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CASE STUDY: THE HISTORY PROGRAM OF THE CANADIAN SOCIETY FOR CIVIL ENGINEERING

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Abstract: This Case Study examines the origins of the Society's National History Program, summarizes the current state of the program and lists some of its future objectives.

1 ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CSCE HISTORY PROGRAM

Shortly after the Canadian Society for Civil Engineering was reconstituted in its present form, several members suggested that there was a need for a history program. There was a belief that many civil engineers had little, if any, knowledge of the achievements of their predecessors. Like the general public, most took for granted those historic civil engineering achievements which had helped to build this great country of Canada.

The follow up to these suggestions came in 1982 when the late W. Gordon Plewes was asked by the Board to develop an appropriate history program. During the Annual Conference in May of that year, Gordon convened a small meeting to explore how this could be accomplished. Out of this meeting came a statement which, in part, said:

“Broadly speaking, the purposes of the program are to record and preserve whatever tangible evidence remains of the significant works of earlier generations of Civil Engineers and through suitable publications and publicity to make the general public and even engineers themselves more aware of the importance of civil engineering in the historic development and welfare of Canada”

Following this meeting the National History Committee (NHC) was formed with a Mandate written by Gordon and each of the Society's Regions was asked to name a representative. This was intended to give the new program a presence in each Region and to encourage Local Sections to become active stakeholders of the committee. For more information, see Crysler (1995) and Hart (2010).

2 CURRENT ACTIVITIES

The National History Committee has continued operating from that date with a Mandate updated to reflect current events and activities but still containing all of the original objectives from its original Mandate. The

Committee currently has fifteen members who reside in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

The principal current activities of the program are described briefly in the following sections.

2.1 Historic Sites Program

This is a “mainstay” of the program. To date 75 National, International and Regional Historic Sites have been recognized. Since 1983, it has been customary to commemorate one or more sites at each CSCE Annual Conference.

2.2 The W. Gordon Plewes History Award Program

In 1992, the Society created a History of Civil Engineering Award and later named it in commemoration of Gordon Plewes. Since then this Award has been presented on a regular basis to recognize “particularly noteworthy contributions by an individual, not necessarily an engineer, to the study and understanding of the history of civil engineering in Canada, or civil engineering achievements by Canadian engineers.”

2.3 Communication Methods

Over the years, the National History Committee has facilitated history-related communication using the following vehicles:

- Papers have been presented at “History Sessions” at the majority of Annual Conferences since 1983.
- Members of the National History Committee have made presentations to CSCE Local Section meetings, meetings of related engineering societies and to the general public.
- The NHC website, which contains:
 - The “Mandate” of the National History Committee
 - Details and photographs of all Historic Sites commemorated by the Society
 - Inventory of all Civil Engineering Sites of National Importance
 - The “Building Canada” exhibit poster project led Alan Perks to celebrate Canada’s Sesquicentennial.
 - Brief biographies of 30 Civil Engineers of historic note.
 - Series of “History Notes” originally published in “CIVIL” journal

2.4 Oral History

The Committee has an archive of Oral History recordings, made during the ‘80s, of interviews of eight civil engineers who made significant contributions to Canadian practice.

3 FUTURE OBJECTIVES

The National History Committee has developed the following objectives for its activities in the near future:

- Development of a system that will safeguard and maintain the plaques located on the Society’s Historic Sites by designating a “custodian” for each site
- Further development of communications through:
 - Enhancement of the NHC website – upgrading the details, descriptions, and images of the Historic Sites
 - Creating a social network presence through LinkedIn, Facebook, twitter, etc.
 - Increasing the visibility of the committee by having members interact with local media outlets.

- Further development of relationship with University of Ontario Institute of Technology for storage and digitization of archival material
- Further development of relations with like programs run by fellow Engineering organizations, initially ASCE and ICE.
- Further development of the Oral History Program.
- Continually update the Committee's Mandate and Terms of Reference as now motions are passed amending these.

4 CONCLUSION

The National History Committee has been committed to implementing the Society's National History Program continuously since 1983. However, we remain mindful of a further comment of W. Gordon Plewes following the May 1982 meeting that "the ultimate success of the Society's History Program depends on the interest and action of individual members throughout the country and its organization must extend to all Regions and Sections".

References

Hart, P.R 2010 *A Civil Society* (2nd. Edition), Canadian Society for Civil Engineering, Montréal
Crysler, R.E. 1995. *The Canadian Society for Civil Engineering History of Civil Engineering Program*, Engineering History Paper #16, Engineering Institute of Canada, Ottawa.