



JORJ O. OSTERBERG

1915 – 2008

Jorj O. Osterberg, eminent geotechnical engineer and inventor, passed away on June 1, 2008 in Denver, Colorado, at the age of 93. Well respected consultant, long-time professor, and prolific inventor, Jorj has justifiably earned his place among the most noteworthy pioneers in the field of geotechnical engineering. His designs provided the basis for the early versions of geotechnical laboratory testing equipment; he invented and patented the WES soil pressure cell; his piston sampler is still the standard in the profession after half a century; and his drilled shaft load cell has literally changed the practice in deep foundation engineering worldwide. As a practitioner, Jorj Osterberg was not only a good foundation engineer, but he was an engineer's engineer. Among the many recognitions of his contributions to our profession, his election to the National Academy of Engineering in 1975 is perhaps the most prestigious.

In the field of foundation engineering Jorj's accomplishments spanned the gamut from soil exploration and sampling in the early phases of a project to serving as an arbitrator or expert witness in the resolution of all too frequent disputes in the latter phases. His inventiveness and penchant for innovation has been demonstrated in every facet of his career. Another strong aspect of Jorj's personality was his intense devotion to professionalism and its associated code of ethics. He always manifested very strong feelings about acting in a manner that is morally and ethically proper – even in very small matters – and his own conscience, rather than popular opinions, always guided his actions.

His first step toward a career in geotechnical engineering was taken in 1931 when, at the age of sixteen, he entered Columbia University, where he befriended Professor Donald Burmister. After completing his B.S. in 1935 and his C.E. in 1936, Jorj's interest in the new field of soil mechanics led him to graduate school at Harvard University to study with a young professor by the name of Arthur Casagrande. After earning his M.S. at Harvard in 1937, Jorj enrolled in the Ph.D. program at Cornell, from which he graduated in 1940. From Cornell Jorj went to work at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Waterways Experiment Station in Vicksburg, Mississippi. It was there that he met and married Ruth Embree, a Virginian, who was working in Vicksburg as a nurse. During the 1942-43 academic year he taught at the University of Illinois, and in 1943 he joined the faculty at Northwestern University, where he taught for more than four decades. In 1985 Jorj retired from Northwestern and shortly thereafter moved to Colorado.

In addition to his significant service to several professional and civic organizations over the years, Jorj practiced widely as a consultant for governments, large industrial companies, and consulting firms in almost all fifty states and more than two dozen countries. Throughout his career he has continually manifested an enviable combination of sound theoretical background, excellent engineering judgment, good appreciation of economic considerations, and an astute understanding of human relationships. The years have provided innumerable examples of Jorj's keen ability to recognize and diagnose a problem and to suggest a technically implementable and economically feasible solution. In most instances his philosophy inherently equated an overly conservative and expensive design with poor engineering.

Preceding Jorj in death was his loving wife, Ruth, who passed away in 2004, and surviving him are his four children – Lawrence, Arvid, Ralph, and Lois – seven grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Services will be private and Jorj's cremains will be buried with those of his wife on the Embree family plot in Buena Vista, Virginia. Donations may be made to the American Heart Association or the Denver Hospice, 501 S. Cherry Street, Denver, Colorado 80246.