



B. P. Bellport

Bernard P. Bellport

1907-1987

By J. Donovan Jacobs

Bernard Philip Bellport had been a member of the National Academy of Engineering (NAE) for seventeen years at the time of this death on October 3, 1987. His participation in development of American water resources is an important chapter in the engineering saga "Reclaiming the West." Here are some memories of the man, as recalled by friends who knew him well. Because he always preferred to be addressed simply as "Barney", that habit will not here be broken.

Barney entered this world May 25, 1907, in the small town of LaCrosse, Kansas. His father, also Bernard P., passed away while Barney was an infant. When the child became eight, his mother, Louise, packed their belongings and with her son traveled westward to a new home in Merced, California.

The lad attended grammar school in Merced and high school in Palo Alto. After high school, Barney matriculated in Polytechnic College of Engineering in Oakland. He graduated from Polytechnic in 1927 with a B.S. in mining engineering. Shortly thereafter he was hired by St. Joseph Lead Company as assistant engineer-geologist. He did underground exploration work for them until the mines succumbed to the great depression in 1931. His mining career had been brief but productive. He had learned the

practicalities of underground operations and had acquired a colorful vocabulary.

Disregarding the depression, Barney succeeded in selling himself as a civil engineer to Phoenix Utility Company that was laying natural gas lines in Butte and Helena for Montana Power Company. When the pipe lines were completed, he rustled a field engineering job with Montana Highway Department. He worked for the state until 1935 when a depleted treasury forced the department to cancel dozens of contracts and lay off hundreds of manual and technical employees, including Engineer Bellport.

During the following months, Barney learned a lot about hardship caused by economic collapse. Further employment prospects in Montana were bleak, so he packed his wife and baby daughter into the old car and headed back to California where, at least, winter heating bills were lower. Home again, he picked up whatever odd jobs came his way, and took a government civil service examination for junior engineer. Early in 1936 Barney was notified by the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, that a transitman position was available in Antioch. He grabbed it.

Antioch was headquarters for the Bureau's California Canal Division. During seven years there, Barney climbed the ladder from surveyor to director of all office engineering for three major projects: Contra Costa and Delta Mendota Canal, Delta Cross Canal, and Tracy Pumping Plant. In 1952 he was promoted to construction engineer in charge of all operations on the Solano project.

In 1957 Barney became director of the Bureau's Region 2, headquartered in Sacramento. There he was responsible for direction and execution of an integrated program for beneficial use of water within a region that enveloped a major portion of California plus contiguous areas in Nevada and southern Oregon. After two years in Sacramento, Bellport was summoned to Denver to become deputy to Chief Engineer Grant Bloodgood.

When Bloodgood retired in 1963, Bellport succeeded him as chief engineer of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. In this position he had jurisdiction over design, administration, and construction of Bureau projects in seventeen western states and Alaska. Approximately five thousand technical employees served under him. Outstanding examples in a long list of Bellport-administered projects include Morrow Point Dam in Colorado, the highest double-curvature thin-arch dam in the United States; Third Power Project at Grand Coulee Dam, eventually to become the world's largest single power facility; Monticello concrete arch dam in California; San Luis earth dam in California; Glen Canyon and Flaming Gorge Dams on the Colorado River; and joint development of Intertie, the nation's first and the world's longest extra-high-voltage direct current power line.

Barney possessed an uncanny ability to sort out competent employees and assign them to adaptable jobs. He thrived on hard work and, in that respect, set a good example for his associates. Denver office hours began at 7:30 A.M. but Barney usually arrived at 6:30. He had found that he could accomplish more in that one morning hour than in any three hours during the normal day.

Ever an advocate of innovation, Barney strove to encourage inventiveness among his designers. His frequent admonition, "Forget the way grandpa did it. Let's do it better!" inspired the appearance of surreptitious signs in the drafting rooms like "Hell with grandpa!" On the wall in Barney's private office hung a picture of a turtle under locomotion. The sign beneath it read, "He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out."

Although his official hitching post was in Denver, the chief engineer made frequent trips to visit field operations. Barney's wife, Mabe (for Maybelle), accompanied him on many of these jaunts. She was enthusiastically interested in construction and asked so many questions that many of the staff believed that she too was an engineer.

As time permitted, Bellport would carefully review the

work output of his staff. From his breast pocket always protruded a large red-tipped felt pen. A vivid red question mark on a drawing or document was recognized by all as a signal saying, "Will the originator please come in and explain?" His critiques, however, were usually sprinkled with wry humor to make them palatable.

Barney Bellport was a popular boss, respected and liked by Bureau employees. That admiration was shared by most contractors on Bureau jobs. He advocated fair and reasonable specifications and equitable compensation, and believed that lower costs resulted from a healthy contracting industry. Nevertheless, he carefully guarded the interests of his employer, the government, and its taxpayers. He made friends among union officials by promoting fair working agreements and job safety.

On the other hand, the chiefs job was not all sweetness and goodwill. Political harassment was an inescapable annoyance. In our democracy, public disputes over water rights are bound to occur and be dropped into the laps of Washington politicians. Bellport's office was an interface between political controversy and physical accomplishment. His unbroken service through three federal administrations speaks well for his diplomatic skills.

Barney managed to spare time from his Bureau commitments to engage in extracurricular efforts as long as they were in the interest of better engineering. His committee involvement included memberships on the National Research Council's (NRC) Committee on Rapid Excavation; the NRC U.S. National Committee on Tunneling Technology; the U.S. Committee on Large Dams; the U.S. Committee on Irrigation, Drainage and Flood Control; and the Colorado State Research Advisory Committee. He was past president of the Colorado Chapter of American Society of Civil Engineers. He authored more than seventy published articles or public presentations on technical subjects.

Of the many honors that came his way, Barney most cherished his membership in the National Academy of Engineering.

He also received from the U.S. Department of the Interior its highest honor, the Gold Medal Award for Distinguished Service in 1967. The Beavers, a national organization of construction men, presented to him their Golden Beaver Award for Engineering in 1968. He was also named one of the American Public Works Association's Top Ten Public Works Leaders of the Year in 1970.

As mandated by the Civil Service Code, time arrived for Barney's retirement. On March 31, 1972, he turned over his office keys and red felt pen to his successor, Mr. Harold Aldrich.

A few months after retirement, Barney and Mabe sold their Denver home, said farewell to their many friends there, and flew back to California to a retirement home they had purchased in the community of Rossmoor in Contra Costa County, east of San Francisco. In Rossmoor, Barney kept as professionally occupied as he wished by accepting intermittent consulting assignments. To fill the gaps, he kept current on engineering affairs and restored antique furniture. On October 3, 1987, Barney Bellport died as a result of a massive cerebral hemorrhage. He is survived by Mabe, who still resides in Contra Costa; his daughter, Mrs. Louise Garcia of Dallas, Texas; and son, Barry, a stockbroker in San Francisco.