



John R. Brooks



JOHN R. BROOKS

John Robinson Brooks, emeritus Frank Sawyer Professor of Surgery, died on October 15, 2001, at the age of 82. John, HMS '43, was a loyal and vital part of the Harvard community for the better part of sixty years. He was born in Cambridge and educated both at Harvard College and Harvard Medical School, graduating in one of the accelerated wartime classes when students drilled in the Quadrangle in uniform. After medical school graduation, John went on to a surgical internship and a year of residency at the New York Hospital before assuming active duty in the Army for two years, most of which was served as a surgeon on Guam in a station hospital.

He then returned to Boston as a Research Fellow at the MGH in 1948 where he worked in Francis Moore's laboratory. His project was part of a study in which he and Franny were studying the physiological effects of vagotomy in peptic ulcer disease. It was altogether natural for him to follow his mentor when Franny assumed the chair of surgery at the Brigham later that year. There he completed his residency, serving as Chief Resident in 1951-52. Staying on as a

member of the surgical staff, John soon became a core member of the tightly knit and forward-looking group that Moore was assembling. He soon forged a strong feeling of institutional loyalty and steadily developed an active general surgical practice. Although he remained generally competent, his special interest was mainly in the field of pancreatic diseases, about which he published a number of important papers over several years. He was also caught up in the wave of interest in transplantation that had struck the Brigham in the late 1950s. He participated in this by conducting a number of proficient animal experiments to evaluate the functional properties and fate of transplanted endocrine tissues, especially pancreatic islets and parathyroid cells, housed in cell impermeable filter capsules. He also explored the efficacy of pancreatic transplants for the correction of diabetes.

In those days, he lived the busy life of the young, Harvard surgical academic. This consisted inevitably of a patchwork of various responsibilities, as each person fortunate enough to receive an appointment in one of the affiliated hospitals was obliged to find gainful work anywhere possible and “live off the land.” Thus, he developed staff membership at a number of hospitals, including the Newton-Wellesley, Robert Breck Brigham, and New England Deaconess, where he assisted Dr. Leland McKittrick for a time. He also joined the staff of the University Health Services in Cambridge. He became a stalwart member of this group, where he served capably for many years, becoming Chief of the Surgical Clinic in Holyoke Center. His activities there brought him into contact with faculty and students in this part of the University, whom he encountered in large numbers over the years. He was a good ambassador in those precincts for the medical school and for medicine in general, as he exuded enthusiasm for his discipline and obvious competence. These qualities doubtless served well to reassure anxious patients and helped greatly to ensure the reputation for quality that came to be attached to the Holyoke Center enterprise. With his reliable and energetic presence, he earned a place as a notable and respected figure in the far-flung Harvard enterprise, not only in the Longwood area but in Cambridge as well.

He was promoted through the ranks at both the Brigham and HMS, becoming Professor of Surgery in 1970, and later the first incumbent of the Sawyer chair, a position established by one of his grateful patients.

John was a big man, close to six and a half feet tall. He was physically strong and usually exuded good cheer, often punctuated with his marvelous reverberating laugh. His opinions were usually not hard to make out, as they often came to the fore early in a conversation and then were not easily changed. Although in the course of a busy and demanding day, he may have given the impression of gruffness to some, his underlying disposition was clearly sunny, and he enjoyed life and good fellowship immensely.

John’s loyalty to HMS and wide-ranging friendships among its graduates were richly expressed through his editorship, from 1956 to 1967, of the HMS Alumni Bulletin. One witness to John’s generous and refreshing approach is Robert Goldwyn, HMS ’56, who has been editing the Bulletin since 1966. With John’s encouragement he became a writer for the Bulletin while still an undergraduate. He shares an anecdote, which illustrates John’s open and energetic approach to things. Around 1960, Goldwyn had just heard about fiber optics, and asked John why they could not be applied to sigmoidoscopy, then performed with rigid instruments. John immediately telephoned a major American optical company and was peremptorily told that it was “not feasible.”

John was widely respected by his colleagues. He was a regular contributor at various surgical meetings, both local and national, served as President of the New England Surgical Association, and was an active member of many other groups.

He was also an outdoor man. He had great affection for his series of sailboats, which he was partial to naming *Callina*. He came to know the Maine shore well, along which he cruised many times. In his family refuge in Maine he had many happy times in an environment of firm family stability. Summers there with his four children were precious for all concerned. His spacious house in Weston was also a notable setting for memorable and entertaining evenings. Those of us who attended dinners for KPE, or “The Old Docs Dinner Club” (of which John was Secretary for a number of years) will remember each event with special nostalgia. His wife, Dorothy, a stalwart, warm hearted New Englander to the core, played an essential and skillful part in these events. Their two-story living room was made for John, whose large frame appeared to fill its ample space.

His final illness was a protracted one. His wife, Dorothy, had predeceased him at Fox Hill Village, where they had moved to some time previously. His remaining family, who had been most supportive of him, consist of David C. Brooks, M.D., a member of the surgical staff of the Brigham and Women's Hospital, Stephen H. Brooks, Nancy Brooks Blitz, and Geoffrey R. Brooks.

John Brooks cast a long shadow at Harvard. It seemed to many that he had almost become a part of the physical structure of the old Brigham, and it will be hard to imagine the place without him.

Respectfully submitted,

Paul S. Russell, *Chairperson*

John A. Mannick

Curtis Prout

George S. Richardson