

O. Ernest Bangs

September 17, 1903 — August 10, 1995

O. Ernest Bangs, Professor Emeritus of Hotel Administration, died after a lengthy illness at his home at 731 Cayuga Heights Road, Ithaca, New York. Ernie's career was not unusual for the time; he moved from industry to academia in his mid 50s, then served the School well into retirement. He is remembered with affection by a generation of hotel faculty, staff, and students as a valued colleague and friend.

Ernie was born in Cameron, Missouri, in 1903—though he later changed this to 1905 in order not to be too old to enlist in the service. He was the oldest of five children and attended local schools and college in Missouri. His first career included over two decades in hotel and food-service management for the Fred Harvey Company and others, followed by service with the U.S. Navy supply corps during World War II. While stationed in the Mediterranean, Ernie was injured in an attack and was hospitalized for three months. After the war, Ernie married Isabelle Engle, and they had two daughters. They settled in Cleveland where, first, he managed an apartment hotel and then took a job with Porter Equipment Company, a career move that set the stage for his later work. At that time, the equipment supply companies often designed commercial kitchens and Porter found in Ernie an enthusiastic and able designer and engineer. Among his first projects was a major installation for National Cash Register in Dayton, Ohio, followed by a wide variety of industrial, hospital, school, and hotel projects.

Ernie, much like the “hotelies” he would later teach, had an entrepreneurial talent and, in the early 1950s, he established his own food-service design company. In 1954, he received the Annual Food Service Merit Award from *Institutions* magazine, honoring his design for the U.S. Army Finance Center in Ohio. As business grew, he merged his company with another to create Stephens-Bangs, for many years among the country's largest food-service design firms. In the following years, Ernie completed dozens of projects including major installations for the University of Michigan; for many Detroit-area manufacturers including Ford, Chrysler, General Motors, AT&T, and General Electric; and for the State Department and National Health Institutes in Washington, DC.

Dean Howard Meek invited Ernie in 1958 to teach a professional seminar in food-service engineering in the Hotel School's summer school. His efforts succeeding immediately, Ernie quickly joined the Cornell faculty that Fall as Acting Associate Professor of food-facilities engineering. He greatly expanded the Hotel School's course offerings in food facilities, a new subject area begun by Professor (emeritus) Paul Broten who recalls “I planted the seeds in the garden, but Ernie tilled the soil and PRODUCED.” Professor Broten remembers Ernie writing to him later to

thank him for his help in initiating the course and referring to himself and Paul as “brothers under the skin.” Paul also fondly characterizes Ernie as “extremely cooperative yet strong, and an unusual GENTLEMAN in that he was GENUINE and really did care about his associates and students.”

In his classes, Ernie continually challenged his students to think through problems, to consider an array of alternative solutions, and to prepare professional documents before there were any national standards. But Ernie taught much more than food-service design. In his strong mentoring role with his students, Ernie epitomized the highest standard of business and personal ethics. Ernie’s remarkable influence is recalled by William Eaton, a former student who, with a group of classmates, enrolled in Ernie’s first food-facilities course at Cornell, the beginning of a long sequence of design and engineering courses:

It really wasn't six terms. It was one very long class with five breaks, almost seamless. The key was that it allowed the group of us ... to grow to know each other . . . and [several of us] are still together! It never would have happened without Ernie Bangs. He taught us the Industry as no one else could have and, even more importantly, he taught us to think, to plan, and, above all, he taught us ethics. He was, and I do not exaggerate, the most ethical man I ever knew, and only hope that a fraction of what he taught has become a part of me.

It is not an overstatement that Ernie Bangs, single-handedly, educated a whole generation of industry leaders: in 1990, eighty percent of the executive committee of the International Food-Service Consultants Association were former students of Ernie’s. He is recognized, too, as the person who created the academic area of food-facilities design. In addition to those who hold leadership roles today in the industry, many of his former students now are teaching food-service facilities design at leading hospitality programs around the world.

Ernie continued to teach at the Hotel School until 1971 when he reluctantly retired. In the late 1960s, Ernie had successfully represented the Hotel School in helping fledgling hospitality programs in Korea and the Philippines establish departments of tourism and hotel management. Therefore, Dean Robert Beck invited Ernie to assume the directorship of the Hotel School’s new joint venture program in San Juan, Puerto Rico, where he served for eight more years. When he left in 1979, the students gave him a plaque reading, “For Professor O. Ernest Bangs: Our heartfelt gratitude, to one whose personal expertise and highest standards of both work and conduct kindled in all of us just one goal ... to strive for excellence.” Paul Gaurnier, Associate Dean during that period, recalls Ernie’s outstanding contribution:

Ernie truly came into his own in Puerto Rico. He was Cornell’s ambassador extraordinaire to the fledgling program, serving as professor, counselor to the students (for many of whom he became a surrogate father), and a public and governmental relations expert—overall an outstanding representative of Cornell. Ernie truly loved people and was at his best in helping

people advance their careers, even to the point of offering optional evening courses to those who could not attend his daytime classes. It was a joy to visit him there and watch the program bloom under his tutelage and guidance.

Ernie retired a second time in 1979 when he and Isabelle returned to Ithaca where they lived until Ernie's death in the mid-19th century farmhouse they had bought in 1960. Still full of energy and ideas, Ernie served as a volunteer counselor for the Small Business Administration where he advised local entrepreneurs on setting up their business and helped them deal with a variety of operating issues. In retirement, Ernie had more time to read, especially books on history and philosophy and religion. As his sight failed in his later years, he continued his lifelong education by "reading" more than one hundred books on tape.

When the new Statler opened in 1989, Ernie and Isabelle attended the grand opening. Although virtually blind, Ernie wandered off to explore the building that had been for so many years his professional home. He knew Statler Hall so well in his mind that he had no difficulty finding his way up the stairs to examine and critique the reconstructed food labs designed by his former students. He remained mentally sharp, always ready for a lively conversation, and inspired those around him with his curiosity and spirit.

Ernie is survived by his wife, Isabelle, in Ithaca; a son, Robert Bangs of Seattle, Washington; and two daughters, Connie Bangs of Brooklyn, New York, and Christine Hall of Inverell, Australia; five grandchildren; and five great-grandchildren. Ernie's faculty colleagues at Cornell fondly remember him as a gentleman of the utmost integrity; a consummate professional demanding the highest standards; a pleasant, knowledgeable, and highly valued friend; and a significant contributor to the success of the Hotel School's programs in Ithaca and Puerto Rico. He will be missed.

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