

David Dropkin

September 13, 1908 — October 12, 1990

David Dropkin savored over 50 years of academic life at Cornell, first as an undergraduate, then as a graduate student, next as a research associate, eventually as a faculty member, and finally as a professor emeritus teaching part-time. This is certainly more than most of us experience and he was still showing some reluctance for final detachment when he moved to Florida to ameliorate the poor health of his first wife, Sophie.

He was born in Vitebsk, Russia and became naturalized as a U.S. citizen soon after his parents moved to the U.S.A. He attended elementary and high schools in Nyack, New York and matriculated at Cornell in 1929, graduating in mechanical engineering with the M.E. degree current at that time. He continued his studies on the graduate level, earning an M.M.E. degree in 1935 and a Ph.D. degree in 1938. During the period from 1933 to 1942, he held appointments as research assistant and research associate, with instructor being added to the latter in 1942, entitling him to become a faculty member of the Sibley School. He was appointed an assistant professor in 1943, associate professor in 1946, and professor in 1957. In 1970 he was named the John Edson Sweet Professor of Engineering and retired in 1974 as professor emeritus.

Dave was that *rara avis*, a first-class experimentalist and a first-class teacher—he had many publications to his credit and was accorded the Excellence in Teaching Award of the College of Engineering in 1968-69. His experimental work was meticulous, as shown in his published papers and his laboratory teaching, both of undergraduates and graduates. His field of interest was in heat transfer in general, and a hallmark of his work was the accurate measurement of temperature: good enough was not enough, it had to be as precise as technique and tenacity allowed. A major quality of character possessed by Dave was his innate kindness to students and it was this attribute, together with a certain ingenuousness of approach and of unaffectedness in presentation, which endeared him to them, because they perceived, either consciously or not, that he was personally concerned about their learning. This affection and respect carried through the years, and alumni returning to Sibley School after several years of absence from the campus immediately made inquiries at the school office of his whereabouts and were grieved to learn that he was retired and, later on, far away in the South.

During Dave's long attachment to Cornell from matriculation to emeritus, a number of curriculum patterns were advanced, the major one providing a significant change over the decade of World War II and following years. This innovation was engendered by the establishment of the five-year undergraduate engineering program which

emphasized a new concept, the teaching of “Engineering Sciences” in depth, before the introduction of design and applications. In Sibley, this meant separate courses of study, such as thermodynamics, fluid mechanics and heat transfer, which had been previously subsumed in ‘Heat Power Engineering’ as a single two-semester course covering both basic and application material. While a few of his colleagues might have grumbled that whatever it was called, their lecture notes would remain the same, Dave welcomed the change wholeheartedly and immediately took advantage of it. It meant that heat transfer became a required study complete with built-in laboratory, with temperature measurement and advanced heat transfer for graduate courses and for graduate research.

His publications became well-known in the late fifties, again largely for his prowess in temperature measurement and he established consultancies with a number of institutions and companies. To quote a former chairman, “Dr. Dropkin has done more good work with graduate students than any other teacher in the Sibley School. This is, I believe, one true mark of a scholar”. He was a member of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, the American Society of Engineering Education, the American Association of University Professors and the New York Academy of Sciences.

Throughout his career at Cornell, Dave gave generously of his time to the many necessary tasks within the school beyond those of the classroom, such as advising of both undergraduates and graduates, and acting as graduate field representative of the Sibley School. Even in his retirement, he took up the office of secretary-treasurer of the Cornell Alpha Chapter of Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Society, and brought it to a long-needed order.

Dave was a conscientious person of the highest order and could not abide intolerance, injustice, deception and hypocrisy. He could speak out forcibly whenever an event occurred that violated his high standards of behavior. At such time his friends knew that Dave could always be expected to start his objections with the characteristic phrase “I am furious”. On one memorable occasion, during the student anti-Vietnam War demonstrations, Dave arrived at Upson Hall to find that a number of protestors were carrying the Upson Hall furniture to the outside patio. Dave became “furious” and peremptorily ordered the students to return everything to its proper place. Hearing the voice of authority, possibly for the first time in many years, the perpetrators, all of whom were relatively large fellows, attended to the diminutive professor who was suddenly nine feet tall, meekly restored the furniture to the lounge, and sheepishly departed from the scene.

On September 15, 1940, Dave married Sophie Katz of Nyack, New York. Most of their 43 years of life together were spent in Ithaca, except for sabbaticals and some foreign travel. When Sophie became ill, they moved to Coconut

Creek, Florida, where she died on February 4, 1983. On March 5, 1985, Dave married Idie Kertesz in Coconut Creek, Florida, and, except for occasional visits to Ithaca and some travel abroad, remained there until his death.

He is survived by his wife, Idie, of Coconut Creek, Florida; his son, Dr. Lloyd Richard Dropkin, of New York City; his daughter, Marilyn Hoffman, of Ithaca, New York; and his brother, Harry, of Florida.

David Dropkin will be long remembered as a dedicated and caring teacher, an honored and esteemed colleague, and a true and devoted friend.

Bart J. Conta, Sidney Leibovich, Dennis G. Shepherd