

Robert Franklin Chamberlain

May 19, 1884 — July 15, 1967

Bob Chamberlain, as he was affectionately known throughout the College of Engineering and by his many friends and associates, was born in Newark Valley, New York, the son of Theodore F. and M. Eloise Slosson Chamberlain. On August 19, 1914, he married M. Mabelle Sandwick. They are survived by three children: John Theodore, Robert Sandwick, and Phyllis Jane (Mrs. Philip A. Kilbourne).

His early education was in the Newark Valley schools, and he prepared for college at Phillips Exeter Academy. With the class of 1908, he graduated from Cornell University in mechanical engineering, and, although he had had summer experience in industry, he continued in the academic area by appointment as instructor in electrical engineering at Purdue University. In 1910 Bob Chamberlain returned to Cornell with appointment to the engineering faculty. Successively then, from instructor to Assistant Professor (1920), Professor (1926), and Assistant Dean of Engineering (1946), to Professor Emeritus in 1952—interrupted only with sabbatical leaves to industry and editorial interests – his career evolved at Cornell.

Professor Chamberlain's technical interests were primarily in electrical machinery and in the problems of motor control both in the industrial area and in the then developing field of electric railways. In 1914, the first electric power plant in Newark Valley was built from his design and specifications, and in later years he was consultant to the cities of Ithaca and Elmira when they operated their own independent power systems for local power, light, and “traction” (street cars).

In 1921, when the College of Engineering reorganized its technical fields into several schools, Professor Chamberlain accepted the responsibility in the School of Electrical Engineering for managing personnel matters and for the advising and placement of students. Clearly his success and interest in this area marked a turning point in his career. Moving now to the College, he organized the Engineering Placement Office and, upon appointment as Assistant Dean, became also Director of Student Personnel for the College, including in his office much of the work on student admissions, scholarship awards, and placement.

During World War II, Professor Chamberlain, with Professor Walter Cornell, organized a large area of New York State for engineering defense training. They also administered in the area the wartime activity known as E.S.M.W.T. (Engineering Science and Management War Training) which involved many members of the faculty both on and off campus.

As a member of A.I.E.E., Eta Kappa Nu, and Tau Beta Pi, Professor Chamberlain gave strong and loyal support to his technical and honorary societies. For the national technical conference of A.I.E.E. at Ithaca in the summer of 1935, he was responsible for the organization, planning, and executive work involving most of the Engineering College faculty.

A lifelong member of the Masonic order, he joined the Blue Lodge in Newark Valley and after moving to Ithaca became a member of Ithaca Eagle Chapter 58, Royal Arch Masons, and of the Saint Augustine Commandery 38, Knights Templar.

In recreational pursuits as well as professionally, Bob Chamberlain found strength in the quiet mode; he was an ardent disciple of Isaac Walton and enjoyed nature to the fullest, although his observer interest in the more active sports from baseball to crew was always evident in season.

In his quiet way, Robert Chamberlain was a keen analyst of current affairs and adept in the constructive influence of both town and campus thought and action. Many students and younger teachers can look back to a timely word to them or in their behalf, often unsolicited, that lighted the more productive or wiser way to successful goals. This extraordinary gift of the timely word, together with a keen sense of personal integrity and nonstrident persuasion, characterized a colleague, adviser, and friend who exemplified for his University, profession, and community an uncommon standard of service.

True McLean, Howard G. Smith, Everett M. Strong