

ROBERT (BOB) SPENCE (?-2006)

By Keith Robinson, based on a *Vancouver Sun* obituary with input from Jonathan Fannin and John Gadsby, and a 1983 CGS interview by Iain Bruce.



Robert (Bob) Alexander Spence passed away on February 23, 2006. He interrupted his undergraduate civil engineering studies at the University of Alberta to serve with the RCAF during World War II. After the war he returned to the UofA and completed his BSc in 1948. Bob then carried on to Harvard for postgraduate work. He graduated with his Master of Science (SM) degree from Harvard University in 1949, under the supervision of Arthur Casagrande.

After Harvard, Bob worked briefly for the National Research Council's Division of Building Research Ottawa, and then taught soil mechanics at the South Dakota School of Mines and Technology for a year and the City College of New York for three years. In 1953, Bob joined the faculty of the Department of Civil Engineering at the University of British Columbia, where he is credited with teaching the first soil mechanics course and establishing a soil mechanics laboratory.

After a few years at UBC, he left academia and established R.A. Spence Ltd., a Vancouver-based consulting firm specializing in soils and foundation engineering. The firm remained a relatively small firm, but carried out consulting projects for a number of years, primarily in the lower mainland of BC. In the early to mid-1970s, Bob joined and worked with the consulting firm of Piteau Gadsby McLeod. He continued to work until late in his life as an individual consultant who had extensive local experience that added value to all his projects.

Bob was known as a meticulous and exacting professional who mentored many students and young professionals, directing them toward master's degrees in soil and rock mechanics (geotechnical engineering). Bob was a strong advocate of using detailed geology, past experience and empirical relationships to assess potential risks to a project. Casagrande thought highly of Bob's technical skills.

Bob was also known as being non-conformist and a unique engineer with outstanding ethics. He always wore a hat, had an unusual sense of humour and had a fun personality (see above photo).

Along with some close colleagues in the US, Bob was dedicated to supporting engineers who were being unfairly criticized by other engineers without adequate knowledge of the related issues. He felt that there were too many “ambulance chasers” in the profession. However, if justified he fully supported the appropriate penalties for unethical or inadequate engineering reports.