

Unger Retires

Bill Unger retired in June of 2006, ending a 50-year-long career that spanned one-third of the department's 145-year existence. Generations of department graduate students and faculty who passed through Bill's office, adorned by a six-foot-long green lizard-balloon suspended from the ceiling, benefited enormously from the skills of a man who was, and still is, a masterful jack-of-all-trades. Bill will be remembered not only for his skilled and dogged approach to field work, but more importantly for his dedication to the people around him, including personal loans to students in need, unpaid evening and weekend hours preparing for field experiments, and in general, a devotion to his job far beyond the call of duty.

As an undergraduate geology major at UW from 1956 through 1960, Bill was first hired as a student hourly in January of 1960 to clean the geophysics garage. Bill was hired as a permanent staff member in August of 1960 to work in the then-burgeoning geophysical program anchored by Professors Charlie Bentley, Bob Meyer, Ned Ostenso, John Rose, and George Woollard (see photo page 22). During the ensuing four decades, the number of onland and marine geophysical field experiments that Bill worked on was rivaled only by their breathtaking geographic expanse, which extended from pole to pole and nearly circumnavigated the globe. Bill's most memorable field experiment during the 1960s was a crustal seismic study of the Chukchi Sea north of Point Barrow, Alaska, which required two ice-breakers for the marine seismic profiling and the simultaneous installation and operation of a seismic array in northern Alaska. In the 1970s, Bill worked extensively under Bob Meyer on crustal seismic studies in Peru, Colombia, and the Pacific coast of Mexico. Closer to home, he participated in sub-bottom seismic profiling of Lake Michigan and worked on the design and fabrication of new marine and onland seismometers. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Bill continued working on crustal seismic experiments, including logistically challenging studies of the East African rift in Kenya and the Lake Baikal region of eastern Russia. Throughout this period, Bill also assisted faculty in preparing their grant proposals and budgets, as well as designing and building geophysical equipment, managing experiments, and coordinating instrument purchases.

As the multi-decade field operations



Bill Unger in Parkfield, California, Oct. 2002.

spearheaded by Professors Bentley and Meyer began to wind down in the early to mid-1990s, Bill shifted an increasing amount of his time to the growing seismology and GPS-based field programs of the then-new geophysics faculty Cliff Thurber and Chuck DeMets. Faculty throughout the department also increasingly sought his expertise and experience for an ever-widening number of tasks, including the design, construction, maintenance, procurement, and operation of a wide variety of field and laboratory equipment, as well as grant accounting and staff oversight. Bill made no secret of his continued preference for working under the sun and stars, and during the latter decade of his career greatly enjoyed his field work in remote areas of Mexico, which entailed a gratifying mixture of detailed field measurements, interactions with Mexican students and locals, and circumstances permitting, cerveza and tequila at the end of the day. In 2006, after he officially retired, Bill capped his long and productive career by installing a permanent continuous network of geophysical instruments in western Mexico, having designed and built a great deal of the equipment beforehand.

Although the geophysics garage is still a mess 47 years after Bill was hired to clean it, Bill's legacy includes hundreds of faculty, students, and staff who gained and learned greatly from the experience of working with him. His work in the field has yielded observations that are the foundation for hundreds of research papers and dozens of master's and doctoral dissertations. The equipment he has designed and built will be used for research well beyond his retirement. The department owes much to him—his dedication to the research and educational mission of UW epitomizes what every faculty and staff member should strive for.

As Bill turns the page on his latest chapter, he plans to spend the next few years remodeling his house with his wife Peg and touring on his motorcycle. Bill asks that donations in honor of his long career and retirement be directed to one of the existing funds that benefit graduate student fieldwork.

Contributed by Chuck DeMets



Bill Unger (left), Bob Meyer, Jim Luetgert, and Walter Mooney, in the Plaza de Armas, Ica Peru, July 1976.



Ned Ostenso (left) and Bill Unger on the Arctic Ocean, Nov. 1963. The ship barely visible in the background is the USS Staten Island. They are setting a 40' buoy through the ice.

(Top photo, Neal Lord; others courtesy of Bill Unger)