CARRYING THE TORCH: THE SOCIETAL IMPACT OF STATE GEOLOGIST JAMES E. SLOSSON

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for Symposium #5 A Tribute to Dr. James E. Slosson
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James E. Slosson was born in Van Nuys on April 12, 1923, where his father and mother owned a small ranch. He grew up riding horse, and continued the balance of his life.

At the age of 10 he became aware of geology by his cousin Eugene Reed, former State Geologist of Nebraska, and Chairman of the geology department at the University of Nebraska.
• He was a standout runner at Van Nuys High School. This shows him winning the all-city 880 yard relay at the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1941.

• He also witnessed the devastating effects of the March 1938 floods along the Los Angeles River.
He graduated from high school 6 months before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

He received a track scholarship to USC in the fall of 1941 and decided to major in petroleum engineering. He dropped out of college in 1943 and joined the Army.

These views show him at home with his mother and father, when he was a corporal.
During the war Jim’s older brother Jack received an officer’s commission as a bombardier on B-24 bombers. Jim dropped out of USC in 1943 and enlisted in the Army, and by 1945 had received his commission as an infantry officer; assigned to physical education training because his officer application had listed “P.E.” (for petroleum engineering) as his major field of study!
After the war Jim re-enrolled at USC, with support from the GI Bill. He changed his major to geology after taking a course from Professor Duncan McNaughton.

A Canadian by birth, McNaughton had won the gold medal in the high jump at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles. Afterwards, he accepted an athletic scholarship to USC, where he earned BS and Ph.D degrees in geology and joined the faculty. As a member of the USC track team, Jim formed an instant bond with McNaughton.
During his summers at SC he worked for the USGS and state Department of Water Resources. This shows Jim (left front) on a geology field trip in the Mojave Desert with his mentor, Prof. Duncan McNaughton, in 1947.
In 1947 Jim married Nancy Samuel and “slowed down a bit.” Nancy worked to help support them while he completed his studies. They were blessed with two children in the early 1950s, Bonnie and Thom.
Jim tried to resurrect his running career when he returned to USC after the war, as shown at left. After switching major to geology he received his AB degree in 1949, followed by an MS in 1950.
Shortly after receiving his master’s from USC in 1950, he accepted a teaching position at Los Angeles Valley College, where he chaired their Earth Science Department until 1965.

During this period he also worked part time for Gulf Oil, which figured prominently in his Ph.D. dissertation at USC on the Repetto Basin, which he completed in 1958.

Like Ronald Reagan, he loved riding his horses in the hills, shown here on his favorite mount, dingbat.
Jim coached track at USC and Valley College throughout the 1950s, until 1962.

This clipping records his leading Valley College to the state championship in 1953, a few weeks after his 30th birthday.
As Los Angeles exploded with growth in the 1950s, high visibility geologic hazards began impacting developed areas, fomenting public outcry and triggering lawsuits.

This shows the Portuguese Bend Landslide which reactivated in 1956, drawing Los Angeles County into costly litigation.
The 1958 *Via de Las Olas Landslide* in Pacific Palisades closed Pacific Coast Highway and drew the City of Los Angeles into costly litigation.

The City hired a prestigious Manhattan geotechnical firm to make a comprehensive 2-year study, which included mapping slides along 15 miles of coastline.
Shortly after completing his doctorate in 1958, Slosson began a 50 year career in engineering geology, forming James E. Slosson & Associates, and consulting on a expanding array of projects: input for excavation and grading of potentially unstable slopes, seismic risk assessments, landslides, flood and debris flow hazards, and peer review for public agencies.
In those days geo disasters were occurring with increasing frequency. This shows a massive slide on Rockbluff Drive in Rolling Hills that began moving in the spring of 1960.
Between 1946-61 one of every seven homes built in the United States was in the City of Los Angeles, and one in every four in Los Angeles County.

Jim said they were designed with a “quick, hot and dry” mentality, with little consideration of drainage or geologic setting.
• Jim’s ability to communicate geologic concepts and his zeal to see science and technology applied to development problems naturally attracted reporters.

• He soon emerged as one of the principal spokesmen for engineering geology in the Los Angeles area.

• In 1961, was asked to sit on the City of Los Angeles Engineering Geologists Qualifications Board and the Hillside Planning Committee of the Department of Building & Safety.
In February 1962 Los Angeles was struck by a series of destructive storms, and the stage was set for revising the City’s original grading code, which had been the nation’s first grading ordinance when adopted in 1952.
It was at this juncture in his life, at age 42, that Jim Slosson began to exert himself in the political arena, when he accepted prominent roles in crafting the post-1962 “modern grading code,” and advocating statutory requirements for engineering geologic input in the grading permit process.
These triumphs led to more progress, such as adoption of the grading and excavation appendix of the Uniform Building Code (1964), and professional registration for geologists in California (1969).
One of Jim Slosson’s greatest achievements was his tabulation comparing the property damage caused by the storms of 1962, 1969, and 1978 with which grading ordinance was in effect when they were permitted.
Liaison with USC and the Master’s program in Engineering Geology

- Jim always maintained strong ties to the USC geology program, especially during the years it was chaired by Dick Stone, shown here.
- Through Jim’s influence, in 1972 USC became the first school in California to offer a master’s degree in engineering geology.
On May 1, 1973 Slosson was named Chief Deputy State Geologist by Governor Ronald Reagan, replacing Gordon Oakeshott.

He was named State Geologist later that same year and served for two years, until mid 1975.
Jim’s expertise as a teacher-communicator proved valuable to CDMG, where he was an advocate of these DMG Notes. He spent considerable energy educating decision makers in the capitol and encouraging legislation.
As State Geologist he introduced a series of **Guidelines for Practice**, which had enormous impact on raising the standard-of-care of engineering and environmental geologists, not only in California, but nationwide.
Jim’s crowning achievement was the establishment of the California Seismic Safety Commission in 1975, an outgrowth of the Governor’s Earthquake Council, shown here in May 1975. Governor Jerry Brown, shown here with Jim, approved the legislation creating the commission a few months later.
• These images show the first meeting of the Seismic Safety Commission in 1975, with Governor Brown attending. Jim was a charter member, serving from 1975-78, and again, between 1991-99.

• With his family still living in the San Fernando Valley and his leave of absence about to expire, Jim resigned his post as State Geologist and returned to Valley College in August 1975 and continued teaching part-time.
Jim now focused his full-time energies on a new consulting firm he named Slosson & Associates, based in Van Nuys.

Now 55 years old, he embarked on a career as forensic expert working with attorneys, peer reviewer for government agencies and municipalities, and maintained a stable of mainstream developer clients.
Dr. Slosson soon established himself as an effective expert witness, working on most of the high profile cases in southern California during the next two decades. These images show Jim with Doug Moran (left) and Mike Scullin, at the Big Rock Mesa landslide in 1978.
One of the most controversial advocacy projects Jim involved himself with was the proposed LNG terminal near Point Conception, shown here in 1980. The issue revolved around the mechanics of faulting.
Jim also had the distinction of being one of the plaintiff’s experts in the Erin Brockovich case, which involved contamination of drinking water by chromium from a gas pumping station in the Mojave Desert near Barstow.

The case settled in 1996 for $333 million, the largest ever paid in a direct action lawsuit in America until that time.
• In 1992 Slosson and civil engineer Gerald Shuirman collaborated to write *Forensic Engineering: Environmental Case Histories for Civil Engineers and Geologists*, which was recognized by GSA’s Burwell Award in 1997.

• It remains one of the classic texts on forensic engineering, fetching high prices on Internet trade sites years after it ceased being in print.
Images from the family album reveal Jim’s outdoor spirit. He always had a dog or two by his side, even at the office.
Jim was a loyal USC alumnus his entire life, never without an SC ball cap.
Jim suffered a near-fatal stroke at the Portland AEG meeting in October 1997.

He recovered, but gradually slowed down the pace of his consultations, enjoying life.

This view shows him pondering an outcrop in Wales.
Jim and Nancy Slosson were an inseparable team. The lived together 60 years, worked at the office together, and they departed this world together. Both died of congestive heart failure; Nancy on April 27th, and Jim on April 28, 2007, at age 84. Los Angeles will never be the same.