



THE ROBERT A. BEESLEY MEMORIAL SCHOLARSHIP
in Civil Engineering at the University of Memphis

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KINDNESS TO A STRANGER

“ In the early 70s, Bob was working on the weekend in HB&A’s office downtown at 188 Jefferson. On Sunday, he went out to lunch and was approached by a fellow who was down on his luck. He told Bob he had just arrived in Memphis on a freight train, hadn’t had anything to eat in a couple days, and of course asked for meal money. Fearing that the guy would spend the money on “adult” beverages, not food, Bob took him to a downtown restaurant and bought his lunch. After lunch, the fellow told Bob he would be hopping another freight later that day for Birmingham, and it being a cold day, asked Bob for a couple bucks for “adult” beverages to keep him warm on the ride. Instead, Bob took him to the Greyhound Bus station, bought him a ticket, and stayed with him until the bus left for Birmingham.”

— Ed Cain

THE DESERVED RAISE

“ HB&A conducted periodic salary reviews for its employees. In the late 60s, a 25-cent per hour increase was considered a significant raise. Bob began one of my reviews by telling me that he and the other Associated Partners believed that I was doing exceptionally well and that I deserved a 1-dollar per hour raise. As my pulse quickened with the thought of my newly-bestowed wealth, Bob added that, regrettably, there was no money available for any pay increases, and therefore I would receive no raise at all. Shocking though it was, I left the review feeling pretty good about myself. After all, the Associate Partners believed that I deserved a 1-dollar per hour raise.” — Ed Cain

Robert Ambrose Beesley was born on March 12, 1933 in Wheaton, IL. He was the youngest of four children and the only boy. He was a big baby weighing in at 9 pounds, and this was the precursor to his future growth. He grew into a big man, standing 6 feet, 4 inches tall, with long arms and a wiry build. As the youngest child and the little brother to three older sisters, there is some speculation that he might have been somewhat spoiled.



According to his elementary report cards and other records, in those early years he was not an exceptional student. Later, that changed. He was an active member of the school safety patrol, rising to the rank of sergeant. For those who are too young to remember, school safety patrol was a prestigious assignment that usually went to the older students who were on solid academic footing and who were considered model students. The patrol members controlled street crossings near the school and sometimes served as hall monitors.

During his formative years and on through high school at North Park Academy, Bob was active with his family in their church, and he became a Boy Scout, ultimately earning the rank of Eagle Scout.

While in high school, Bob played both basketball and football. He was **captain of the 1949 football team**, the Vikings, which went undefeated and won the Illinois state



championship in their category. As a tight end, he earned conference honorable mention for his play. That team was honored in 2010 with induction into the Viking Hall of Fame.

Upon graduation in 1950, he enrolled at St. Olaf’s College in Northfield, MN, with a view to becoming an accountant. In 1952 he left St. Olaf’s and entered the **School of Engineering at the University of Illinois**,

changing his major to civil engineering. He became active in the **American Society of Civil Engineers** and **Chi Epsilon Engineering Honor Society**. In his personal scrapbook there is a picture from his youth of a wooden arch bridge located in a park near his home in Wheaton. There is some indication that his choice of civil engineering was in significant measure driven by the strength and elegance of that bridge.

With college behind him, Bob joined the U.S. Navy and became part of the **Navy's Construction Battalion**, known as the "**Seabees**." He spent the majority of his military tour in Japan, returning to the United States in late 1957. Shortly after discharge, he joined the engineering firm of Harland, Bartholomew & Associates (HB&A) in Memphis, TN.



He made rapid progress and soon was made an associate partner in the firm. Bob remained a part of HB&A for 28 years, during which time he worked on innumerable road and airport transportation projects. Some of the most notable that he designed were Red Mountain Expressway, 14 miles of Interstate 59, and the Oporto-Madrid road and bridge project, all in Birmingham, AL; and Interstate 40 from Chelsea Avenue to Summer Avenue in Memphis, TN.

In the mid-1970s, HB&A formed a joint venture with an Iranian firm to do roadway and airport design and construction in Iran. Bob, at the time planning to marry his soulmate, Naomi, speculated on the possibility of doing so and taking Naomi and her three daughters along with him. Ultimately, they decided to postpone the wedding. He went alone, was successful, and returned to the United States just before the beginning of the Iran hostage crisis.

A few years later, while working on projects for HB&A at Memphis International Airport, Bob was asked to recommend a reliable engineer to join the Airport Authority and oversee an upcoming multiyear airport expansion and improvement program. Bob recommended himself, left HB&A and joined the Authority in 1985. He remained with the Authority

A GOOD DAY

“ It was a good day for the airport when Bob came to work there. Although our working day was 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Bob started off by arriving at 7:00 a.m. and leaving at 6:00 p.m., putting in 60-hour weeks. He kept that up for years, and frankly he wore me out. Bob was so dedicated to the job that he brought his own coffee to work in a thermos which he kept under his desk so he wouldn't waste time going to the break room. By the end of the day, he had to chew it a while before he could swallow. When he was at work, he gave it his total attention, but when he went home he gave his total attention to his family.” — **Bill Burrow**

WHERE DID THE MONEY GO?

“ In the consultant design community two things, among many, that Bob was famous for were holding lengthy meetings where every detail was discussed at length and being tight-fisted with design fees. As Design Project Manager for many Airport Authority projects through the years, I spent many hours in meetings with Bob, so I had numerous opportunities to experience these firsthand.

Well, a year or so before his retirement, I met with Bob to discuss design fees on a large airfield project. Bob scheduled the meeting at 5 PM, as he was never a clock-watcher, and I showed up at the appointed time and went into the conference room. Bob showed up a few minutes later with a thermos of coffee and a large can of prunes! I thought to myself, “What have I gotten into?” Anyway the meeting went fine and as I left about two hours later, I was thinking, “Well, he did it to me again—I cut our fee by 25 percent and he made me happy to do it!”

I always admired Bob because he treated the Airport Authority dollars, no matter the source, as if they were coming out of his own pocket and as a taxpayer, I appreciated this.” — **Gary Scruggs**



A PROPHETIC MEETING

“ Mom and Daddy originally met each other when both were working at HB&A. She left, and they had no contact for a long time. She was working somewhere else and had three little girls to support when they ran into each other again. They started talking, and he asked Mom (and all us girls) out on a date with him. That first date was on 4th of July, 1972, and we all did go. I was eight or nine at the time. They dated for five years. During that time he began preparing for a two-year assignment in Iran, and they talked about getting married and we would go to school in Iran. Ultimately, we didn’t go, and he came home right before the start of the Iran hostage crisis. They married on July 16, 1977, and he became our Daddy.” — Teri Holt

THE EARTH MOVED

“ In our early days with HB&A, Windyke Gold Course was a pay-to-play course open to the public. We were playing there one day, and Bees cranked a tee shot way down the fairway of the hole in the northwest corner of the course. It wasn’t quite in the fairway—maybe 20 or 30 feet left. It was within Bob’s capability to reach the green, and you could see he had every intention of doing so. He set himself, and grinding those big feet into the tundra, came through with a mighty swing with the longest iron he had. I think I felt the Earth move. The ball traveled maybe 15 feet. No words were spoken by anyone. Bees repositioned himself, 15 feet from where he was, and set himself again. He came through with another mighty swing and achieved the same result. I’m sure the Earth moved that time! Then Bees uttered a four-letter word. He said “My **WORD!**” And that was what separated Bob from most of us.” — Tweed Bryant

until retirement in 2008 as Director of Development. His professional life spread more than 53 years with only two organizations—an amazing record.

At Memphis International Airport, Bob’s work covered a multitude of successful projects including runways, taxiways, concourses, parking lots, roadways, and buildings. The most notable of the projects is the Third Parallel Runway Program that expanded the airport capacity by more than 25 percent and allowed international flights to leave Memphis and fly nonstop to the Orient. All these are visible evidence of his professional ability. There is truly no place on the airport where one can look without seeing the evidence of his work and his personal touch.

Throughout his life, Bob maintained an avid interest in music, teaching himself to play the guitar and sing. He also was a good golfer, enjoyed woodworking and house remodeling, did amateur photography, and maintained aquariums of exotic fish. When he was at work, the work had his whole attention, but when he left work, his entire being belonged to his family.



Diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (commonly known as Lou Gehrig’s disease) in 2008, Bob fought the debilitating disease until February 2011. His legacy is to be seen in not only the work he did but, more importantly, in the multitudes of people he touched along the way. He influenced many, many professional engineers and won the love and respect of virtually everyone with whom he came in contact. He was truly an outstanding human being and a first class engineer.

The guest list from his visitation and funeral reads like a “who’s-who” for both the engineering community and the Memphis aviation community. This gentle giant of a man set a higher standard than most of us who worked for and with him can aspire to reach. We—his family, friends, and associates—were fortunate to share pages of his life.

Personal Stories

The following stories are gathered from Ed Cain and Tweed Bryant, two old friends and associates; daughter Teri Holt; Bill Burrow, who hired Bob at the airport; Gary Scruggs, who worked with Bob as a consultant at the airport; and one of Bob's longtime employees, Joe Polk.

THE CARDBOARD SHOES

“ Bob was somewhat frugal when it came to spending money on himself. He once ordered a pair of shoes from a magazine ad. The shoes were made of a synthetic product and, of course, were a real bargain! Bob wore the new shoes to work and was quite pleased with his cost savings. Rain came a few days later. The shoes got wet, and tore completely apart. The refrain around the office for the next couple of weeks was “Hey Bob, how are those new cardboard shoes holding up?” It always brought a gale of laughter, and Bob laughed the loudest of all, because he did have a fine sense of humor and could laugh at himself. Didn't affect his authority one bit.” — Ed Cain

THE SUCCINCT ANSWER

“ Bob worked on several large projects in Birmingham, Alabama, and he often went on trips to meet with the clients. After he returned from one such visit, our boss, Mr. Pollard (who, like Bob, came to HB&A from the University of Illinois and had a healthy respect for himself) asked Bob, “Well Bees, how did you find Birmingham?” Bob replied, “Stepped off the plane and there it was!” I don't remember Mr. Pollard ever again asking Bees that type of question.” — Tweed Bryant



SINGING FOR HIS SUPPER

“ Many people have asked about this story. It is true. As a young, single man, Bob came over to our house often on Friday nights to eat and to entertain us with songs and his guitar (he had taught himself to play). I mention to my wife, Sybil, that it made me feel good that Bob enjoyed our company enough to come and spend all that time with us. Sybil replied, “Well Tweed, you know he IS getting free dinners.” — Tweed Bryant

NO EYE FOR DISTANCE

“ Bob was a first class engineer. Far smarter and more skilled in almost everything than me, but there was one thing he could not do. He had no talent for judging long distance by eye. A few months after I came to work for him, we were looking at a newly cleared strip of land beside the approach lights to one of the runways. He asked me how far I thought it was to a big tree right at the remaining tree line. I looked and said “About 820 feet.” He squinted up his eye and allowed as how that could not possibly be right. It was way off. That rankled a little bit, because over the years I had learned to eyeball distances pretty well, so I said, “Well Sir, these light poles are 200 feet apart and it looks to me like we could measure four spaces and have a little left over. He was unconvinced. Later I learned that he had sent a survey crew out to check. They came up with 819 feet. In the 10 or so years afterward, he never again challenged my eye for distance. Of course, he never again asked me to, either.” — Joe Polk