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AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS

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TRANSACTIONS

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**ADDRESS AT THE 42^D ANNUAL
CONVENTION, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, JUNE
21ST, 1910.**

BY JOHN A. BENSEL, PRESIDENT, AM. SOC. C. E.

I know that to some of my audience a satisfactory address at a summer convention would be like that which many people regard as a satisfactory sermon—something soothing and convincing, to the effect that you are not as other men are, but better. While I appreciate very fully, however, the honor of being able to address you, I am going to look trouble in the face in an effort to convince you that, in spite of great individual achievements, engineers are behind other professional men in professional spirit, and particularly in collective effort.

Whether this, if true, is due to our extreme youth as a profession, or our extreme age, is dependent upon the point of view; but I think it is a fact that will be admitted by all that engineers have not as yet done much for their profession, even if they have done considerable for the world at large.

Looking backward, our calling may properly be considered the oldest in the world. It is older, in fact, than history itself, for man did not begin to separate from the main part of animal creation, until he began to direct the sources of power in Nature for the benefit, if not always for the improvement, of his particular kind. In Bible history, we find early mention of the first builder of a pontoon. This creditable performance is especially noted, and the name of the party principally concerned prominently mentioned. The same thing cannot be said of the unsuccessful attempt at the building of the first sky-scraper, for here the architect, with unusual modesty, has not given history his name, this omission being possibly due to the fact that the building was unsuccessful. If an engineer was employed on this particular undertaking, the architect had, even at that early stage of his profession, learned the lesson of keeping all except his own end of the work in the background.

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The distinctive naming of our profession does not seem, however, to go back any farther than the period of 1761, when that Father of the Profession, John Smeaton, first made use of the term, "engineer," and later, "civil engineer," applying it both to others and to himself, as descriptive of a certain class of men working along professional lines now existing and described by that term.

Remarkable progress has certainly been made in actual achievements since that time, and I know of nothing more impressive than to contemplate the tremendous changes that have been made in the material world by the achievements of engineers, particularly in the last hundred years. This was forcibly impressed upon me a short time ago, while in the company of the late Charles Haswell, then the oldest member of this Society, who, seeing one of the recently built men-of-war coming up the harbor, remarked that he had designed the first steamship for the United States Navy. The evolution of this intricate mass of mechanism, which, from the very beginning of its departure from the sailing type of vessel, has taken place entirely within the working period of one man's life, is as graphic a showing of engineering activity as I think can be found.

Our activities are forcibly shown in many other lines of invention and in the utilization of the forces of Nature, particularly in the development of this country. We, although young in years, have become the greatest railroad builders in history, and have put into use mechanical machines like the harvester, the sewing machine, the telephone, the wireless telegraph, and almost numberless applications of electricity. Ships have been built of late years greatly departing from those immediately preceding them, so that at the present time they might be compared to floating cities with nearly all a city's conveniences and comforts. We have done away with the former isolation of the largest city in the country, and have made it a part of the main land by the building of tunnels and bridges. In all our work it might be said that we are hastening, with feverish energy, from one problem to another, for the so-called purpose of saving time, or for the enjoyment of some new sensation; and we have also made possible the creation of that which might be deemed of doubtful benefit to the human race, that huge conglomerate, the modern city. [466]

There has been no hesitancy in grappling with the problems of Nature by engineers, but they seem to be diffident and neglectful of human nature in their calculations, leaving it out of their equations, greatly to their own detriment and the world's loss. We can say that matters outside of the known are not our concern, and we can look with pride at our individual achievements, and of course, if this satisfies, there is nothing more to be said. But it is because I feel that engineers of to-day are not satisfied with their position, that I wonder whether we have either fulfilled our obligations to the community, or secured proper recognition from it; whether, in fact, the engineer can become the force that he should be, until he brings something into his equations besides frozen figures, however diverting an occupation this may be.

One may wonder whether this state of affairs is caused from a fear of injecting uncertain elements into our calculations, or whether it is our education or training which makes us conservative to the point of operating to our own disadvantage. We may read the requirements of our membership and learn from them that in our accomplishments we are not to be measured as skilled artisans, but the fact remains that, to a great extent, society at large does so rate us, and it would seem that we must ourselves be responsible for this state of affairs. Our colleges and technical schools are partly to blame for the existence of this idea, on account of the different degrees which they give. We have a degree of civil engineer, regarded in its narrowest sense, of mining engineer, mechanical engineer, electrical engineer, and by necessity it would seem as if we should shortly add some particular title to designate the engineer who flies. In reality there should be but two classes of engineers, and the distinction should be drawn only between civil engineers and military engineers. As a matter of fact, fate and inclination determine the specialty that a man takes up after his preliminary training, and so far as the degrees are concerned, the only one that has any right to carry weight, because it is a measure of accomplishment, is that which is granted by this Society to its corporate members. The schools, in their general mix-up of titles, certainly befog the public mind. It is as if the medical schools, for instance, should issue degrees at graduation for brain doctors, stomach doctors, eye and ear doctors, etc. Very wisely, it seems to me, the medical profession and the legal profession, with histories far older than ours, and with as wide variations in practice as we have, leave the variations in name to the individual taste of the practitioner, in a manner which we would do well to copy. The Society itself has adopted very broad lines in admission to membership, classing as civil engineers all who are properly such; and there is good reason for the serious consideration of the term at this time, as we cannot fail to recognize a tendency in State and other governments to legislate as to the right to practice engineering. It was owing to the introduction of a bill limiting and prescribing the right to practice in the State of New York, that a committee was recently appointed to look into this matter and report to the Society. This report will be before you for action at this meeting. [467]

As to the manner in which engineers individually perform their work, no criticism would properly lie, and in fact it is fortunate that our work speaks for itself, for, as a body, we say nothing. We are no longer, however, found working for the greater part of the time on the outskirts of civilization, and it becomes necessary, therefore, for us to change with changing conditions, and to use our Society not only for the benefit of the profession as a whole, but for the benefit of the members individually. Whether one of our first steps in this direction should be along legislative lines is for you to determine. For myself, having been confronted with legislation recently attempted in New York, I am convinced that we shall have legislation affecting our members, and this legislation should properly be moulded by some responsible body like our own Society. If we do not take the matter up ourselves it is likely to be taken up by other associations, and from past

experience, it would seem as though it might be carried on along lines that would tend to ridicule our desire for professional standing.

The Society is to be congratulated on its present satisfactory status. The reports show a very satisfactory financial condition, and you may note a continuing increase in membership that is extremely gratifying. This, after having nearly doubled in the last seven years, still shows no sign of diminishing in its rate of increase. It may be said, also, that we have in the Society an excellent publishing house, where the members have an opportunity to secure technical papers published in the highest style of the art. We have in general in the officers, a number of men, who, within the prescribed limits, labor for the benefit of the members, but we also have constitutional limitations to the activity of our governing body, so that the voice of the Society is never heard, or, at least, might be compared to that still, small voice we call "conscience," which is not audible outside of the body that possesses it. [468]

Now, in these days, when the statement that two and two make four is accepted from its latest originator as a newly discovered truth, a little extension of our mathematics, to take into our estimate people as well as things, is what we principally need, and it would be a good thing, regarded either from the point of view of what the world needs or the more selfish view of our own particular gains. At the present time it would seem as though our world had thrown away the old gods without taking hold of any new ones. Private ownership as it formerly existed is no longer recognized; individual action in almost any large field is to-day hampered and curtailed in a manner undreamed of twenty years ago. In fact, our whole scheme of government seems to be passing from the representative form on which it was founded, to some new form as yet undetermined. Whether all this is, in our opinion, for good or for evil, is of no particular concern. The matter that concerns us is, that we have left our old moorings, and that, to secure new ones, new limits are to be set to the activities of men along lines which concern us, and that, therefore, it is necessary that those who by education and training are best fitted to consider facts and not desires, should guide society as much as possible along its new lines. I consider that we as a profession are particularly trained to do this by our consideration of facts as they exist, and I think it will be recognized by all that we are not in our work or activities bound by any precedent, even if we do learn all that we can from the past; and that we are by nature and training of a cool and calculating disposition, which is surely a thing that is needed in this time of many suggested experiments.

To be effective, however, we must be cohesive, and thus be able to take our part not as the led, but as leaders, convincing the people, if possible, that all the ills of our social system cannot be cured by remedies which neglect the forces of creation, and that the best doctors for our troubles are not necessarily those whose sympathies are most audibly expressed. [469]

In the recent discoveries of science our ideas as to the forces of Nature must be greatly enlarged and our theories amplified. Recent discovery of radium and radio-active substances shows at least that much of our old knowledge needs re-writing along the lines of our greater knowledge of to-day.

With this increase of knowledge it would seem as though those who devote their lives to the exploitation of natural forces should take a position in the future even more prominent than in the past, and it will undoubtedly become our function to help the world to that ideal state described by our greatest living poet of action, when he speaks of the time to come, as follows:

"And no one shall work for money,
And no one shall work for fame;
But each for the joy of working,
And each in his separate star;
Shall draw the thing as he sees it,
For the God of the things as they are."

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