

Robert Lee Von Berg

June 14, 1918 — August 11, 2006

Born in Wheeling, West Virginia, Bob attended schools there before entering West Virginia University from which he received a B.S. and M.S. degrees in Chemical Engineering with a minor in Electrical Engineering in 1941. He served in the National Guard from 1937-41. Next, Bob went on to Massachusetts Institute of Technology where his work was sponsored by the National Defense Research Council. He graduated with the Sc.D. degree in 1944, again majoring in Chemical Engineering. From MIT, he joined the Industrial Engineering Department of DuPont in Wilmington, Delaware. There he worked on process design and development until 1946 when he accepted an offer to join the faculty of Chemical and Metallurgical Engineering at Cornell. Three years later, he was promoted to Associate Professor and in 1958, to Professor of Chemical Engineering.

Early on, Bob developed an interest in nuclear engineering and spent six summers at Oak Ridge and Brookhaven National Laboratories working on reactor design as well as one summer at DuPont's Savannah River plant working on nuclear fuel processing. He was a visiting professor at the Los Alamos National Laboratory cryogenic engineering division. At Cornell, he was primarily responsible for the design of the Gamma Radiation Facility. He served as a consultant to other faculty who made use of the facility, often as a member of a graduate student's special committee. For many years he served on Cornell's Reactor Safety Committee.

Other one-year leaves were spent working on process development at Dow in Midland, Michigan and at the Delft Technical Institute in the Netherlands where he held a NATO fellowship. Visiting professorships in New Zealand and Australia further enriched his international background. All of his varied experiences with research and development enriched his teaching and research at Cornell. He and his graduate students studied the design and analysis of chemical processes and equipment design especially in the areas of liquid-liquid extraction and the use of gamma radiation to promote chemical reactions such as ammonia synthesis. Atomic Energy Commission Fellowships supported several of his students. He also collaborated with another Chemical Engineering faculty member, Herb Wiegandt, on the desalination of seawater using a direct contact freezing process.

Over the years, Bob taught courses in thermodynamics, reaction kinetics, nuclear engineering and plant design. It was especially plant and process design that continued to be his interests even to the years following his nominal retirement in 1988. He served on faculty panels that critiqued teams of chemical engineering seniors who were

required to design chemical plants in the “capstone” design course. Bob was patient and thorough in his questioning, but he always maintained an even disposition and good humor that elicited positive responses from the students.

Other products of Bob’s overseas study periods were the people he contacted. Some of them returned the favor by spending time at Cornell in a teaching capacity.

Second only to his devotion to teaching and research was his abiding interest in music. As a graduate student, he was the student leader of the MIT Classical Orchestra. Over the years, he played the clarinet in the Cornell Orchestra and the Ithaca Concert Band. In addition, he played as part of the informal groups that entertained at numerous Chemical Engineering functions, especially at the annual departmental Christmas parties. During his sabbatic leaves, he invariably found a local group with which to play.

Bob was an elder and long-standing member of the First Presbyterian Church of Ithaca. He was a founding member and volunteer of the Cayuga Heights Fire Department in 1955, and he served as a Trustee of the Village of Cayuga Heights. At various local and university track and field events such as the Heptagonals, he often officiated as a timer and in other capacities. For some of his colleagues, he is especially remembered as a member of an informal Statler Club luncheon group that included faculty from various disciplines. He participated and enjoyed the animated discussions that ranged over politics, science and technology, and the state of the University.

Bob married Kate Hopkins in 1947. Surviving him are Kate and their four children: Eric, Gretchen, Karl and Karin, their spouses and twelve grandchildren; and also his sister, Gloria Luikart; and three nephews.

Ferdinand Rodriguez, Chair; Robert K. Finn, Julian C. Smith