

SPENCER BALL (1890-1986)

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It gives me great personal pleasure to pay tribute to the late Spencer Ball, who was my geotechnical predecessor at the Technical University of Nova Scotia (now Dalhousie University) in Halifax, Nova Scotia. He was born on 30 June 1890, in Liverpool, England. After his matriculation examination, he immigrated to Canada in 1912 to study civil engineering at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

After graduating with a BSc degree in 1928, he was appointed Assistant Professor in our Department of Civil Engineering rising to Full Professor and Head of Department in 1938. During the Second World War, he was seconded to the Department of National Defence to organize service training for the Canadian Army.

In 1947 he set up the first undergraduate courses and laboratories in soil mechanics, construction materials and highway engineering in a new Civil Engineering Building with ample space for future expansion. I was pleased to inherit it in 1955, when he retired after more than 25 years of dedicated service to the university.

I first met Spencer Ball 50 years ago at the 1st Canadian Soils Mechanics Conference held in Ottawa at the end of April, 1947, which I happened to attend as guest of Dr. R. F. Legget. Thus, I appreciate the opportunity to pay tribute to him here today. He was a humorous, athletic but somewhat pugnacious man, having been an amateur boxer for many years! He was also a kind and generous host in his modern house, which he had designed himself within walking distance from the university.

After his retirement, Spencer Ball went into a consulting business in Halifax until 1963, when he began travelling in North America and Europe and pursuing his hobby of reading about history. He also kept in close contact with his former students and colleagues and with the development of the university. He became a Life Member of APENS in 1940 and later was awarded an Honorary Life Membership. At a Special Convocation of the College in 1969 when four outstanding alumni were honoured, I had the pleasure of reading his citation for an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Engineering. Subsequently he left for British Columbia to join his family. Suffering from total blindness during his last two years, he passed away peacefully at home in February, 1986, at the age of 95.

For information about Spencer Ball, I am indebted to my colleagues, the President of the Alumni Council, the Registrar of APENS and the Department of Community Relations of the Technical University, who provided a copy of a remarkable taped address and interview by Spencer Ball at the Alumni Reunion in 1984 when he was 94 years old, one year before he died.