A 50 Year Class Reunion

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Civil Engineering Class of 1961

Fifty years is a long time, not so much in the life of a university, but definitely in the life of its graduates. Northwestern has a nice tradition in inviting its graduates to march at Commencement on the 50th anniversary of their own graduation. However, I did not want to march with some unknown grads from 1961. Instead, I wanted to spend some time with my own civil engineering classmates, with whom I shared classes from 1957 to 1961.

On the spur of the moment, at last December’s holiday party, I asked Professor Jainmin Qu, chair of the CEE department, “I am thinking of organizing a reunion of the CE Class of 1961. What could you do for us?” I’ll buy you dinner,” he said without hesitation.

I contacted the NU Alumni Association to obtain a list of the civil engineering graduates circa 1961. They gave me nine names, to which I added two more. I knew from past alumni news magazines that three more were deceased (Gilbert Pearson, Robert Malmgren and James Cunningham), and later learned of the recent death of Gunter Ozolin. I posted 10 letters last January, crossed my fingers, and waited. Within a few days, I received five positive responses. Five, plus myself, or a 50% response, I thought was quite good, especially considering that three did not reside in the Chicago area. We agreed on a date (July 6, 2011), and discussed what we would do during our day together. Mainly, talk, we agreed, but also take a walk around campus and Tech to see what changes had occurred in those 50 years; and enjoy that dinner offered by the Chair. (For the names and a picture of the five participants, scroll to the end of this article.)

In the back of my mind, an idea and several questions were forming. Who were the faculty who taught us during our civil engineering undergraduate years? What were their accomplishments then and subsequently? Were any of them still living, and if so, could we contact them? I already knew partial answers for a few, but I was curious to learn more. And I knew where to look – the University Archives. Fortunately, by chance I knew that one of our professors, Dr. Seng Lip Lee, had retired from the Civil Engineering Department of the National University of Singapore. I was able to contact him through my former student, Dr. Der-Horning Lee of the same department. In this way, I obtained a picture of our Civil Engineering faculty taken in 1958. Not a great reproduction of the original photo, but good enough to remind us of the faculty’s appearance.

In May, I went to the University Archives, and started searching. First, from the Bulletin of the Technological Institute, I obtained the names of the faculty. Then, I requested the folders for each, read them, and copied pertinent materials. Most files ended when the person left the university, sometimes before retirement. Then, I searched the Internet for more information and for obituaries. From these materials, I prepared a presentation for my classmates, which can be downloaded from the link below. My findings can be briefly summarized as follows.
Ten faculty members taught most of us from 1957 to 1961. Four were elected to the National Academy of Engineering, which was founded in 1964: Donald S. Berry, 1966; John A. Logan, 1968; Jorj O. Osterberg, 1975; and Olgierd C. Zienkiewicz, Foreign Associate, 1981. Two served as presidents of universities: John A. Logan, Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology, Terre-Haute, Indiana; Robert B. Banks, Asian Institute of Technology, Bangkok. Several served as department heads at Northwestern and elsewhere: Merrill B. Gamet, Robert B. Banks, John A. Logan, Donald S. Berry, and Jorj O. Osterberg at NU in order of their service; Seng Lip Lee at the National University of Singapore. Robert B. Banks also served as Dean of Engineering at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle.

Faculty members who were most successful as supervisors of Ph.D. theses and as authors of noted research works were Olgierd C. Zienkiewicz and Seng Lip Lee. Professor Zienkiewicz supervised 70 Ph.D. theses, and published over 600 papers and several books. He founded the field of finite element analysis, jointly with Robert L. Taylor of the University of California Berkeley. Professor Lee supervised 53 Ph.D. theses and published more than 500 papers on structural engineering, geotechnical engineering and construction technology. Professor Donald Berry founded the program in transportation systems engineering at Northwestern, which has been a leading program in the field since the 1960s.
A professor from the Department of History, Dr. Clarence L. Ver Steeg was also very influential in teaching engineers at Northwestern during the late 1950s. His lectures on American History were much appreciated at the time. From the 1960s onwards, Professor Ver Steeg became a leading intellectual leader of the Northwestern faculty. He chaired the highly influential Faculty Planning Committee, which succeeded in raising the aspirations of Northwestern to become an outstanding research university. He also chaired the committee that planned the Lakefill Campus and the expansion of the University Library during the 1970s. Finally, he served as Dean of the Graduate School from 1975 to 1986.

Following a review of this material by our assembled alumni, we agreed that we were fortunate to have been taught by a faculty of such distinction. Our small group enjoyed comparing our life experiences in academe, consulting, business and government. I believe that most of us would agree that we would not have accomplished the outcomes we achieved professionally without the fine education we had received at Northwestern.

Our Reunion ended with a dinner at the University’s Allen Center, hosted by Professor Charles Dowding and his wife, Jane, on behalf of Professor Qu, who was out of the country, and attended by Professor Ray Krizek. We engaged in a useful discussion of advice to present-day students and a review of the rehabilitation of the Technological Institute. In addition to the presentation attached to this account, we would like to remember several of our faculty members be posting their photos on this page.

J. A. Logan  
1908-1987

D. S. Berry  
1911-2002

J. O. Osterberg  
1915-2008

O. C. Zienkiewicz  
1921-2009

S. L. Lee  
1925-
Participants in the Civil Engineering Class of 1961 Reunion

Edgar Preissner, William Buchholz, David Boyce, David Guell, Charles Brintlinger