

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

JOSHUA L. SOSKE (1903 – 1966)

Professor Joshua Lawrence Soske was born near the village of Ardmore, South Dakota, on May 16, 1903. After graduation from high school he worked as a miner at Park City, Utah, and later as a magnetometer observer for the Piper Petroleum Syndicate, Kansas. Meanwhile, he studied geological engineering at the Colorado School of Mines, where he obtained his bachelor's degree in 1929. After two years working as a geologist and geophysicist with the Standard Oil Company of California in Wyoming, California, Utah and Texas, he returned to academic pursuits at the California Institute of Technology. While serving there as instructor in geophysics, he was awarded the master's degree in 1932 and his Ph.D. in 1935.

Reflection seismology was in its infancy during the early thirties, and Dr. Soske was among the first to recognize its vast potential for petroleum exploration. With some of his Caltech associates he organized the Geophysical Engineering Corporation, for which he was to become chief geophysicist and president from 1935 until 1952. This was an exciting and rewarding period in petroleum exploration, but initially no one knew whether application of the new geophysical methods would yield useful results. Instruments had to be designed and built. Varied techniques had to be tested. Baffling problems arose in interpreting the data wrung from a complex earth. And these technical difficulties were intricately interwoven with problems of business, labor, and human relations. From this rich and successful experience, Professor Soske later drew classroom examples that enlightened, amused, and inspired a generation of students.

Joshua L. Soske joined the Stanford faculty in 1951 and became the Henry Salvatori Professor of Geophysics in 1956. He was appointed executive head of the new Department of Geophysics in 1957. Highly effective teaching, much of it in informal discussions, became his hallmark at Stanford. He established warm, personal friendships with students and needled them humorously and successfully toward greater effort and better performance.

Josh, as he was known to all his friends, had professional competence at a high level, along with a keen and amusing insight into human motivations. For these reasons he was repeatedly sought out as a friend and adviser. He had his own unpredictable ways for startling people out of habitual narrow channels of thought. In one Ph.D. examination, for example, the student had been performing brilliantly and flawlessly under intense and highly specialized questioning from his professors. After a particularly long and involved mathematical excursion into the complex plane, it came Josh's turn to ask another question. This one was simple but broadening: "What is a debenture?" The student, who evidently had never heard of so mundane a thing, was shocked into silence, and the story became a legend.

The most astonishing facet of Josh's humor, however, was a remarkable ability to savor a joke on himself, a truly rare quality! He was a thoroughgoing realist, forthright in his expressions and convincing in his analyses. And as a colleague once remarked, "You always knew where you stood with him, provided you could tell whether he was putting you on!"

While he was an undergraduate student at the Colorado School of Mines, Josh met Helga L. Larson and in 1926 they were married. Helga did much to develop an unusually fine family environment for their five children, Dorothy, Linnea, Joshua Jr., Paul and Katherine. Both boys were graduated from Stanford.

Josh died on October 17 after a brief illness, and all who knew him must feel a profound sense of loss at his passing. To his host of friends and especially to his family, we of the Academic Council express our pride in his achievements and extend our deepest sympathy.

Richard H. Jahns
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