975), and Professor (1975-2004). He retired from Cornell in 2004 and was subsequently awarded Emeritus Professor status by the Board of Trustees. As of 2004 he had been at Cornell for 50 years, eight years as a student and forty-two years as a faculty member. During his tenure as a faculty member he served as the School's Associate Director (1991-1994), and the Director and Charles N. Mellowes Professor of Engineering (1994-2004). He was a Faculty intern American Electric Power (AEP) Service Corporation, New York City, 1976-1977 and served as a consultant to AEP from 1977 until 1983. During his career he wrote more than 200 technical publications, co-authored two books, and holds two U.S. patents

Upon retirement in 2004 he accepted an appointment as the Hugh P. and Ethey C. Kelley Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering as well as the Department Head of the Bradley Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering at Virginia Polytechnic and State University, Blacksburg, Virginia. He remained the head of the department until the

summer of 2009 when he again retired and was awarded the “Hugh P. and Ethel C. Kelly Professor Emeritus” title by the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors. He continued to be technically active after retirement until his death in 2018.

He was made a Fellow at Churchill College, University Cambridge in 1988, elected a Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers in 1989, elected to the National Academy of Engineering in 1996 “For contributions to the development of digital techniques for power system protection, monitoring, and control”. He received an IEEE Power Engineering Society Career Service Award in 2001 and the Outstanding Power Engineering Educator Award in 2006.

He was co-recipient of the Benjamin Franklin medal in Electrical Engineering, awarded by the Franklin Institute in 2008 for “... contributions to the power industry, particularly microprocessor controllers in electric power systems that have significantly decreased the occurrence and duration of power blackouts”. Jim’s co-recipient, Arun Phadke, said of his collaboration with Jim, “In all our work together I could always count on him to provide strong analytical foundation to the work we did. Together, we wrote numerous papers and books, travelled to many countries on work related matters, and I believe we took delight in each other’s companionship. He was a master raconteur and his colorful stories were always a joy to the listener. I will miss him.”

Jim’s technical achievements are many. It was also his work in and out of the classroom, with graduate and undergraduate students, that was especially laudable. He understood very complex ideas so clearly and was always eager to share his understanding and enthusiasm with others. In addition, he loved the game of golf and was not just an exceptional golfer but he was a “student of the game”.

In his later years, he had to give up the game he loved for health reasons. He then decided to focus on his love of art. As a result he became an outstanding artist. His favorite artist was Jackson Pollock. Jim subsequently created several original pieces in that genre. He also loved woodworking, and the opera. For all of his life he had the habit of spending Saturday mornings doing his research while listening to the opera. And he loved to tell stories of his own creation. His favorite stories were usually about golf or something that happened to him during one of his travels.

Jim was a cherished father and grandfather, a revered educator, a gifted artist, an avid golfer, woodworker, world traveler and an accomplished teller of stories. He has been missed.

Written by Robert J. Thomas and Terrance L. Fine