



Howard Upton: Mr. PEI

In the 50th anniversary year of the Petroleum Equipment Institute, Howard Upton recalls his exciting life before, during, and after being the first chief executive of PEI. Jaime Sessions interviews Howard Upton.



Jean and Howard Upton

Half a century ago, Howard Upton became the first employee of the trade association known today as the Petroleum Equipment Institute. He managed PEI for 37 years until his retirement in 1987. During that period he exerted so much influence over the structure and thrust of the association that many long-time members routinely referred to him as “Mr. PEI.” Since stepping down from his PEI post, he has worked as a communications consultant for corporate clients, as a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin and the University of Alaska, and as a contributing writer for such publications as The Wall Street Journal. He has also continued to perform contract writing assignments for PEI.

The early years

Howard Upton was born May 17, 1922 in the small eastern Oklahoma town of Tahlequah. During his teen-age years he worked as a columnist for the weekly newspaper. The affinity he developed during this period for putting words on paper has served him well throughout the ensuing years.

“Everyone has some narrow talent,” he said. “Mine happens to be the ability to explain complex subjects in clear language.”

Following high school graduation, Howard entered a small state college in his home town. After two years there, he transferred to the University of Oklahoma where he planned to study law. He enrolled at OU in September 1941. Less than three months later the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred, and he enlisted in a US Navy officer-training program. The program allowed him to complete the work required for a bachelor’s degree—including one year of law school—before going off to active duty.



Lt. (j.g.) Howard Upton, in 1944 while serving as a USN bomb disposal officer in Milford Haven, Wales.

Bombs and bunkers

In April of 1943 he reported to the Navy’s midshipmen school at Northwestern University in Chicago. Four months later he was commissioned as an ensign and assigned to the USN bomb disposal school in Washington, DC where he trained in the technology of dealing with unexploded bombs and land mines.

The bomb disposal school was located on the campus of American University. While he was in training there, he met a transplanted Chicago girl—Jean Devereaux—whose father was a US Army major stationed in Washington. Howard and Jean were later to be united in a marriage that has endured for 55 years.

After completing bomb disposal school, Howard was assigned to a USN amphibious base located on the west coast of Wales, and in the winter of 1943-44 he was sent on temporary duty to London, where he worked alongside British officers removing unexploded bombs from the city's rubble.

"I was not exactly excited to be working with unexploded bombs. It was scary at times and often frustrating. A 2000-pound bomb that doesn't explode can bury itself 15 feet or so in the ground. To render it safe you have to begin by digging a hole and bracing up the excavation on all sides. That's not exactly exciting work. Then, when you finally get to the bomb itself, you have to try to figure out what kind of a fuse it has and whether the fuse might be booby-trapped. That can be—well, scary."

After the Allied invasion of Normandy in June of 1944, Howard was assigned to a USN base in the French harbor city of Le Havre. Over the course of the next seven months he was principally engaged in removal of German land mines and booby traps from coastal installations adjacent to the English Channel.

"The German troops had built heavy bunkers along the coast," he recalls, "and before they retreated they installed booby traps in many of the bunkers. It was the job of some of us to locate and remove these explosive devices. I'm afraid we became rather careless about this. The Germans were so consistently precise that they always put their booby traps under the third step of the stairway leading down into the bunker. Never under the second step or the fourth step. When my petty officer and I began to figure this out, we would walk boldly into each new bunker, go down two steps, and then reach under the third step to see if it was fitted with a booby trap. Happily, as a result of unerring German precision, we survived."

Cinematic Obligation

It's shocking to find they're growing old,
Even worse to discover they're dead.
Movie idols should remain young and alive
How could you, Ginger and Fred?

Court martials & speeches

Early in 1945 Howard, now a junior-grade lieutenant, was ordered back to the Navy bomb disposal school in Washington. There he was made editor of the school's technical bulletin and he resumed courtship of the Chicago girl he had met two years earlier. In June of 1945, Howard Upton and Jean Devereaux were married in Washington.

Three months later the war with Japan ended. Instead of being discharged, however, Howard was sent in August of 1945 to Yokosuka, the site of a Japanese Navy base on Tokyo Bay. He and other bomb

disposal men were supposed to clean up the large stocks of enemy ordnance in the area. Soon after he arrived in Japan, however, his assignment was changed. The Navy had a large backlog of court martial cases, and lawyers were needed to help dispose of them. Because Howard had received a year of law school training prior to entering active service, he was transferred from bomb disposal work to judge advocate duty. He spent the rest of the year prosecuting court martial cases.

In January 1946, he was transferred back to Washington where he was promoted to senior-grade lieutenant and assigned as a speech-and-article writer in the office of James Forrestal, then Secretary of the Navy. In that post, he was primarily engaged in writing speeches and Congressional testimony for members of Forrestal's staff.



First NAOEJ board of directors (Howard seated on right).

PEI

In September of 1946, Howard separated from military service. He re-entered the OU college of law, under the GI Bill, and Jean enrolled in liberal arts courses at the university. Howard completed the Oklahoma state bar examination, and was sworn in as an attorney. His experience as a prosecutor in Japan had convinced him he would not be comfortable in a conventional law practice. This prompted him to look into a job opening with a national trade association for petroleum refiners, headquartered in Tulsa. He was offered the job—that of industrial relations director—and for the next three years wrote newsletters and conducted seminars which explained federal labor regulations that applied to oil companies.

If the Phone Rings Don't Answer It

Crouched within his lily pad
A crafty frog is napping,
Waiting for the hapless flies
That later he'll be zapping.

Crouched within his cubicle
A telemarketing spinner
Is waiting for the rest of us
To seat ourselves for dinner.

In the spring of 1951, Howard read a story in an oil industry journal which announced formation of a new trade organization called the National Association of Oil Equipment Jobbers (NAOEJ). The story said the group intended to hire a full-time executive to manage its affairs, and that applications for the job should be submitted to Jimmy Newberry, a Memphis oil equipment distributor. Howard decided to apply. Newberry invited him to Memphis and then arranged for him to meet with the full NAOEJ board of directors, meeting three months later in St. Louis. Howard was hired for the job at a salary of \$500 a month. He soon opened the first office for NAOEJ—now PEI—in a single room on the

14th floor of a downtown Tulsa office building.



Newly elected NAOEJ president August Schramm (right) and his wife, Jean, flank Jean and Howard at 5th convention in Kansas City, 1955.

"Two men were primarily responsible for getting us started," Howard said. "They were Jimmy Newberry of Memphis and Fred Coffield, then of South Bend, Indiana. Both were Navy veterans of World War II, both had returned to family-owned petroleum marketing equipment companies after the war, and both felt isolated in their new management responsibilities. When they encountered a management problem, they felt a need to discuss it with other distributors who had struggled with the same problem. So they began tracking down other equipment distributors and proposing the formation of a national association."

During the first 10 years of NAOEJ's existence, the association's "staff" consisted of Howard and a typist. It was during this period, in 1955, that he inaugurated the organization's venerable periodical, the TulsaLetter. He confesses now that in designing the new publication he brazenly sought to replicate the style and format of the popular Kiplinger Washington Letter.

In reminiscing today about the early years of the association, Howard salutes half a dozen or so owners of pioneer member companies. It was they, he said, who made sure the organization survived during its difficult formative period. In addition to Newberry and Coffield, he singles out John Quilter, Richmond; Eugene de Penaloza, St. Louis; Bill Crowder, Dallas; H.R. "Horsey" Tuller of Columbus, Ohio; Mel Schlesinger, Kansas City; and Gus Schramm, New York City.

"Had it not been for the perseverance of those guys, and others who came along a little later—men like Ed Marshall of Atlanta, 'Hobby' Habegger of Philadelphia, and Warren Cruzen and Elder Shearon of Memphis—we wouldn't have made it," Howard said. "They were our stalwarts. They kept us going. Unfortunately, all of them have departed this earth. They won't be around to see the fruits of their work and dedication when PEI marks its 50th anniversary later this year."

A major turning point in Howard's professional life occurred in 1966 when the association he had been managing for 15 years made the transition from National Association of Oil Equipment Jobbers to Petroleum Equipment Institute.

"Some of our founders—Jimmy Newberry and Gene de Penaloza, in particular—were strongly opposed to the change, although they later gave it their approval. I spent a good part of my time in 1965 (we still had only a three-person staff) working out the details for PEI. The organization had to be completely restructured. We had to develop a new logo. We had to have a new procedure for electing directors. We had to redefine our mission."

Head table guests at the annual dinner dance of the association's 15th annual convention in Houston in 1965. Howard and Jean Upton are seated on the left.



The formal transition from NAOEJ to PEI occurred during the 1966 annual convention of the association, held in Chicago. Association president Elder L. Shearon, Jr. of Memphis presided over the

membership session at which the change was submitted to voting members for a decision. The shift to PEI was approved by a 95-to-5 percent margin.

In looking back over the nearly four decades during which he managed the affairs of NAOEJ/PEI, Howard can recall a long list of milestones with which he dealt. These milestones include the transition to self-serve marketing, the emergence of fiberglass storage tanks, the first Arab oil embargo in 1973, the purchase of the first PEI headquarters building, the advent of the PEI 10-Groups, the coining of the “Convex” acronym, the inauguration of the “recommended practices” program and the hiring of Bob Renkes onto the PEI staff.

When asked to identify the single most important innovation he put into effect during his 37-year tenure at PEI’s helm, Howard’s response was “the 10-Groups.” In 1982, prompted by a suggestion from Pat Ryan, a PEI distributor in Green Bay, Wisconsin who was later to serve as president of the association, Howard set up the structure for groups of ten or twelve distributor company owners from like-sized, non-competing firms and organized them into informal groups for the exchange of management information.

Senior Euphemism

Don’t speak of him As being retired;
He finds that term insulting.
He prefers, instead, To have it said
That he’s doing a little consulting.

Other interests

Although Howard Upton was primarily involved in the day-to-day management of PEI during his 37-year tenure with the organization, he was also involved in outside activities. One of his principal outside activities was service as a board member of the Telex Corporation. Telex was headquartered in Tulsa and also had plants in Minnesota, North Carolina, Massachusetts, and New York. It manufactured communications equipment, and in the late 1970s it became a major manufacturer of computers and computer systems. Howard continued as a board member until 1988, when Telex merged with the Memorex Corporation. In addition to his service on the Telex board, Howard served two terms on the board of the American Society of Association Executives, and was a frequent contributor of management articles to ASAE’s monthly journal.

He began selling his written work to national magazines in 1948. The Saturday Evening Post, then a weekly, began buying and publishing Howard’s satirical essays, and in the late ‘fifties one of his feature-length articles, which had appeared in the Post, was picked up and republished in the Reader’s Digest.

Howard’s book, Petroleum Equipment Lexicon, written in 1995 for PEI, is available from the association or through purchase on the Internet at amazon.com.

His sale of management articles to The Wall Street Journal began in the mid-eighties. The articles

were seen by the editor of Southwest Airlines in-flight magazine, then published in New York, and Howard was invited to begin writing a by-lined column for that publication.

Each day on its op-ed page, The Wall Street Journal runs a humorous feature called “Pepper...& Salt.” The feature consists of a cartoon and two or three light verses. In 1994 the Journal began buying Howard’s poesies for this feature, and since then has been publishing two or three each month.

Family and personal life

Howard and Jean Upton live in the same house in Tulsa that they built in 1955. One reason they have remained there is that their four children enjoy returning for visits to the home in which they grew up. When asked which of his accomplishments gives him the most satisfaction, Howard immediately responded: “The kids we raised.”

These children—each a graduate of a different university—are scattered about the country. Pam, the oldest daughter, lives with her husband, Greg, in Dallas, where she is a speech therapist in the Irving public school system. Daughter Barbara has an art studio in Denver where she illustrates children’s books for New York publisher, Dutton. Her most recent book is Adventure on Klickitat Island. A third daughter, Marti, lives in Tulsa with her husband, Jeff, and two teen-age sons, Upton and Jeffrey. A professional journalist, she was the original editor of PEI’s Safety Letter. She now writes romance novels that are available on the Internet.

Howard and Jean’s fourth child, Brian, and his wife, Elizabeth, live in a suburb of Raleigh, North Carolina. They are the parents of a young son, Sam—who will soon have a baby sister. Brian, who graduated from Rice University in Houston and earned a master’s degree in computer science at the University of North Carolina, is director of product design for Red Storm Entertainment, writer Tom Clancy’s computer game company. Brian supervised the design of such best-selling computer games as Rainbow Six and Rogue’s Spear.

In addition to his writing and editorial work for corporate clients, Howard lectured for six years, following his PEI retirement, at seminars on tank installation presented by the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the University of Alaska, in Fairbanks and Anchorage. The seminars were coordinated by PE&T publisher John Hartmann, whom Howard had known since the days when Hartmann was treasurer—and later president—of PEI.

A disadvantage of making a life-time career of managing an international trade association, Howard confesses, is to discover later that very few of the close friends you have made over the years live in your home town. Instead, they are scattered around the globe. Today, however, he manages regularly to keep in touch with a group of old PEI friends, some of whom he has known four decades or more. This group includes Florence Smith of Pittsburgh, the only woman PEI president; Ed Beaver of Charlotte, NC, former president of Southern Pump & Tank Co.; Paul Neves of Seattle, PEI president in 1971 who will mark his 100th birthday in June; Bill Petter of South Haven, MI, longtime CEO of OPW; Mike Farmer of Williamsport, PA, owner of the Farmer Co.; Jamie Thompson, Southwold, England, a

long-time official of the British agency that oversees liquid fuel installation projects in the UK; and a score of others.

“We keep in touch with our best friends through letters and phone calls,” Howard said.

Although they travel less than they once did, Howard and Jean usually try to attend the annual meeting of the Georgia Tank & Equipment Contractors Association in Savannah. Howard has addressed the group on several occasions, and has been made an honorary member of GTEC.

“We enjoy going to Savannah,” he said. “We like Bill and Pam Greer, who manage GTEC. We also value the opportunity of getting together in an informal setting with other old GTEC friends.”

The man who is referred to as “Mr. PEI” still doesn’t think of himself as being retired, even though it is has been almost 13 years since he stepped down from his post as the association’s executive vice president. He begins each day by reading The Wall Street Journal, and then sits down at his computer and does some writing. He may turn out an essay or a magazine article. Or he may merely produce what he refers to as a “trivial verse”—like the rhymes in this article.

Prudence

When asked the name of your company,
You’d be wise to avoid the truth
If the question is asked as you snoop about
In a competitor’s trade show booth.