JORJ O. OSTERBERG  
1915 – 2008

Jorj O. Osterberg passed away on June 1, 2008 in Denver, Colorado, at the age of 93. The son of Swedish immigrants, Jorj was raised in the Bronx borough of New York City. In 1931, at the age of sixteen, he entered Columbia University, where he befriended Professor Donald Burmister. While at Columbia, his interest was piqued by the new field of soil mechanics and he attended the first undergraduate and graduate courses given on the subject. After completing his B.S. in 1935 and his C.E. in 1936, Jorj’s interest in 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. While at WES, Jorj invented and patented the WES soil pressure cell and worked with many of the researchers who were instrumental in the development of soil mechanics during World War II. During the 1942-43 academic year he taught at the University of Illinois, and in 1943 he joined the faculty at Northwestern University.

Jorj’s first project at Northwestern was to build the soil mechanics laboratory. Although much of the equipment designed by Jorj was inspired by that built at Purdue and Harvard by Professors Rutledge and Casagrande, its style and operational characteristics incorporated some improvements and provided the basis for the early equipment produced and sold commercially. During his more than four decades on the faculty at Northwestern University, hundreds of successful consulting engineers and university professors took his classes and benefited from his advice, and the impact of his
philosophy has literally been felt throughout the world. 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. 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.

Without doubt, Jorj O. Osterberg has justifiably earned his place among the most noteworthy pioneers in the field of geotechnical engineering. 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.

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.

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 many ways, ranging from ingenious patents to creative solutions to foundation problems. His WES pressure cell design was among the first in the field; 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 foundations worldwide. As a practitioner, Jorj Osterberg was not only a good foundation engineer, but he was an engineer’s engineer.

Notwithstanding all of Jorj’s technical accomplishments, his human qualities are among his most defining traits – the advice he gave when asked, the stability he provided in times of trial, and the concern he manifested when personal problems loomed on the horizon. Our lives are certainly richer – both professionally and personally – because our paths have crossed with that of Jorj Osterberg.

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.