

# AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is the life story of Dr. John J. McKetta Jr., born in 1915, a Ukrainian American coal miner who rescued himself from the coal mines and went on to become the world's foremost energy expert, a university dean, and one of America's most widely known and beloved professors. This is the myth. Who is the man?

In this book I try to answer this question. But don't be fooled: the myth is part of the man. His life is too much of a fairy tale to pretend you can be a great human without a myth. This rags-to-riches story traces how he worked, loved, and played his way into becoming the godfather of modern chemical engineering, dedicating his life to helping students reach their dreams, and helping his country produce and use energy well. His story spans the twentieth century and goes on today. At the time of this writing, he is alive and well at age one hundred.

When I was asked by my family to write this book, and when the McKetta Department of Chemical Engineering offered its support, I knew it would be a project that involved many people and many archives. All his life, John McKetta has kept records, as if he knew that his life was significant and would be useful for people to study. His archives are stored at the University of Texas, and they include artifacts ranging from department coffee mugs to World War II ration cards to letters from his wife (in a file called "Letters from de Pink") to his famous energy lectures to notes from presidential first ladies.

As I've studied his life, interviewing former students and colleagues and examining his extensive files, my wishes for his biography have become more personal. His records and all the words from his students reveal a person who lived an exemplary life: generous, empathetic, self-trusting, and astonishingly disciplined. And just as his life was shaped by the century in which it took place (and his contributions helped shape the century, too), my research on his life is shaped by the era in which I live. In this time, there is a great deal of interest in scientific research on happiness. "What makes a good life?" researchers are asking,

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and popular culture follows suit. Part of that research has been a systematic study of centenarians, and there have been links drawn between happiness and long lives. I am interested in the relationship between his happiness, his productivity, and his longevity. There will be other biographies, I hope, that look more deeply at his contributions to science, to world energy use, or to the University of Texas. In this biography I try to answer the question of what made his life so *good*.

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*John J. McKetta Jr. at his one hundredth birthday celebration.*