



Wm Griffith

WILLIAM A. GRIFFITH

1922–2009

Elected in 1998

“For technical contributions in the mining industry leading to new technology for optimal resource utilization and enhanced productivity.”

BY TERRY MCNULTY

WILLIAM A. (“BILL”) GRIFFITH, a retired mining industry executive, was elected to the National Academy of Engineering (Sections 8 and 11) in 1998 and died on April 30, 2009.

Bill was born on March 28, 1922, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and was raised in the Sioux Falls area, graduating from Canton High School in 1940. His education was interrupted by service in the U.S. Navy (Amphibious Forces) during World War II. He participated in the invasions and occupations of Iwo Jima and Okinawa and in the initial landing of U.S. occupation forces in Japan. He was honorably discharged from active duty service in 1945 as a lieutenant (serving in the Naval Reserve until 1954) and resumed pursuit of a college education at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, receiving a B.S. in metallurgical engineering in 1947. He then studied at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and was awarded an M.S. in metallurgy in 1950.

Bill worked as a research investigator for the New Jersey Zinc Company and as a metallurgist for Rare Metals Corporation of America during the 1950s, prior to serving as research director for Phelps Dodge Corporation (Morenci Division) for 10 years. He then joined Hecla Mining Company and held a succession of positions ranging from research director to chairman and chief executive officer. Under his leadership, Hecla rose from near-insolvency to become the premier domestic silver producer. Following retirement in 1986, Bill remained on Hecla’s board of directors until 1996.

Bill was an outstanding metallurgist and manager. In the mid-1970s the direction of his research work turned to the Lakeshore joint venture owned by Hecla and El Paso Natural Gas. Copper ores from the underground mine were treated separately, the sulfides being concentrated by flotation. The copper sulfide concentrates were then roasted, enabling production of sulfuric acid from the roaster gases. The roasted calcine was blended with oxide ore, leached with sulfuric acid, and the leach liquors were treated by direct electrowinning to yield cathodically deposited copper. For a few years, magnetite was recovered from the flotation tailings, pyrometallurgically reduced to metallic iron, and applied to the precipitation of residual soluble copper from the electrowinning plant. Bill once commented that bringing this large complex operation into production was "tantamount to starting a perpetual motion machine."

Bill received an honorary professional degree from Montana College of Mineral Science and Technology, an honorary doctor of business administration from the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, and an honorary doctor of science from the University of Idaho. From the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers, he received the Extractive Metallurgy Technology Award (1976), the A. M. Gaudin Award (1976), the Distinguished Member Award (1977), the Robert H. Richards Award (1981), and was elected to the Legion of Honor (1983).

Bill was active in his community of Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, and belonged to the Rotary Club and St. Luke's Episcopal Church. He served as the director of the Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, and of the American Mining Congress, as president of the Silver Institute and of the Western Regional Council, and was founding chairman of the board for Inland Northwest Bank. He was a humorous and caring man who left behind many good friends and respectful colleagues.

Bill married Gratia Frances Hannan on Jan. 27, 1949, in Boston, Mass. They had three children, Georgeanne Griffith of Rathdrum, Idaho; Jim (Pam) Griffith of Canton, Ohio; and

Wade (Kathleen) Griffith of Spokane, Washington. In addition to his wife and children, Bill is survived by his sister, Kate Kurvink, of Sarnia, Ontario, Canada, and devoted friend, Kathie Wilson of Coeur d'Alene. He is also survived by four grandchildren: Jennifer Griffith Weber (Josh), Wm. Ashley Griffith (Liz), Camie Griffith Rodan (Mike), and Daniel Griffith, and four great grandchildren.

Bill's wife wrote that:

When it was time to talk about a marker for Bill's grave, his younger son said it should read: Husband, Father, Engineer, Servant, which was remarkably perceptive. His children remember him as always having exacting standards in everything he did and reminding them to always leave a place better than they found it. He was ever supportive of the interests and activities of his family—Boy Scouts (Troop Leader for two years), girls' softball, football and track events, music programs, and family picnics at Juan Miller Campground in the White Mountains of Arizona on Sundays. And the needs of the community—Rotary Club (President for the Morenci, AZ, club), vestry member and substitute organist of his church, and he loved to brag about being instrumental in changing the ratio of registered Democrats to Republicans from 16 to 1 to 14 to 1 while serving as Chairman of the Republican Party for Greenlee County, Arizona.

After retirement to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, he served on the hospital's foundation board, as well as a number of civic committees, and was dedicated to working to improve education in the state, yet still found time to putter in his greenhouse, raising tomatoes and marigolds for the garden. Toward the end of his life he continued to read the Wall Street Journal regularly and study the Bible, while holding Marcello, the three-legged Siamese cat, on his lap. He also always enjoyed a spirited conversation about any controversial issue. Somehow he never found time for golf, but did enjoy playing tennis, some cross-country skiing, and a bit of bridge.