

Nephi Albert Christensen

January 19, 1903 — April 12, 1996

Nephi Albert Christensen died on the morning of April 12, 1996, in his home in Albuquerque, New Mexico at the age of 93. His wife, Leda Lyman Christensen, predeceased him. He is survived by his youngest sister, Eva C. and her husband, John VanOrman; as well as his four children: Albert L. Christensen; Robert W. Christensen and his wife, Carrie; Marilyn C. and her husband, Dr. Jerome W. Bettman, Jr.; and Julianna McGregor; and nine grandchildren.

Born January 19, 1903, in Provo, Utah, Nephi was the second eldest child of seven born to Ellen Susanna Jorgensen and Chresten Carl Christensen. After receiving a Bachelor of Science degree from Brigham Young University, he taught high school in Cedar City, Utah in 1925-26. In 1928, he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Wisconsin and then from 1928-33, he was Professor of Exact Science at Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho. He was a member of the Hydraulic Research Laboratory of the Soil Conservation Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture while completing Master of Science and Doctoral degrees from the California Institute of Technology in 1934 and 1939.

He became Dean of Engineering at Colorado State University in 1938, while simultaneously serving as Director of the Engineering Division of the Colorado Experiment Station for the next decade. He took leave from Colorado State during World War II to serve as chief engineer for the Ballistic Research Laboratory where he was promoted to Chief of Research for the Rocket Research Division in the Ordnance Research and Development Center, Aberdeen, Maryland.

In 1948, Dr. Christensen joined the Cornell faculty as Director of the School of Civil Engineering. Chris's tenure as Director of the School of Civil Engineering has to be viewed in the context of his times. In 1937, "Cornell was reported to be the worst housed and equipped among twenty-five top (engineering) schools in the country" and "virtually no research was done except that which the then new Director of Civil Engineering, Solomon Cady Hollister, started in the Hydraulic Laboratory." In the same year, Hollister became Dean of the College of Engineering and immediately undertook its revitalization. But Hollister's plans had only begun to bear fruit when World War II put them on hold. When Chris arrived in 1948, he found a faculty within civil engineering composed of experienced hands, tired from wartime teaching, and new hires with energy and ideas - but there was little that could be called research.

The picture was not completely bleak. Cornell was on the threshold of regaining a prominent role in engineering education by introducing a five-year undergraduate program and reviving long-delayed plans for new engineering buildings. In addition, the attitudes and funding required for the expansion of graduate study and research gained prominence. In civil engineering, Chris took advantage of these opportunities. Nationally, he was active in engineering educational planning circles. Locally, he oversaw the planning and the 1959 move from Lincoln Hall—tradition-rich but outmoded building—to Hollister Hall on the new Engineering quadrangle. A primary example of the progress in civil engineering was the transition in hydraulics from a largely empirical approach to one in which Cornell's historical status as a leader of the field was restored through the theoretical and experimental contributions of a new, younger faculty group.

The road to revival was not a smooth one, but when Chris retired, he could leave with pride and a sense of accomplishment in a school that was once again one of the undisputed leaders in civil engineering education and research. He remained director until 1966, and retired from Cornell in 1968 when he was named Professor Emeritus. He then led the Near East Foundation team assisting the Iranian Government in establishing an agricultural college at Rezaiyeh in northwestern Iran.

He was a member of Tau Beta Pi, Sigma Xi, Chi Epsilon, Sigma Tau, the American Geophysical Union, a National Director of the American Society of Civil Engineers, and the American Society for Engineering Education. For ASEE, he co-authored *Ethical Problems for Engineers* in 1965 with Philip Alger and Sterling Olmsted - an early reference and guide for engineering students and professionals. He was a trustee for the Village of Cayuga Heights in 1956 and a member of the New York State Flood Control Commission from 1954-60. He helped develop a comprehensive sewerage plan for Monroe County, New York in the late 1960s. He served as a consultant to the Brookhaven National Laboratory, the Argonne National Laboratory, and other national agencies.

Chris was a “hands-on” engineer who thoroughly enjoyed building things, including his own home five miles east of campus in Ellis Hollow and the Mormon Church in Ithaca. After returning from Iran in 1972, he became deeply involved in numerous building projects with his family and friends, including homes for several of his family, and also undertook the exacting pastime of building some 75 violins.

Nephi Christensen was a gentle, unassuming, honest, and honorable man who was kind to everyone. His sense of fairness and his dealings with people were exemplary. His philosophy of life continues to serve as a model for faculty members who become involved in administrative leadership positions in a university setting.