Memorial to Jules Braunstein  
1913–1983

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Jules Braunstein—a man for all seasons—died in New Orleans on March 25, 1983, after a brief bout with acute leukemia. He was dedicated to his profession, honored by his peers, admired by a grateful community, warmly regarded by colleagues and by his students, whom he loved, and loved for himself by a host of friends. With his death, the geological community lost one of its distinguished members.

Born in Buffalo, New York, on November 4, 1913, Jules was one of the fortunate few who knows at a very early age what he wants to do for the rest of his life. At the tender age of 9, he enrolled in after-school classes at the Buffalo Museum of Science and began his lifelong love affair with geology. When only 15, Jules enrolled at the University of Buffalo; he transferred 2 years later to George Washington University to study paleontology. During his undergraduate years he worked at the U.S. National Museum as a volunteer curator in order to learn from the great figures in paleontology, such as R. S. Bassler and G. A. Cooper. Upon completion of his bachelor’s degree in 1933, he enrolled at Columbia University, earning an M.A. in 1936. While at Columbia, Jules met and married Olga Ravitch; they were married for nearly 50 years, and Olga survives him. Their home represented the integration of their personalities: there were books and art and music; cheerfulness and brightness; and always Jules’s wonderful, though sometimes gruff, sense of humor. He was a master of the pun, but his humor was always gentle and kind. He cared deeply about his fellow man.

Jules was first and foremost a geologist. He joined Shell Oil Company in the fall of 1937 as a micropaleontologist and progressed through the company hierarchy as a technical specialist serving at various times as paleontologist, stratigrapher, senior stratigrapher, area stratigrapher, and staff geologist. He remained a loyal Shell employee until his retirement 41 years later. During his tenure he lived and worked in Houston, Shreveport, Jackson, and New Orleans, where he spent the last 30 years of his life. Much of the later part of his career was spent in compiling geologic folios covering many areas of interest to Shell, and these will be used by company geologists for years to come. A former chief geologist of Shell wrote to Jules shortly before his death: “Without you as custodian and chronicler of the geologic progress in the Gulf Coast, much knowledge simply would have been lost. You did all this with skill and great modesty, quite disproportionate to the scope of your contribution.”

Upon his “retirement” in 1978, Jules accepted a position as adjunct professor at the University of New Orleans and taught there until the time of his death. He participated fully in the life of the Geology Department and will be well remembered by a host of students whose lives he touched during those years.
As busy as he was with his professional responsibilities at Shell and then at the university, Jules participated actively in several professional and scientific societies. He was elected to Fellowship in the Geological Society of America in the mid-1960s; he served as cochairman of the Registration Committee for the 1955 Annual Meeting, as cochairman of the Technical Program Committee for the 1967 Annual Meeting, and as general chairman for the highly successful 1982 meeting. He served for 10 years as a member of the Publications Committee of the American Geological Institute.

Jules also served the American Association of Petroleum Geologists in many ways: as a general editor of the Bulletin from 1964 to 1977, chairman of the Publications Committee (1970–1976), chairman of the Technical Program Committee in 1965 and 1976, and chairman for the Gulf Coast Area of the COSUNA Project. He was compiler of several Reprint Series volumes, editor of Memoir 29 (North American Oil and Gas Fields), and coeditor of Memoir 8 (Diapirism). In 1975 the association honored him with its Distinguished Service Award. He was awarded Honorary Membership in 1980. In his response to his Honorary Membership citation, Jules made two statements that emphasize the philosophy he lived by: “Because of the strong debt of gratitude I felt toward my profession for affording me so interesting a career, I have been willing to work on any committee for any geologic organization that invited me to do so.” and “I believe that a geologist who can retire from the field has been in the wrong profession.”

In 1976 the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists awarded him Honorary Membership, and in the same year he also became an Honorary Member of the Gulf Coast Section of SEPM, of which he was a charter member and in which he served as president in 1970–71. Jules also made significant contributions to the Gulf Coast Association of Geological Societies. He was editor of several volumes of the Transactions of the Association and editor of the Bibliography of Gulf Coast Geological Literature. The association awarded him Honorary Membership in 1982. He was also active in many committees of the New Orleans Geological Society, was elected to its presidency in 1960, served on its Board of Directors in 1961 and from 1969 to 1972. For this society he edited three volumes on southeast Louisiana and offshore Louisiana oil and gas fields. The society made him an Honorary Life Member in 1972.

During all of this service he was a “watch-dog” for excellence and integrity. His editorial “perfectionism” is legendary. Jules shares space with the poet Milton on the page facing the title page of the AGI Glossary of Geology (which he also helped to edit). There, a quotation attributed to Jules Braunstein reads: “It is not really a mark of distinction for a geologist's writing to be so obscure that a glossary is required for its comprehension.” He is the author of more than a dozen scientific papers that demonstrate his devotion to quality and clarity.

Jules’s service and enjoyment of life was not restricted to his profession. He was president of the Greater New Orleans Science and Education Fair; he wrote an art and music column for the Jackson Daily News; he was “DJ” for the classical music radio station in New Orleans; and during their many years in New Orleans, Jules and Olga were avid supporters of the symphony, Friends of Music, Museum of Fine Arts, and many of the New Orleans art galleries.

Jules has touched the lives of many geologists in the petroleum industry and of many young people, potential geologists and scientists. It is likely that his influence will continue for years to come. A memorial service was held for him on April 4, 1983, at the University of New Orleans. Close friends and colleagues, in the presence of an assembly of several hundred, described Jules as they knew him: as a friend, a neighbor, a member of his community, a member of his profession, a compassionate human being, and “quite a guy.”