



Mechanical Engineering
Academy of Distinguished Alumni

Mr. Frank Wilkins McBee, Jr.
Charter Member

BSME, The University of Texas at Austin, 1947
MSME, The University of Texas at Austin, 1950

Founder, Chairman, and CEO
Tracor, Inc.

Frank Wilkins McBee, Jr., was born in Ridley Park (Philadelphia), Pennsylvania, on January 22, 1920. The son of a French-Canadian mother from upper New York State and a father, Frank Wilkins McBee, Sr., who was a descendant of a pioneer Texas family, McBee was known as a consummate Texan: smart, tough, even gruff at times, but always a gentleman.

After growing up in Manor and South Austin, sometimes actually riding a burro to school, McBee headed to engineering school at The University of Texas at Austin. His studies at UT Austin were interrupted by WWII, but not before he married Sue Brandt McBee, editor of the Daily Texan and later named an Outstanding Alumnus of the UT College of Communications. After graduating from the USAF Engineering Officers School at Yale and service in India, where he supervised the maintenance of bombers “flying the Hump”, McBee returned home to receive both a BSME (1947) and MSME (1950) from The University of Texas at Austin.

A member of Tau Beta Pi, Sigma Xi and Pi Tau Sigma, McBee spent much of the 1950s teaching in UT’s Department of Mechanical Engineering and as a supervisor in what was then called its Defense Research Lab, where he met physicist Richard N. Lane. In 1955, McBee joined Lane, Dr. Chester McKinney and Jess Stanbrough to found Associated Consultants and Engineers, Inc., later renamed Texas Research Associates, Inc. Originally specializing in acoustics, the company branched into defense electronics with its 1962 merger with Austin’s other outstanding tech startup, Textran, Inc., and the combined entity became Tracor, Inc. A decade later, Tracor was Austin’s first homegrown Fortune 500 and NYSE-listed corporation.

McBee began as treasurer and succeeded Lane as president, CEO and chairman of the board from 1972-1988.

From its roots in a small former grocery store at 17th and Guadalupe, Tracor grew to an international company with 11,000 employees and a large campus in east Austin that would attract such neighbors as Motorola, Texas Instruments and MCC. McBee was credited with naming Austin the “Silicon Gulch”. Among many products, Tracor focused as both manufacturer and consultant on passive defense countermeasures, analytic instruments, and the revolutionary “Autofuse”, now used by every automaker in the world.

Not just an entrepreneur, McBee also bore a strong sense of civic duty. He and Sue were leaders in the preservation of Austin’s historic buildings and homes, the arts, and education. The Frank and Sue McBee Elementary School was dedicated in 1999. McBee also found time to lead the Austin Yacht Club and The Headliners Club of Austin.

For all of his contributions, McBee was among the initial class of Distinguished Alumni of the UT College of Engineering and, in 1988, was named a Distinguished Alumni of The University of Texas at Austin. In addition, he was inducted in 1990 to the Texas Business Hall of Fame. Among his many awards, he was especially proud of his election in 1989 to the National Academy of Engineering.

McBee died on April 7, 2000, followed in 2011 by Sue, his wife of 57 years. He is survived by a daughter, Marilyn McBee Moore, and son, Robert F. McBee (BBA 1972).