

SEM History

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Daniel K. Wright, Jr.
Beloved Professor – Musician - Gentleman
1913-1991

Dan Wright joined the SESA during the first year after the new society was formed and regularly attended SESA meetings for more than three decades. During that period he was very active, serving twice as chairman of the Educational Lectures Committee and also was a member of the Membership Committee for several years. Dan was the general chairman of the 1958 SESA Spring Meeting in Cleveland and was a member of the SESA Executive Committee in 1960. Dan wrote Chapter 1-- “Elementary Elasticity” for the *SESA Manual for Experimental Stress Analysis, Third Edition*. In addition to his publications he also had three patents, one of which was on conductive coatings. To recognize his contributions, SESA bestowed upon him the M.M. Frocht Award in 1975 for “outstanding achievement in education of experimental mechanics”, and in 1977 Dan was elected to the grade of Fellow in SESA.

Dan’s engineering career began some 70 years ago when he first set foot on what is now the Case Western Reserve University campus. As a 17-year-old freshman entering Albert College, he was following his fathers advice to “get a little culture” before settling down to study mechanical engineering at Case School of Applied Science. “There was no doubt in my mind what I was going to study eventually,” Dan said in an interview at Case over twenty years ago. “My father was a mechanical engineer and I had absolutely no interest in any other kind of engineering.” So in the fall of 1932, having taken a number of liberal arts courses as well as math, physics, and chemistry, Dan transferred to the M. E. Department at Case. Little did he realize then that he would spend virtually his entire career in that department.

Dan received a B. S. degree in mechanical engineering in 1935 and a masters degree in 1939. After a few months in industry he returned to Case and rose through the ranks to become a full professor in 1953. The laboratory he developed was later named the Daniel K. Wright Laboratory of Experimental Mechanics. Later he was made head of the mechanical engineering department and still later he became the acting dean of engineering. When he was appointed as the first Arthur P. Armington Professor of Engineering, Dan Wright was the first person to have a chaired professorship in the history of Case Western Reserve University. He received the Case Alumni Association’s highest honor, the Meritorious Service Award in 1973.

In October 1980 the newsmagazine at Case Western Reserve University *Insight* carried an article which started with the following: “Can there be two individuals with the name

of Daniel K. Wright, Jr.? There is the tall, quiet and gentlemanly professor who has been the mainstay of the mechanical engineering department for 41 years. He is the Arthur P. Armington Professor of Mechanical Engineering whose main field of interest is mechanical design, especially stress analysis and the kinematics and dynamics of machines.” But what about the silver-haired clarinetist who occasionally drops in at the Colony Restaurant or the Lobster Pot to get in a toe-tapping Dixieland rendition of ‘When The Saints Come Marching In’ or ‘Bill Bailey’? [He also played at Sea World and at Preservation Hall in New Orleans.] Actually, they are one-in-the-same – the distinguished professor and the musician who plays a mean Dixieland clarinet whenever he can.”

Many SESA/SEM members would recognize “both” of these gentlemen. On at least four occasions, Dan treated SESA audiences with his musical skills. I had already known Dan Wright for at least ten years when I saw him carry a clarinet case into his hotel room at an SESA meeting and learned about his “other” life. Having myself spent a “misguided youth” playing in dance bands, I started talking with him about music and soon learned of his interest in Dixieland music. The idea of an SESA Dixieland band had been germinated.

Soon thereafter the SESA was preparing for its Silver Anniversary Celebration in San Francisco (1968) and we volunteered our services as the “SESA Dixieland Band”. Dan Wright was the leader and played his clarinet. Buck Tuppeny was our trumpeter and I tooted my trombone. Bill Bloedorn was to be our drummer (although I don’t believe he ever performed with us) and at various times our pianists were Larry Winston and Dick Smith (a professional musician who was the son of SESA stalwart, Clarence Smith). The audience seemed to enjoy our efforts – I remember Dan Wright saying, “Well, we got out of that one alive”. Frank Tatnall decided that we *would perform* at the next SESA meeting which was scheduled for Philadelphia. Since Frank wouldn’t take “no” for an answer, the 1969 Spring Meeting of the SESA was our second “gig”. Dan, Buck, and I had a lot of fun, but we spent so much time getting our act together that we virtually missed the rest of the SESA meeting. At that time we resolved that we would not play at future meeting (even if asked). It turned out that our resolution was unnecessary because no one asked us to play again for twenty-five years.

The 1964 SESA Annual Meeting and the 1983 Spring Meeting (Fortieth Anniversary) were held in Dan Wright’s hometown, Cleveland. On both of those occasions, Dan and his regular Dixieland buddies played during the banquet and for dancing afterwards. They were really a superb group and we all enjoyed their music.

As the Society’s Golden Anniversary approached, Dave Willis organized the celebration and he asked me to resurrect the Dixieland Band. When I tried to contact Dan, I received the very bad news that he had died September 16, 1991 of a heart attack suffered while driving his car. He was survived by his wife, two daughters, a son, and three grandchildren. That was the end of an era but we are thankful for all of the great memories that he left with us.