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**WHITHER THE BOSTON SOCIETY OF
CIVIL ENGINEERS?**

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(Presented at Annual Meeting of Boston Society of Civil Engineers, March 18, 1965)

The one hundred-seventeenth year in the life of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers has now drawn to a close. Those years have been replete with accomplishments and with service to the engineering profession. The roster of Past Presidents, some fortunately still with us, and others now only a legend from out of the past, reads like a list of eminent engineers of their day. Truly the Society has given much to the development of engineers and engineering during its lifetime.

Let us review, for a moment, the current work of the Society. It and its various sections hold some two dozen meetings each year in which talks are presented on various phases of engineering or related subjects. The meetings are open, of course, to members and non-members alike. The speakers are generally well known in their fields and the subjects technical and most informative. Unfortunately, and possibly because of the general apathy that seems to have prevailed in engineering as well as in other areas, the attendance at these meetings is often discouragingly small. The excellence of the talks is such that those engineers who fail to attend are missing one of the chief advantages of their membership.

Another accomplishment in which the Society has been able over the years to take pride is publication of the Journal. Until recently the papers contained therein were required first to have been presented before the Society or one of its Sections, but other papers on technical subjects are now acceptable. It is not generally appreciated that, in

insisting on a high degree of excellence of papers for the Journal, the Society rejects many that superficially appear good. The Journal is currently sent to subscribers in many countries around the world. Indeed, if one looks up bibliographies on engineering subjects he will be surprised at the number of references made to our Journal—certainly an indication of the esteem in which it is held by the scientific world.

A third activity most worthy of mention is the series of lecture courses on various phases of engineering. Several of these series have been given and more are planned. The speakers have generally been well known and excellent and the talks well organized. Enthusiasm for these courses has been great and the attendance more than satisfactory. Some twenty or thirty years ago objection might have been raised to such courses on the ground that they were in competition with the colleges and technical schools, but now with the emphasis on advanced degrees, such objection is no longer raised. In any case the extent of response of the engineering profession to the lectures has been most surprising. Many of the lectures are being published as articles in the Journal. Orders for reprints have been received sometimes in large numbers from corporations, universities, the Federal Government and others. In all this the Society is offering truly professional services.

Nevertheless, during my term as President this past year, I have often stopped to wonder whether we are presently giving and doing up to the limit of our capacity, and I have not been thoroughly satisfied with my own answers. Such doubt as to the extent of the Society's service is in no way a reflection on those who have helped run the Society during the past twelve months. Rather, I feel, it is a reflection on my own accomplishments, or lack thereof, as nominal leader and so, rather than talk to you on some technical subject, I shall bring to your attention some thoughts I have had concerning the functions of the Society.

To begin with, what are the privileges and the responsibilities of the Society? An examination of the Act of Incorporation and the applicable statutes gives little definite information to the layman. We are forbidden elsewhere by law to use our funds for certain purposes such as lobbying, and here we may conclude we are on definite ground. But then, what is lobbying? Presumably the hiring of an individual to represent us before the legislature or one of its committees comes

under that category and is therefore proscribed. But is it acceptable for one of our officers, for instance, to so represent and speak for the Society? Here opinions differ. It could very well be worth our while to obtain legal advice on the matter. We have, it is true, an excellent and active Legislative Committee which follows the various items of proposed legislation that are of interest to the Society and reports its recommendations to the Board of Government. Surely when such items affecting the welfare of engineers or of the profession are proposed, the Society should throw its full weight in support of or in opposition to the measure. Should we not find out just how far we may legally proceed?

One who reads the daily papers will no doubt recollect having seen many an article or letter submitted by an official group of the medical or legal profession. For some reason engineers are much more reticent, and it is rarely indeed that one will find any communication from one of their groups; yet it would appear that the medical and legal professions have influence and stature partly because they keep themselves constantly in the public eye and the public press. They have sold themselves. It is true that our own Society has not met with much success in having the papers report on our meetings. Nevertheless it is felt that they would more readily welcome articles or letters expressing the official opinions and recommendations of a recognized engineering group, such as ours, on engineering matters affecting the public. The general public would be glad to know of those recommendations and would come to recognize the stature of our Society. Might we not therefore profitably consider more extensive use of the press in the interests of the engineering profession?

We have recently deplored the dearth of students choosing to enter the engineering field. There seem to be several reasons for this. First, of course, there is the influx of many of the so-called glamor industries that lure prospective students away. Then, too, the need for specialization in this age and the difficulty of finding one's proper slot discourages others. Personal contact with, and advice and guidance of, the student in his secondary school days are prerequisite if he is to be influenced toward engineering as a career. This work is already being carried forth on a large scale by more than one organization. Several of our members are already doing their share in interviewing and guiding secondary school students, but so far the Society has not officially taken part. In view of the crying need for more rather than

fewer engineers, should not the Society consider active participation in the program, possibly in concert with others? It is here suggested that the prestige of the Society might go a long way toward influencing prospective engineers.

In past years there was a certain amount of co-ordination between the various engineering groups. Recently, however, with a large increase in the number of societies and associations, the co-ordination has for the most part disappeared. Sometimes the various groups seem to be competitors and rivals rather than engineering groups with much the same goals. Often too, lack of proper inter-communications prevent a united backing for some items of general interest. If genuine co-ordination is to be obtained in the future one of two steps must be taken. Either the original coordinating unit must be restored to its earlier status or a completely new method of general liaison must be found. Neither of the steps is a one-society project, but certainly one engineering group, such as our own, must take the lead in furthering necessary coordination. One can find no reason why this cannot be obtained while still remaining short of actual amalgamation. Should our own Society not be the leader in restoring this coordination?

It should be noted that the various suggestions herein are expensive both in time and in money. The question then arises whether the Society, providing in the first place it agrees that some parts of the program are desirable, feels it can find the necessary funds, the necessary number of member participants. There is almost no limit to the services an association of engineers can render, but there is definitely a practical limit of expense and of manpower. What those limits may be should be a subject of most careful study.

Having considered the foregoing suggestions, an engineer might be tempted to say: "The out-going President has been in office for a year and now comes up with various suggestions that he should have covered during his own term." But the thoughts presented have been accumulating during the year and are herein set down as suggestions only, which later Boards of Government may or may not care to follow.

Many an American youth, on listening in on the World Series, has imagined himself out on the pitcher's mound firing strikes past the bewildered opposing batters. But even while he pitches he can somehow detach himself and sit in the stands and watch himself at

work as he becomes a national hero. And every so often we in the Society must look at our own work with complete detachment and ask ourselves if it has been good. Only by so doing can we hope to improve on our work and ensure that our Society is living up to its complete capabilities.

The question necessarily arises to one who has the best interests of the Society at heart: has the time yet arrived when we should carefully examine its organization and procedures so that this Boston Society of Civil Engineers may gain still more in stature and influence while giving even more in service?