

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

SIDNEY DEAN TOWNLEY (1867 – 1946)

In the death of Sidney Dean Townley, Professor of Mathematics, Emeritus, on March 16, the University lost one of the most conscientious and public-spirited members of its early faculty.

Professor Townley was born on April 10, 1867, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, and began his academic career in the University of Wisconsin. His first degree there, the B. Sc. in 1890, was followed by a fellowship in astronomy, then an assistantship in astronomy and mathematics, and the M.Sc. in 1892. For the next year he was Hearst Fellow in Astronomy at the University of California. Then he became Instructor in Astronomy at the University of Michigan, leaving to study for two years in Berlin and Munich, returning to Michigan in 1896, and receiving the degree of Doctor of Science in 1897. In 1898 he went to the University of California again, this time as Instructor in Practical Astronomy. While there he took charge of the International Latitude Observatory at Ukiah in 1903 and became Lecturer in Astronomy in 1904. In 1907 he came to Stanford, where he has remained except for the year 1925-26, when he was visiting Lecturer in Astronomy at Harvard.

Professor Townley's astronomical interests included not only practical astronomy and variations of latitude, already mentioned, but also asteroids, comets, and variable stars. In variable stars, an especially notable contribution was the "Harvard Catalogue of Long Period Variable Stars," published in 1928 by Professor Townley in collaboration with Miss Annie J. Cannon and Mr. Leon Campbell.

Concurrently with his astronomical work, at least from 1911 onward, Professor Townley conducted researches in seismology. This work included the management of the Branner Seismometer Station, from 1928 until his death. In 1939, seven years after his retirement, his series of more than one hundred research papers culminated in a monumental work, prepared in collaboration with Mr. Maxwell Wallen entitled "A Descriptive Catalogue of the Earthquakes of the Pacific Coast of the United States, 1769 to 1928."

This last work is made especially valuable by a quality, characteristic of all of Professor Townley's work, namely, extreme thoroughness and conscientiousness. Files of old newspapers were searched for every shred of information; witnesses to earthquakes were interviewed whenever possible; and the accounts from all sources were critically examined and appraised. In short, the work is described by one of the most eminent of living seismologists as "just as complete and just as good as it can possibly be made," so that in it the study of Pacific Coast earthquakes up to 1928 is "done, once for all."

The same conscientious thoroughness was shown by Professor Townley as Chief Editor of the Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America, from 1911 to 1930, during which time the Bulletin was noted for its good editorial work. He also served this society as Secretary-Treasurer for the same period, and as President 1935.

Other scientific societies of which he was a member included the Astronomical Society, the Astronomische Gesellschaft, the California Academy of Sciences, and the Wisconsin Academy; and he was especially active in the Astronomical Society of the Pacific, of which he was President in 1916.

As a teacher, Professor Townley kept astronomy alive at Stanford, despite the lack of an observatory, and not only alive but vitally interesting to large classes, year after year. Among students he was noted, not only for this achievement, but also for his kindness and at the same time for the unswerving justice of his grades.

Other educational work by Professor Townley included twenty years of service on the local school boards, both for the Palo Alto Union High School, for which he became President of the 'Board., and the Stanford Elementary School. In both schools the present fine buildings were constructed largely under his guidance.

Throughout all these activities Professor Townley was modest and unassuming, never asserting himself in his own interest, though always ready to stand up vigorously for the rights of the University or the scientific societies and schools whose interests he was obligated to protect. These qualities, with his kindness and high ideals, won him, the admiration and respect of his many friends.

Be it resolved, therefore, that with a deep sense of appreciation of his loyalty and service to the University, the community, and science, this memorial of Professor Townley's achievements be recorded in the minutes of the Academic Council and a copy be transmitted to his family.

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J. Uspensky