

Robert E. Bergstrom (1923-1996)

Robert E. Bergstrom, former Chief of the Illinois State Geological Survey, died on September 28, 1996, at Carle Foundation Hospital in Urbana, Illinois, at the age of 73. He is survived by his wife, Margaret, who resides in Champaign, Illinois; two daughters, Elizabeth Selander and Joan Kemna, both of Naperville, Illinois; a son, John Bergstrom, of Hoffman Estates, Illinois; a brother, James Bergstrom, of Lake Forest, California; and six grandchildren. He was preceded in death by his parents and a sister.



Bob was born March 27, in Rock Island, Illinois, a son of Raymond and Gladys Bergstrom. He served on destroyer minesweepers in the Pacific in World War II and was discharged from the U.S. Navy as a lieutenant junior grade in 1946. That year, in Moline, Illinois, he married Margaret Carlson, a union that was to last 50 years. The couple celebrated their golden wedding anniversary on August 24. Bob was later to describe the most fortunate event of his life as meeting and marrying Margaret.

Bob received a bachelor of arts degree from Augustana College, Rock Island, in 1947, a master's degree in geology from the University of Wisconsin in 1950, and a doctoral degree in geology, also from the University of Wisconsin, in 1953. He was an instructor in geology at Beloit College and the University of Wisconsin before he joined the staff of the Illinois State Geological Survey in 1953. One of his initial assignments with the Survey was to serve as field assistant to Morris M. Leighton, then Chief of the Survey, a position that Bob was destined to fill. Bob rapidly progressed through the ranks from Assistant Geologist in 1953 to Associate Geologist, then to Geologist, and then in 1963 to Head of the Groundwater and Geophysical Exploration Section. He became Principal Geologist and Head of the Geological Group in 1974, Assistant Chief of the Survey in 1979, and Acting Chief in 1981. He was appointed Chief of the Illinois State Geological Survey in 1982. Following a highly successful career of 30 years at the Survey, Bob retired on September 1, 1983.

Bob's fields of professional interest were hydrogeology and environmental geology, particularly as the latter related to the disposal of hazardous wastes. He authored or co-authored approximately 45 professional publications related to his areas of expertise. During a leave of absence from the Survey from 1961-63, he served as technical director of a groundwater investigation in the Kingdom of Kuwait. He later served as a consultant in groundwater investigations in Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Guatemala as well as in a number of states in the U.S. One of his major accomplishments as a consultant was to direct the geologic and hydrogeologic investigations for the facility for disposal of low-level radioactive waste at Barnwell, South Carolina. After his retirement, he continued to serve for six years as a consultant on geological matters related to waste disposal.

Bob believed passionately that geology is an important tool for helping people make their surroundings more healthful and for making better use of natural resources. While he was their leader, scientists in the groundwater section coined the term "environmental geology" for the application of geology to solving environmental problems. Many of Bob's publications dealt with groundwater protection and waste disposal issues and he brought the rigor of classical geology to the new field of environmental geology.

He was a fellow of the Geological Society of America serving as Secretary-Treasurer of its Hydrogeology Group from 1968-72. He was also a member of the American Institute of Professional Geologists, the Association of Groundwater Scientists and Engineers of the National Water Well Association, the Illinois Academy of Science, and Sigma Xi. As a member of the Advisory Committee to the National Water Well Association, he helped to evaluate the groundwater pollution potential of hydrogeologic settings. He was also an active participant in the National Academy of Science/National Research Council committees and panels, including the Committee on Geological Sciences, the Committee on Remote Sensing Programs for Earth Resource Surveys, the Committee on Surface Mining and Reclamation (COSMAR), and COSMAR panels on construction minerals, clay, and bauxite. In 1974, Bob received an Outstanding Achievement Award from Augustana College for his work in geology.

Bob will be remembered, not only for his professional contributions, but for his outstanding personal traits. He was a warm and caring person, a man of integrity, a gentleman. He was a low-key, concerned but unflappable individual with a good sense of timing and humor. Two anecdotes or examples perhaps best exemplify his qualities. One that his friends at the Survey like to recall, occurred during an important long distance phone call in his office. Bob, absorbed in the conversation, did not notice that he had tipped back precipitously in his chair -- a bit too far. The chair flipped over onto its back carrying Bob with it. Unflustered, Bob carried on the conversation in a prone position without missing a word, evoking many puzzled expressions on the faces of people walking past his

open door. His character was again revealed in a remarkable and poignant "epilogue" that Bob wrote before his death and that was read by his son at his funeral. In his epilogue, Bob recognized the loves of his life – his wife, his three offspring, God, his church, his 30-year career of public service at the Survey, the English language for which he waged many battles for proper English expression, and his delight in staging and directing productions. He recognized the many gifts of life that had been given him and valued his friends, feeling it a duty to respect his fellow man, to honor him, and to help him if he could. He aptly observed that "no man is an island". At the conclusion he wrote, "Leave it to Bergstrom to put on another production. I salute you, my friends, and ask you to exit stage left smiling." And his friends are still smiling as we recall the many fond memories of Bob, our friend.

- Morris W. Leighton