

MEMORIAL RESOLUTION

JAMES BERTRAND WELLS (1888 – 1978)

James Bertrand Wells, Emeritus Professor of Civil Engineering, died at the Stanford University Hospital on November 27, 1978 at the age of 90. He is survived by his wife Clare Humphries Wells and five sons. As a resident of Palo Alto for 86 years and a Stanford professor for 50 years, Bert Wells participated in the development of both the city and the campus from their early days to their present state of maturity.

Bert Wells was born on November 19, 1888 in Pasadena, California. His family moved to San Francisco when he was one year old and then to Palo Alto in 1892 when he was age four; it is interesting to note that Stanford held its first Commencement that same year. Palo Alto was not yet incorporated, and El Camino Real was a dirt road. In later years, Bert would reminisce about the days of his youth when he drove his horse and wagon along that dusty road in front of the campus. He attended "grammar school" in Palo Alto and then went to Palo Alto High School, from which he graduated in 1907.

The great San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906 occurred while Bert was a high school student. Shortly after the earthquake he took his small box camera in hand, got on his bicycle, and pedaled to the campus. There he took numerous photographs (now in the possession of the University) of the terrible destruction to campus buildings. This early experience no doubt helped motivate him to a professional career in structural engineering, and it certainly contributed to his well-known concern for the seismic safety of campus buildings.

Bert attended Stanford University and received the B.A. degree in Civil Engineering in 1911. He then went to work for the Standard Oil Company of California, where he stayed until 1928 with the exception of one year in the U. S. Army during World War I. Joining the Stanford faculty in 1928; he became a full professor ten years later. His classes in structural engineering and design were received with favor by students, who particularly appreciated his friendly manner and sense of humor. He was a member of the engineering honor society Tau Beta Pi, and he served the University on numerous committees. He became emeritus in 1954 but remained an active civil engineer for many years thereafter.

Being involved in civic affairs was natural for Bert Wells. He was a Palo Alto City Councilman in 1952 and 1953 and prior to that time was Chairman of the Board of Public Works and a member of several other local boards and councils. His professional work included active participation in the American Society of Civil Engineers and the Structural Engineers Association of California, of which he served a term as President. He was also a faithful member of the Elks, Masons, and American Legion.

As a structural engineer, Bert knew more about the construction of the old campus buildings than anyone else and played a key role in all reconstruction or remodeling of them. He served as a consultant to Stanford on Crothers dormitories, Sequoia Hall, various Quad buildings, Encina Hall, and the Stadium press box. He was also the consultant (with Professor Jack R. Benjamin) on the reinforcing of Memorial Court and its archways when they were made earthquake-resistant in the early 1960s and on the structural design of the Faculty Club.

Bert Wells was not an ivory tower engineer but a person with wide practical engineering experience. He put more faith in the exercise of engineering judgment than in the use of complex analytical procedures. He had the ability to communicate his accumulated wisdom and judgment to his students through his courses in structural design. He was willing to devote many hours a day to instruction of his students, who often solved problems under his direct supervision. He trained many engineering students who later became successful practitioners and he remained in close contact with a large number of his former students.

Throughout his long life Bert Wells was devoted to his family, the University, the City of Palo Alto, and his country. He served all of them well, and they will miss him.

James M. Gere, Chairman
Jack R. Benjamin
Joseph B. Franzini
Harry A. Williams