

Herman Diederichs

John E. Sweet Professorship in Engineering; Dean of the College of Engineering

August 12, 1874 — August 31, 1937

The death of Herman Diederichs on August 31, 1937 removes another of those outstanding figures that have brought fame to our College of Engineering and have given luster to the University as a whole.

Born at Muenchen-Gladbach in the Rhine Province, on August 12, 1874, the German lad received his elementary education in his native city. In 1888 his parents brought the family to America, settling in Dolgeville, New York. In spite of modest circumstances, means were found to send young Diederichs to the local high school, where he won a Cornell state scholarship, walking to Herkimer more than twenty miles distant, to take the competitive examinations. With this scholarship and a promise of financial assistance from friends, he entered Cornell University in 1893. Here, with a large measure of self-support and with only a recent acquisition of English he not only completed his course in engineering in the prescribed four years with a record that won him election to the honorary society of Sigma Xi, but also found time to engage in student activities, becoming prominent a shot-putter. After receiving the degree of Mechanical Engineer in 1897, he was at the end of the following year appointed Instructor in Experimental Engineering under the late Professor Rolla C. Carpenter. In 1902 he was promoted to an Assistant Professorship, and to a Professorship in 1907, and he succeeded Professor Carpenter as Head of the Department of Experimental Engineering in 1920. In 1928 he was appointed as the first incumbent of the John E. Sweet Professorship in Engineering which had been established in honor of the distinguished engineer who at one time was a professor at Cornell. Professor Diederichs had in 1911 become Director of the Sibley School of Mechanical Engineering, and in 1936 he was appointed to the Deanship of the College of Engineering—a well-deserved honor, which he was fated to enjoy for only a little over a single year.

The entire period of Herman Diederichs' manhood was, therefore, devoted to the service of his Alma Mater. His activities concerned not only his chosen field, but also many of the broader aspects of university life. As a member of the faculty he was often called upon to serve on important committees, and the confidence in which he was held by his colleagues is attested by his election in 1929 to serve as one of the Faculty Representatives on the Board of Trustees. For many years no important question in the College of Engineering, whether of academic or administrative character, has been decided without his advice and judgment.

Interested in athletics, Professor Diederichs was over a long period a member of the Athletic Council for several years he served as President of that body. Here, again, his sterling character impressed itself, and the appreciation of this service is shown by the following dedication of *The Cornellian* of 1935.

“To Herman Diederichs, who forty-two years has served his Alma Mater as student, teacher, and administrator, and who through his intense interest and untiring efforts, has succeeded in inaugurating a new era in Cornell Athletics. For his active participation in Campus affairs he will long be remembered, and as a stern teacher and a sympathetic honest friend, the Class of 1935 will revere him—”Cornell’s Man of the Year.” Surely student praise can attain no higher level.

He was an authority in the field of experimental engineering, and his contributions to the literature of this field were many and important. In 1930 the Melville Medal was awarded jointly to Dean Diederichs and William P. Pomeroy by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers “in recognition of a thesis of exceptional merit.

Professor Diederichs was a member of Quill and Dagger; Phi Sigma Kappa fraternity; Sigma Xi; Tau Beta Pi; Phi Kappa Phi; American Society of Mechanical Engineers; Society of Automotive Engineers; American Society of Metals; Verein Deutscher Ingenieure and Society for the Promotion of Engineering Education. Last year he was chairman of the Board of Honors and Awards of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers and also of its Nominating Committee for 1936. He was vice-president of the second district of the National Collegiate Athletic Association and Chairman of the Board of Athletic Policy of Cornell University.

His teaching naturally reflected his scholarly habits and thoroughness. Perhaps his best known undergraduate course included his lectures on Materials of Engineering which he gave to many generations of electrical and mechanical engineers. No student ever went to him for advice or help on any matter without receiving assistance, and as freshmen grew into seniors, they acquired respect, admiration, and real affection for his rugged personality. Of permanent value also has been his assistance in developing the course in experimental engineering. The engineering experimental laboratory had been conceived by the late Dr. Robert H. Thurston at Stevens Institute and brought by him to Cornell in 1885, and the background of the present course was further developed under the late Professor Carpenter. Professor Diederichs, therefore, carried with him to his death the inspiration of these two great pioneers, but it was his own labor to modify and adapt the course to an ever-changing industrial world, and this he did in a masterly manner. He has also kept alive at Cornell the spirit of research in mechanical engineering,

and in spite of many handicaps, the long list of scientific publications issued under his guidance continued to grow. His influence and knowledge in this important part of the work of the college will not be forgotten.

One of Dean Diederichs' outstanding virtues was his sturdy honesty, not only in matters appertaining to his professional work and his teaching, but in all his personal contacts with people. Modest to an extreme degree, he was nevertheless essentially a sociable person with a sympathetic and tender heart.

Herman Diederichs was helpful to all around him. Cornell University and this entire community are the better because he lived and worked among us.

Source: Fac. Rec. p. 2016 Resolution of the Trustees and Faculty of Cornell University, Nineteen Hundred and Thirty-Eight