Harold Benedict Gotaas

1906-1977

By Burgess H. Jennings and Donald S. Berry

His many friends, colleagues, and engineering associates were greatly saddened at the untimely passing of Harold Gotaas on August 24, 1977, in Evanston, Illinois. At the time of his death, he was active on many committees and projects of public interest, serving from the office he continued to maintain at Northwestern University. In 1969, he had retired as Dean of Engineering. This position he had held for the prior twelve years, where under his leadership the Technological Institute had developed an outstanding graduate and research program to complement the undergraduate program, which he also directed with diligence. He relinquished all his academic responsibilities in 1975 to assume emeritus status as Walter P. Murphy Professor of Civil Engineering and Dean of Engineering.

Harold Benedict Gotaas was born September 3, 1906, in Melette, South Dakota. He received his Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering from the University of South Dakota in 1928 and his Master of Science degree in civil engineering from Iowa State College in 1930. After two years of service as a structural engineer he joined the faculty of the University of South Dakota. Having developed a strong interest in sanitary engineering, he resigned in 1936 to attend Harvard Graduate School, receiving his Master of Science degree in 1937. He then became Assistant Professor in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of North
Carolina, becoming a full Professor in 1941, and receiving a Doctor of Science degree in engineering from Harvard in 1942.

Gotaas entered the army during World War II, working in the Institute of Inter-American Affairs. He succeeded Nelson Rockefeller as President of that corporation until his resignation from active duty in 1946 after reaching the rank of colonel. He then joined the University of California (Berkeley) as Professor of Sanitary Engineering, in 1949 becoming Chairman of the Civil Engineering Division and Head of the Sanitary Research Laboratory. In 1957 he resigned to accept his final academic assignment as Dean of Engineering of the Technological Institute of Northwestern University.

He served on many committees, boards, and panels, notably membership on the Great Lakes Commission, Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and Inter-American Association of Sanitary Engineering. Many significant activities were also carried on through the professional societies in which he took an active part.

Awards and decorations came to him in many areas, of which the following are most significant: Legion of Merit, United States; Order of Condor of the Andes, Bolivia; Order of Merit, Chile; Cross of Boyaca, Colombia; Order of Honor and Merit, Haiti; Harrison P. Eddy Medal, Water Pollution Control Federation; Kenneth Allen Award, Water Pollution Control Federation; Gordon Maskew Fair Medal, Water Pollution Control Federation; James R. Croes Medal, American Society of Civil Engineers; Rudolph Hering Medal, American Society of Civil Engineers; Marston Medal Award, Iowa State University; Chicago Civil Engineer of the Year, 1974, ASCE; Engineer of the Year, 1961, Illinois; Honorary Member, ASCE; Honorary Member, Western Society of Engineers; National Honorary Member, Triangle Fraternity; D.Sc. (Honorary), University of South Dakota; D.Eng. (Honorary), Rose-Hulman Polytechnic Institute; Distinguished Service Recognition, Great Lakes Commission; National Academy of Engineering, 1967.

Dr. Gotaas participated actively in committee work and on assignments for the National Academy of Engineering, serving with:
NAE Project Committee-1968-1974 (Member), Subcommittee on Human Welfare 1968-1970 (Chairman); NAE 1970 Annual Meeting-Panel on World Population (Member); NAE Committee on International Activities-1970-1973 (Member); NAE Project Committee, Panel on Environment-1970-1974 (Chairman); NAE Committee on Membership-Civil Engineering Peer Group-1974-1975 (Member); NAE Committee on Membership-Foreign Associates Search Task Group-1977 (Member).

He also served on a number of National Research Council committees and panels.

Although continuously busy, Harold B. Gotaas found time to write one book and more than one hundred research papers covering the environment, water, waste treatment and control, engineering education, and economic development problems. Best known as a sanitary engineer, his many-faceted career enabled him to contribute significantly in many other areas, in particular to engineering education. He is gone, but his work lives on and he will long be remembered by all who had the privilege of knowing him.