



*Percy H. McGauhey*

# Percy Harold McGauhey

## 1904-1975

By Vinton W. Bacon

P. H. (Mack) McGauhey, who died on October 8, 1975, was intimately known and deeply respected by professional engineers, educators, and governmental officials in the State of California and throughout the nation and world. His name was synonymous with sanitary engineering and water resources. There were few people facing perplexing, practical engineering problems who did not seek his help.

Professor McGauhey was born on a homestead ranch on January 20, 1904, in Ritter, Oregon. The harshness of the eastern Oregon lands is reflected in his philosophy of life and in his verses, many of which appear in *Rimrock Ranch and Other Verses* and in *Oral History of the Sanitary Engineering Research Laboratory*, published by the Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley.

Before getting to the real man and human being, let us look at his outstanding professional record, which was recognized by election to the National Academy of Engineering in 1973. In 1927 he received a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering from Oregon State University; a Civil Engineering degree in 1929 from Virginia Polytechnic Institute; and a Master of Science degree in hydraulic and sanitary engineering from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1941. Utah State University honored him with a Doctor of Science honorary degree in 1971.

He served in faculty posts at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, at the University of Southern California and at the University of California, Berkeley, the last beginning in 1952. In 1957 he was appointed Director of the Sanitary Engineering Research Labora

tory, Professor of Civil Engineering, and Professor of Public Health. In addition, he was appointed to the chairmanship of the Department of Civil Engineering.

It was in the latter capacity that he molded and led what has become one of the most respected sanitary engineering laboratories in the world. Professor McGauhey conducted pioneering investigations on a wide variety of subjects that included the composting and management of solid wastes, the economic evaluation of water, the treatment of waste by septic tanks and percolation fields, the eutrophication of natural waters, the fate of detergents in sewage treatment, and the use of the soil mantle as a waste management and water reclamation system. In each of these areas, Professor McGauhey became a world expert. What was so amazing, besides the diversity and excellence of his research, was his ability to bring his spirit of eternal optimism and his manner of meaningful compromise into the organization of his research, into the organization of the Sanitary Engineering Research Laboratory, and into the academic programs in civil engineering and public health. These qualities are reflected in the type of research that he undertook—he had the ability to hold together interdisciplinary research groups with the knack of allowing each investigator to contribute both toward the mutual objective of the group and toward fulfilling his own individual satisfactions.

He retired as Director of the Laboratory in 1969, but he was soon recalled by the Chancellor of the Berkeley campus to conduct a study of the role of the University in environmental studies.

In addition to the honors mentioned above, he received the Fuller Award of the American Water Works Association (1950), the Harrison Prescott Eddy Medal of the Water Pollution Control Federation (1960), the Distinguished Service Award of the National Clay Pipe Institute (1964), the Service Award of the California Water Pollution Control Board (1964), and the Gordon M. Fair Medal of the Water Pollution Control Federation (1969).

He served as a consultant for the State of California on the Lake Tahoe water management problems, HEW, AID, Israel, the Ford Foundation, and many others. One of his last significant contributions was as chairman of a three-person board of consultants that

developed a Wisconsin Statewide Solid Waste Recycling Program, which resulted in the legislature creating an authority empowered to design and operate recycling systems—the first of its type in the nation.

But such creative achievements are expected of someone elected to NAE. Virginians, Californians, and admirers around the world will always remember the warm, humble, helpful, philosophical, and poetic man.

First and last, he was an educator. He had unique and old-fashioned views as to what an educator should be. Undoubtedly, these were formed by his early bleak schooldays in a one-room schoolhouse in eastern Oregon and by the fact he had to work his way through grade school, high school, and college. Such experiences would harden in philosophy even the softest of dispositions. His verse "Schoolhouse" expresses his ideas on the real purpose and meaning of education:

Schoolhouse

Its blackboard showed the sentence parsed-  
 Though feebly understood  
 And random truths there shone a while,  
 Then disappeared for good.  
 Yet stubborn minds perforce must yield  
 Beyond its battered door.  
 We went in poor and ignorant-  
 And came out only poor.

Adversity being the creator of character, Professor McGauhey had more than his share. Just when he was about to complete his doctorate, he contracted tuberculosis. He spent two years in a sanatorium and another year recuperating from surgery. From his verse "Sanatorium," a glimpse of this time emerges:

Sanatorium

*Infirmery*

Like patient oxen in their stalls  
 We lie benumbed of flesh and brain;  
 Each crack, each smear upon the walls,  
 Becomes the pattern of our pain.

*Horizons*

Slowly the restful are where earth  
 Meets patterned skies we knew so well;  
 The far horizons of the mind  
 Are squared and shrunk to fit this cell.

*Evening In Summer*

There is a hungriness that grips the heart  
 When the last oblique rays of the dying sun  
 Shatter like hopes against these ageless hills  
 That wall us off from life.  
 I see you there alone-yet cannot come  
 To share your solitude  
 When lengthening shadows of the evening grow-  
 Suddenly-to a blackness that is night;  
 Bearing on its restless wings  
 The hot damp cloak of loneliness.

Education to him was the task of instilling useful and well-structured knowledge into recipients who were expected to work hard and doing this without unnecessary interference or ballyhoo from administrators. He had little time for professors who taught at 8:10 a.m. what came into their heads at 7:55 a.m.; nor did he have much sympathy for the professional student who spent too many years getting too few degrees. In his unpublished novel, aptly entitled "Phooey on Your Alma Mater," you can find these attitudes precisely stated:

Sound advice and high purpose have not always been the considerations by which our institutions of higher learning are populated. A good long loaf at the old man's expense has always stood high among the reasons for congregating within ivy-covered walls. Nor, has improvement in headwork always been the end result of the learning process in such an environment. A couple of generations ago, some colleges were so successful in converting their loafers into sots that many parents were thankful that poverty protected their sons from the moral strain of a college education.

On the "free-thinker" professor he states:

Much of a University catalog is given over to a list of subjects along with descriptions indicating that the whole field of human knowledge is to be covered by Professor Van Beer in three hours per week for one semester.

By this subterfuge the grouchy old professor can teach anything he pleases without fear that the accrediting committee will compare his course unfavorably with the same course at Harvard.

He gave equally short shrift to the elitist academician who felt that the dispensation of knowledge and the conduct of esoteric scholarly research had to be divorced from any semblance of everyday hard work. In his *Oral History of the Sanitary Engineering Research Laboratory*, he notes that the Richmond Field Station is some seven miles northwest of the Berkeley campus and remarks:

Reluctance of some faculty members to undertake such a long journey (from campus) was one of the problems of utilizing the (Field Station). I once explained this phenomenon on the rationale that the (Field Station) was located on the wrong side of the Campus. Thus it was not on the way to Europe and hence (was) geographically inconvenient.

His feelings on the unreasonable world of academe were summed up, during the so-called Free Speech Movement at Berkeley, on a scrap of paper found in his desk drawer:

There is nothing so crude, lewd, or treasonable that the sub-species of apes, it tolerates as students, will not attempt to force upon the community. There is nothing so preposterous, unbecoming an academic community or even common civilization, that its faculty will not, in its childlike naivete, espouse in the name of Academic Freedom. There is nothing so craven or absurd that its administration will not embrace when the enemies of society and America have at the gates of Sproul Hall. There is no demand so preposterous, that it will not be tolerated while faculty and students ponder how to remove the cause of this blatant attack on society.

Mack said he was one person who "gave up church for Lent and never went back"; and when he became Emeritus he would let you know that he had just been "retarded from the University." His poetry conveys his wit and "pure fun" humor:

Advice Is Worth Its Salt  
I sought a friend (advice to borrow).  
He said, "Go home and drown your sorrow!"  
I felt so bad I shed a tear-  
And found the salt improved my beer.

## La Cucuracha

I picked up my glass and went for a drink,  
There was something in it, and he jumped in the sink.  
He got clean away-cause he saw me first.  
Strange how a cockroach can quench one's thirst!

Professor McGauhey's poetry showed all his moods. There are things in these lines that you rarely heard him say. The barely endurable pain that he must have suffered almost constantly throughout his life only seeps through to the outside world in his verses.

## Dichotomy

Though 'gulfed in weariness by day  
That makes him long for bed,  
A man may come to dread the night-  
When night holds things to dread.

Mack was a true example of the type of individual here now being paid homage: a descendent of pioneer Americans who took the promise of the American dream literally and who achieved it through the application of strenuous physical labor to a lifelong quest for education and excellence. In Rimrock he wrote his epitaph:

He did not lose his zest for life  
Nor judge the race not worth the run.  
But he would have judged his duty shirked  
If he failed to do-what must be done.

Throughout his life, Percy Harold McGauhey was sustained by a loving and loveable wife called Margo.

