

# Oskar Dietrich von Engeln

*July 3, 1880 — January 25, 1965*

Oskar Dietrich von Engeln, since 1948 Professor Emeritus of Geology, was born in Dayton, Ohio, the son of German-born parents, Dietrich and Elizabeth (Adam) von Engeln. Prior to entering Cornell in 1904, his formal education had ended with the eighth grade. In the ten years between leaving elementary school and entering Cornell he worked as an office boy, factory hand, shipping clerk, and salesman.

During that decade, however, his lively intellect did not lie fallow. His reminiscences of these years sketch an appealing picture of an alert and resourceful youngster. He read assiduously, to good purpose, and with such effect upon his own style that at twenty, and before entering college, he was able to sell to *The Outlook* his essay "On Spring Flowers as They Grow." Two years later *The Outlook* printed another of his essays, "On Being Abroad in Winter," both stemming from excursions into the field made with a group of high school teachers with whom he had become acquainted. He became expert in photography, too.

Enterprising as he was, he entered a contest, conducted by a shoe polish company whose product he was selling, to estimate the receipts of the Cincinnati post office for a given month and captured the third prize of \$250—no contemptible sum in those days.

Toward the close of this period, he prepared himself for the College Entrance Board examinations by independent study and by being tutored in Latin and mathematics. He passed all the subjects required for entrance to Cornell except algebra and geometry, and in 1904 he was admitted with conditions in these two subjects.

His career as an undergraduate was notable even for a student more mature than the average. With an essay entitled "Shakespeare as an Observer of Nature," he won the Barnes prize as a freshman. The same essay later won the Walter Natural History prize offered by the Boston Society of Natural History, and it was subsequently published in *Popular Science*. Dr. von Engeln was naturally proud of these, and all his life he strove to improve his style. He also maintained his interest in photography, and his talents won him the photographic editorship of the 1908 *Cornellian*.

As a freshman at Cornell he had attracted the attention of Professor Ralph S. Tarr, in whose course in physical geography he had enrolled. The very next year, 1905, Tarr secured his appointment as an assistant instructor in dynamic geology. And so it was as a sophomore that Oskar von Engeln's long and successful career as a teacher at

Cornell began. He was only a junior when he was made an instructor in physical geography. He received the A.B. degree in 1908 and the Ph.D. in 1911. He was promoted to Assistant Professor in 1919 and became a full Professor in 1921. From 1944 to 1947 he was chairman of Department of Geology and Geography.

Dr. von Engel's interest in good writing had a salutary effect on the graduate students he trained, for they soon discovered that only well-organized and carefully composed writing would secure his approval. Dr. von Engel continued writing himself, and among his favorite subjects were Cornell and its natural environment. In 1909, only a year after graduation, he published *At Cornell*, and eight years later followed this with the more comprehensive *Concerning Cornell*. Both books were designed to orient and instruct the student in the history of the University and its unique setting, and both exercised a wide influence, attracting to Cornell many who might have turned elsewhere. His life-long interest in the geology and topography of Cornell's locale culminated in his last book, *The Finger Lakes Region: Its Origin and Nature*, summarizing the development of the scenery of south central New York. It was published by Cornell University Press in 1961 when he was eighty-one, and it is as fresh and vivid a treatment of the theme as any man in his prime might write.

Of his several books, *Geomorphology*, published in 1942, was his outstanding contribution to geology. *Geology*, an elementary textbook written with Kenneth E. Caster, was characteristically well written and well illustrated, and was revolutionary in that it proceeded from modern times backward into geologic past.

Learned though he was as a geomorphologist, only about half of his books and papers deal with glacial and geomorphic geology; the remainder are concerned with geography. He was particularly interested in the social implications geography and regarded them as his special province. That interest is attested by his insistence on being listed, in later editions of *American Men of Science*, the volume dealing with the social sciences. His interest in geography's social impact is evident, too, in his *Inheriting the Earth*, published in 1922. This is remarkable work so far in advance of its day that it failed to attract the attention it deserved. In it he developed with rare skill and erudition the theme that the rise, development, and destiny of nations, and the well-being of its peoples are inevitably and inextricably tied to the place they occupy on the face of the earth. His *General Geography for Colleges*, written with Bruce C. Netschert and published in 1952, was his last textbook; it was well received and widely used.

Dr. von Engel's skill as a photographer was of great assistance in preparing illustrations for his publications, and some of his photographs, particularly those of the campus, were works of art. One, "In College Precincts," taken

as early as 1906, showed two freshmen passing McGraw Hall in the rain on their way to the library. It was used as the frontispiece of his *At Cornell* and was widely admired, as it seemed to catch the very spirit of the place.

He communicated his enthusiastic appreciation of the beauties of the Ithaca region to his students not only during the academic year, but even more successfully in the course which he so much enjoyed giving in the summer sessions and to which he devoted a large amount of his time and energy. This summer course was for him the highlight of the year; for his many students it was a profitable, enjoyable, and even thrilling experience.

Professor von Engeln's field work outside the Ithaca region was confined to expeditions to Alaska. These expeditions were conducted in 1906 and 1909 by Professor Ralph S. Tarr, primarily for the study of glaciers. Von Engeln enjoyed the difficulties of these surveys and delighted in recounting his experiences and in contrasting the conditions under which the work was done with those prevailing at present.

He was a fellow of the Association of American Geographers, of the Geological Society of America, and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He was a member of Sigma Xi, Sigma Gamma Epsilon (honorary), and Sigma Phi Epsilon. In 1930 he was a delegate to the Centennial of the Geological Society of France, and in 1934, to the International Geological Congress at Warsaw, Poland. In 1937 he was made a member of the International Committee on Snow. He was invited to give the Bonnocker Lectures in geology at Ohio State University in 1943.

On September 7, 1910, he married Maude G. Hewitt, Cornell '09, of Margaretville. She was a gracious and vivacious person, known affectionately to her wide circle of friends as "Buzzie." The von Engelns had no children, but their home was always open to the children of neighbors and to groups of students, many of whom recall long evenings of stimulating discussion before a blazing fire in their living room.

Mrs. von Engeln died suddenly of a heart attack on March 25, 1962. The loss of her companionship, her sympathy, understanding, advice, and solicitude for his well-being affected him profoundly, and those close to him immediately saw his hitherto valiant spirit falter and his will to go forward ebb.

He enjoyed unusually good health all his life and, although partially incapacitated by arthritis during his last years, he had never been confined to a hospital before his terminal illness beginning in the early summer of 1964. After a few weeks in the hospital and a subsequent brief period at home, he returned to the hospital in early December and remained there until his death on January 25, 1965. He is survived by a sister, Miss Bessie E. von Engeln of Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Honest, open, forthright and foursquare, “Von,” as he was known to his many friends, never left the slightest doubt about where he stood on any question, however much he consequently sometimes nettled the pussyfooter. His sense of humor was well developed. He loved debate, and to stimulate it he would often prod—”stirring up the animals,” he used to call it. He was a good companion and a good mixer; he enjoyed to the full his association with his colleagues, particularly his daily encounters with his friends at lunch in Willard Straight Hall, and later on, at the Statler Club. Only some unavoidable contingency kept him away and he is painfully missed by those who were of his company.

He lived a long life and a full one. His contributions to Cornell and the Ithaca Community endure, and in his passing we have lost a human landmark of rare qualities.

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