THE FIRST HUNDRED YEARS

By Simpson Linke
WO alumni of the College of Civil Engineering are chatting on campus after a technical meeting of the Association of Civil Engineers of Cornell University in the early 1900s:

“That was a good speaker at the association meeting today.”

“Yes, but there were only a few alums there and we didn’t hear anything about what’s going on in school here.”

“That’s right. Of course Ithaca is pretty well isolated and it’s a long and expensive haul on the Lehigh Valley from New York for a technical talk—eight hours and all those stops.”

“Three bucks for the association Transactions is also pretty steep.”

“Maybe we should have an alumni group that holds smokers now and then in New York.

THE COLLEGE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION MARKS ITS CENTENNIAL WITH A HISTORICAL RECAP AND A FIRM FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE.

with invited speakers from the college like the dean and some faculty members.”

“Say, that’s a great idea. Let’s work on it.”

Many alumni conversations similar to this imagined one must have occurred over the years because the June 1905 reunion brought some 43 of the alumni of all classes of civil engineering together in Barnes Hall to consider the establishment of just such an organization. Prominent members of the faculty spoke in favor of the proposition and, in particular, Frank W. Skinner, B.C.E. 1879, in a strong endorsement of the idea, called for the “formation of civil engineering alumni associations wherever a group of engineers could be assembled.”

In the winter of 1905, the Cornell Society of Civil Engineers (CSCE) was founded and the following statement was adopted as a guideline for its members.
“The purpose of the Cornell Society of Civil Engineers is to promote the welfare of the College of Civil Engineering at Cornell University and to establish a closer relationship between the college and its alumni.”

Frank Skinner, a New York City resident, presided over that first meeting in New York City, the newly established headquarters of the society.

Over the next several years the burgeoning organization inaugurated a placement service for Cornell University civil engineers, organized quarterly New York “smokers” with guest speakers, arranged annual banquets in New York City, provided donation of equipment to the College of Civil Engineering, established the first CSCE regional section, promoted annual discussions with college administration and faculty on curriculum matters, and encouraged preparation of articles by alumni for the Cornell Civil Engineer.

It is interesting to note that even at that early date, suggestions were made for improvements in engineering education that are pertinent to present-day concerns. A number of alumni proposed a five-year program since many students felt there should be time provided in the crowded curriculum for the study of topics other than purely technical ones. Professor Emeritus of Civil Engineering William McGuire, M.C.E. ’47, has often commented on an article by Columbia University Professor of Civil Engineering E. B. Lovell, B.C.E. 1891, that appeared in the February 1908 issue of Transactions of the Association of Civil Engineers of Cornell University. Professor Lovell generally approved of a five-year engineering curriculum but felt very strongly that a six-year program would be even better!

Following great Cornell growth in the 1890s and at the turn of the century, student enrollment in the 1920s had decreased 20 percent to be followed by similar reductions in the next two decades. Static salaries and antiquated equipment had also reduced Cornell engineering status. During 1919, discussions between faculty and administration on how to improve enrollment centered on combining the College of Civil Engineering, the Sibley School of Mechanical Engineering, and the Department of Electrical Engineering into a unified College of Engineering with each unit as a school within the new college. Despite some reservations by several members of the faculty, the proposed “amalgamation” (the term used at the time) occurred the following year.

The successful establishment of CSCE had encouraged alumni from Mechanical Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Architecture to form their own associations. Along with the establishment of a unified College of Engineering, some members of CSCE proposed that members of these other alumni organizations should be allowed to join their group. In the March 1965 issue of the Cornell Engineer, Sidney Turkish, B.E.E. ’59, in his article, “A History of the Cornell Society of Engineers,” observes, “The rivalry of undergraduate days reflected itself in aloofness and disdain on the alumni front. The liberal wing of the CSCE had proposed opening CSCE membership roles to Sibley graduates. These proposals had met with stern refusals by the majority of the CE alumni group who claimed that the CE degree carries with it an appreciable amount of distinction which the others lack, and that CEs have little in common with EEs and factory engineers.”

These initial concerns were resolved satisfactorily as revealed in the minutes of the fall meeting of CSCE of New York held on October 19, 1920, at the Cornell Club, 30 West 44th Street, New York City: CSCE President Ernest A. Truran, B.C.E. 1895, wrote as follows: “The officers and members of the Cornell Society of Civil Engineers have decided that with the amalgamation of the engineering colleges in Ithaca, a similar broadening of the scope of their society would be a distinct step forward. In 1919, discussions began on the best way to enlarge the society by making it available to all Cornell engineers. The mechanical engineers, electrical engineers, and architects were invited to attend two annual banquets and several other meetings, and influential Sibley College alumni cooperated with fine spirit toward making these joint meetings a success.

The large number of Sibley men who came to these meetings convinced the officers of the society that the time had come to propose the necessary amendments to the constitution. The amendments were drafted and presented at the spring meeting on April 9, 1920, when a motion was given that they would be brought up for final vote at this meeting. Whereupon it was moved
and duly seconded that the following proposed amendments be adopted:

- The name of the Cornell Society of Civil Engineers shall become the Cornell Society of Engineers.

- Eligibility for membership shall be for all men who had been engineering students at Cornell, or who had taught engineering at Cornell for one year.

The motion was unanimously carried. Ira W. McConnell, B.C.E. 1897, was then elected as the first president of the Cornell Society of Engineers.”

In the first year of the CSE, architects, electrical engineers, and mechanical engineers joined the new society and membership rose to 1600. The first annual CSE dinner in January 1921 attracted 450 attendees at $3.50 a plate. Attendance at later annual meetings during the 1920s averaged about 150 members. During this period the CSE registration bureau advertised in engineering periodicals and newspapers to obtain inquiries for potential employment, assisted in the organization of the Engineering College Council in 1926, began mailing the president’s annual message to all engineering graduates, arranged visits by the CSE president to talk to members of the senior classes, and provided donated equipment to the schools and to certain memorial funds.

Everything was going well in the 20s until the 1929 stock market crash. The depression was tough on Cornell. Faculty salaries were cut 10 percent, and engineering enrollments declined. Many alumni engineers were unemployed. But the March 1, 1934, minutes of the CSE annual meeting contained a message of hope by John P. Syme, B.M.E. ’26, who wrote, “Many of our members are out of employment but when the engineering business doors open up again, you will find the Cornell Engineers right on the job as always. Cornell has established an enviable reputation and our fellows are not to be licked by ‘old man adversity.” Employment for engineering graduates did not improve until 1935. In this period the annual letter had been limited to members to reduce costs, but financial conditions of CSE improved enough to allow resumption of mailings to all engineering alumni in 1935.

The annual mailings were generally well-received by members of CSE but over the years, frequent suggestions from alumni called for some sort of publication devoted to the interests of the society. A special CSE committee of directors of the engineering schools in the college had been considering the consolidation of college alumni magazines into a single periodical, with one of the objectives being the establishment of a suitable communications medium for the society. The March 14, 1935, minutes of the committee
reported an agreement that “the present corporation, The Sibley Journal of Engineering Inc., will acquire the assets and liabilities of The Cornell Civil Engineer. The name of this corporation will be changed to The Cornell Engineer Inc. in application to the Secretary of State in proper legal form. The corporation will publish the new combined journal, to be called The Cornell Engineer.”

The first issue of the new journal, dated October 1935, contained the following statement:

“This new publication retains undergraduate management and function and becomes the official organ of the CSE. The hope is that The Cornell Engineer will provide a forum for the expression of opinion about engineering which no university publication has provided in the past. It is also hoped that the new arrangement will provide a medium of communication that will allow participation in the affairs of CSE by alumni who reside outside of New York.”

Following the appointment of Solomon Cady Hollister as dean in 1937, 17,000 alumni.

During the war years, CSE placement efforts were maximized to assist in the war effort. As the condition of the Allies improved, CSE talks moved from technical advances to postwar concerns such as unemployment, engineering unions, and obtaining surplus war equipment for the college.

At the end of the war CSE membership rose to 2100 and continued to grow in post-war years. In 1955, the society began a program of inviting outstanding high school seniors who had been accepted by the college to listen to and question the dean and alumni thereby hoping to induce the seniors to accept Cornell’s offer of admission. The meetings resulted in gratifying increases in average enrollment, which reached 3500 in 1958.

In 1959 a series of two-day executive committee meetings were started with the college administration, school directors, faculty, and the publication board of the Cornell Engineer in order to discuss immediate problems, challenges, and successes. For several years the executive committee gave particular attention to a proposal for the establishment of a CSE Award for Distinguished Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching. Dean Dale Corson was enthusiastic about the proposal and suggested that such an award might possibly have great inspirational effect on the faculty. Since graduate student enrollment had increased from 45 to 75 in 1968, there was some feeling that this growth could distract from the undergraduate program, but proponents argued that an award of this nature would add zest to the emphasis on undergraduate teaching.

On January 14, 1964, the teaching award was formally established as follows:

“It is the intent of the Cornell Society of Engineers that this award shall become a part of its regular program. The award shall have as its purpose the honoring of a member of the staff of the College of Engineering, or other faculty member who teaches in the prescribed engineering curriculum, whose excellence in the teaching of engineers is attested by his students and is further confirmed by the judgment of a special committee of school and society members appointed for the purpose.”

The first CSE Award for Excellence in Teaching was presented on September 24, 1964, by CSE President Robert Cowie to then Associate Professor Richard N. White of the School of Civil Engineering. Cowie relates that White was appreciative when told that he was to receive the award and then delighted to learn that he would also receive a check for $1000, a major sum of money in those days. The presentation occurred at the annual CSE reception.

THE FIRST CSE AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING WAS PRESENTED ON SEPTEMBER 24, 1964, BY CSE PRESIDENT ROBERT COWIE TO THEN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR RICHARD N. WHITE OF THE SCHOOL OF CIVIL ENGINEERING.

CSE assisted the Engineering College Council in a 20-year effort to raise the funds necessary for building the engineering campus and improving faculty salaries and facilities, objectives that had been put aside during the Depression. Other accomplishments in this period included creation of a new CSE constitution under the direction of Robert W. Gastmeyer, B.C.E. ’31, expansion of regional branches of the society, establishment of Cornell Day (later called Engineers Day) to acquaint prospective students with Cornell University, and inauguration of a program of annual awards of books to outstanding sophomores. In 1954 an alumni directory was published by CSE based on returns from a questionnaire sent to faculty and friends of the College of Engineering. Several hundred of Professor White’s colleagues and students were present as well as a number of representatives of the larger university community.

CSE executive committee meetings were changed from New York City to Ithaca in 1969. Joint meetings with representatives of Tau Beta Pi, the engineering honor society, began that year to consider joint sponsorship of the Excellence in Teaching Award with CSE. The objective was to reach students and new
graduates in order to develop interest in CSE participation. Joint meetings continued through that year. CSE President J. Eliot McCormack presented the first joint award at a reunion meeting in Barton Hall on June 13, 1970, to Professor George F. Scheele (associate professor at the time, now deceased) of the School of Chemical Engineering. Votes were cast by students under a balloting procedure conducted by Tau Beta Pi, which also established a plaque to be inscribed annually with the name of the award winner.

**A new constitution was adopted at the annual meeting in June 1975, but the usual projections for continued close interactions with the College of Engineering administration were not realized. CSE President David Kessler’s message in the fall 1982 *Cornell Engineer* stated that for the past seven years there had been a lack of study of the interaction of alumni with the college, the CSE executive committee endorsed the task force recommendations to broaden participation in alumni affairs, establish broad geographic distribution of members, increase number of mailings containing alumni and college news, increase alumni activities in the area of development, and conduct a major CSE event each year. These recommendations were approved enthusiastically by Dean Bill Streeter who considered them to be very important in the attempt to revive interest in CSE. He also reaffirmed positive support of CSE by the College of Engineering. The task force gave particular attention to their proposed annual major event and eventually concluded that a three-day CSE engineering conference and associated banquet to be held on the campus each spring would attract many alumni and interested college faculty members. The annual CSE meeting was also to be scheduled for the same period. The first conference, held in Ithaca in April 1983 with L. Jack Bradt as chairman, focused on Engineering Manufacturing. Since their establishment, the conferences have been popular and well-attended by alumni. The 21st conference, chaired by Bill Bruno ’69 CE, on “Energy Demand and Sustainable Development,” was held April 15–17, 2004. The upcoming conference in April 2005, to be chaired by Don Follett, B.M.E. ’52, will celebrate business leadership and how an engineering education prepares one for this career.

In April 1990 the CSE constitution was revised again. At the July 1990 meeting, plans were made for a CSE directory of all Cornell engineering alumni to be distributed free of charge to all CSE members. The directory was to be based on the response from questionnaires distributed to engineering alumni in 1989. The directory was published in 1991 in paperback form. An updated alumni directory, available in hard cover, was published in 1999.

The board of directors voted unanimously in January 2004 to change the name of the Cornell Society of Engineers to the Cornell Engineering Alumni Association (CEAA). In a rationale for the name change, Jaclyn A. Spear ’74 EE, a member of the board, wrote, “In recent years the CSE board of directors had many discussions about the name of the organization with a major goal being to find a way to emphasize that the society is inclusive of all graduates of the College of Engineering regardless of whether or not they work directly in the field of engineering. A survey of senior members (past presidents and directors emeritus) supported a name change that would clearly identify the society as an alumni organization for all engineering graduates by including the word ‘alumni’ in the name title. This name change was approved by the membership at the annual meeting in April 2004 together with a revised constitution of the association. The surveyed members were also unanimous in their belief of the need to demonstrate to alumni and students that an alumni organization adds value to Cornell, the College of Engineering, alumni, and students, and enhances the ability of the College of Engineering to interact with alumni and tap alumni resources.”

Article 1, Section 2, of the new constitution reads as follows:

“The purpose of the association is to promote the welfare of the College of Engineering at Cornell University and its alumni, and to establish a closer relationship between the college, its
students, and the alumni.”

Except for the names of the organizations and for a couple of minor changes, this is essentially the same statement as the original one that was drafted in 1905.

The current executive board of CEAA consists of eight officers and one executive officer emeritus with Karl F. Miller, B.E.E., '65, as president. The board of directors consists of 20 national members, two faculty members, and three student members. There are eight regional vice presidents, with one located in Germany, and 14 liaisons to Cornell Clubs, with one in Seoul, Korea, and one in Singapore. At present there are about 1900 members in the organization.

alumni concerns and offering alumni reassurance of the full support of the present college administration. In 2003, alumni participated directly in the strategic planning process of the college established by Dean Fuchs. An alumni committee chaired by Ashok Balhr, members and for student organizations, including the CEAA/Tau Beta Pi Excellence in Teaching Award and student project awards, not only bring credit to the individuals involved but also serve as achievement incentives. Engineering 150, a one-credit seminar course for first-year students, provides opportunities for the students to meet with professors from various disciplines and thereby gain some insight into possible career choices. The Enterprise Engineering Seminar (previously known as the Manufacturing Seminar), is offered to Master of Engineering students in operations research and mechanical engineering for one credit hour. It is a two-semester course that meets once a week, with

**SIGNIFICANT ALUMNI INTERACTIONS**

**WITH FACULTY, UNDERGRADUATES, AND GRADUATE STUDENTS ARE ACHIEVED THROUGH**

**CEAA SPONSORSHIP OF A NUMBER OF ON-CAMPUS ACTIVITIES.**

CEAA leadership and programs supported by the organization provide extensive alumni involvement in the affairs of the college. The engineering conference, a highly anticipated annual event, always focuses on one of the major priorities in the college and allows leading alumni speakers in various engineering disciplines to interact with CEAA members, alumni, faculty, and students. CEAA board meetings, held four times each year, are frequently attended by current engineering dean Kent Fuchs. Their discussions help to build the relationship between the college and its alumni by providing opportunities for presentation of

M.S. ’65 ORIE, participated in some of the intense strategic planning deliberations and Jack Boehringer, B.M.E. ’53, flew to Ithaca twice each month to serve as representative from the alumni association to the College Strategic Planning and Advisory Council. Alumni have also been asked by the college to meet with representatives of the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) who are evaluating a number of programs within the college this year.

Significant alumni interactions with faculty, undergraduates, and graduate students are achieved through CEAA sponsorship of a number of on-campus activities. Recognition awards for faculty alumni speakers from industry coordinated by a CEAA board member.

Alumni contacts with undergraduate and graduate students through mentoring, guest lecturers, and applicant interviews, including sponsorship of career seminars for freshmen in the fall and a career symposium for seniors, all contribute to the development of the Cornell engineer’s experience.

In a summary of current activities of CEAA, President Karl Miller writes, “The most exciting facet of the new association has been the involvement in alumni activities by student leaders of the college through thoughtful contributions to CEAA board deliberations and
leadership in combined student/alumni events. This trend is reminiscent of the early days of the Cornell Society of Engineers that began in 1935 with the establishment of the student-managed magazine, The Cornell Engineer. In November 2003, graduate students participated in a pilot program to hear Raj Gupta, M.S. ’69 OR, president and CEO of Rohm & Haas, speak at a Philadelphia area alumni meeting on engineering innovation, an event that led to a Cornell Alumni Federation grant to CEAA of almost $4,000 for increased graduate student involvement in engineering alumni activities.

In May 2004, undergraduate students led the effort to host the first “Almost Alumni” event on campus for graduating seniors and graduate students. As part of this networking occasion, the students designed, developed, and distributed an alumni handbook with information on Cornell Clubs and regional offices. Following the dedication of Duffield Hall by President Lehman on October 6, 2004, the undergraduate Engineering Student Council organized the “First Annual Engineering Student Showcase” during Homecoming 2004, to share the activities of more than 15 diverse engineering student organizations and project teams with the alumni. CEAA provided the funding for the event and the students showed their organizational skills by developing a first-class reception for the alumni. With this dynamic involvement of a new generation of student leaders in support of the CEAA, the college, its alumni, and students are all working together to grow the next generation of dedicated alumni leaders.

In this first century of its existence, the alumni organization has grown from a group with limited membership to one that welcomes all Cornell engineering alumni to interact with the College of Engineering in ways that bode well for both organizations in the future.

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References for this article include the Archives in the Rare and Manuscript Collection, University Library, issues of the Cornell Engineer in the Engineering Library, and helpful discussions with past and current presidents and directors of the Cornell Engineering Alumni Association.