

Remembering Ralph J. Stephenson

August 25, 1922 – March 11, 2006

The Construction Industry Loses an Exceptional Man

Michigan's construction industry has lost an intellectual giant. Educator, engineer, and author Ralph J. Stephenson, PE, died in a Mt. Pleasant hospital on March 11.

Probably thousands in Michigan's construction industry knew Ralph Stephenson and benefited greatly from the relationship. He freely dispensed focused, practice advice to any and all, with the objective of promoting ethical and highly professional practices. He wrote extensively, basing his work not just on academic study, but also from years of practical experience.

He received his first bachelor's degree in 1943 from the Highland Park campus of what was then called the Lawrence Institute of Technology (now Lawrence Technological University). Service in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers followed, where as a line officer he was responsible for field engineering and demolition projects. Honorably discharged after three years, he returned to his studies, earning a master's from the University of Michigan in 1948. He got his M.S. Degree at Michigan State University in Civil Engineering.

Ralph joined the world-renowned architectural and engineering firm of Smith, Hinchman & Grylls Associates (now SmithGroup) in 1948. As a structural engineer there, he performed a wide range of design and drafting assignments, many involving structural calculation preparations for wood, concrete, and steel structures. From 1950 to 1958, he worked for another famous architectural firm, Victor Gruen Associates, where he was vice president.

In 1960, he then joined H.F. Campbell Company, a design and build firm, as a vice president responsible for estimating, graphics, and marketing. Two years later, he went into business for himself as a private consulting engineer.

Ralph was an early advocate of critical path scheduling and construction management practices. From the late 1980s, he also played a crucial role in the development of the project team approach to construction. Later he became a champion of Partnering, a process to avoid traditional project disputes by meeting together to create project-specific partnering charters. He helped hundreds of contractors create these Charters and later put his research into a book on partnering.



During his long service as a private consultant, he handled projects ranging in size from \$100,000 to \$400 million, providing services in design and construction, project planning and management, plant location and land planning, training and education, and alternate dispute resolution.

For about two decades, he served as an instructor for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's College of Engineering in its Department of Engineering Professional Development. He taught hundreds of technical and management seminars in the U.S., Canada, and Europe.

In Michigan he was frequently invited as an expert speaker for workshops conducted by both the Michigan Chapter and the Greater Detroit Chapter of the Associated General Contractors as well as the Construction Association of Michigan.

Ralph was born in Detroit, Michigan to Julia (Quigley) and Ralph J. Stephenson, and moved with his wife Betty to Mt. Pleasant in 1989. He is survived by his loving wife of 58 years, Betty (nee Foster), son Robert John (wife Rainy, and daughters, Jennifer, Julia, Lara), daughter Beth Diane Vought (husband Robert). Daughter Barbara Jo Stephenson of Mt. Pleasant predeceased him.

A memorial service was held on Saturday, April 8 at the United Methodist Church in Mt. Pleasant where many industry leaders paid tribute to Ralph. Members of his Lions Club and church family also honored him.

Over 200 boxes of his papers are going to be archived by Ferris State University for future reference by students and the industry. The family has provided an initial donation to get the project started. Others wishing to help support this project can make a donation to the FSU Construction Management program C/O Lee Templin, P.E. Construction Technology & Management, 605 S Warren, GRN 217, Big Rapids, Michigan 49307.

Donations to honor Ralph can also be made to the Michigan Chapter AGC Educational Endowment Fund that provides annual scholarships. Those donations can be sent to the Michigan Chapter AGC Educational Endowment Fund, 2323 N. Larch, Lansing, Michigan, 48906.