

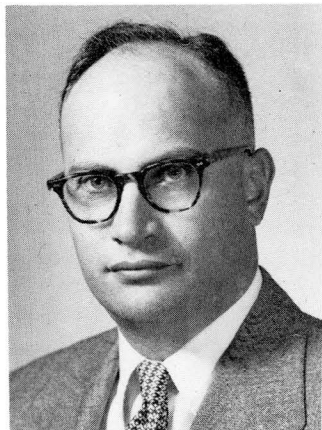
# Memorial to Ely Mencher

## 1913–1978

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Ely Mencher, professor of geology and chairman of the Department of Earth and Planetary Science at the City College of New York (CUNY), died of a thrombosis in White Plains (New York) Hospital on December 11, 1978, three days short of his sixty-fifth birthday. He was on leave from City College while convalescing from open-heart surgery performed earlier in the year.

He was born in New York City on December 14, 1913, the second of three children, all sons, of Morris Mencher, a dentist, and Rachel (April) Mencher, a housewife. His father was born in Austria, but ultimately became a naturalized citizen of the United States; his mother was born in New York City.

After primary and secondary education in the New York City school system, Mencher entered City College in 1930 and received a Bachelor of Science degree in 1934 together with the Ward Medal for outstanding achievement in geology, his major. He entered Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the fall of 1934 and for the next four years studied under the supervision of Hervey W. Shimer, whom he assisted by instructing in the laboratory for three successive years (1935–1938). During this same period he also taught geology at City College in the summer sessions (1936–1938).

His thesis problem for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in geology (awarded in December 1938) concerned the sedimentology and stratigraphy of the Devonian Catskill sequence of upstate New York. The results of this work were later published (1939) under the title "Catskill Facies of New York State," and the work itself was excellent preparation for the field work he did twenty years later on the metamorphosed Paleozoic strata of northeastern Maine.

By September 1938 Ely was working in Venezuela as a geology professor, in response to an invitation from his former M.I.T. schoolmate, Victor M. López. López had been in the process of recruiting faculty members for the newly established Escuela de Geología that he had persuaded his brother, Ralph E. López, Minister of Education, to authorize. As professor of geology in the new school, Mencher's assignment was to organize the geology curriculum and to lecture *in Spanish* on sedimentation, stratigraphy, historical geology, and mineralogy. Although he had no knowledge of Spanish when he arrived in Caracas in the fall of 1938, Mencher was lecturing in reasonably good Spanish six months later on the subjects assigned him, and he subsequently became quite fluent in that language. In 1941 the board of directors elected him technical director of the school, and he served in that capacity until he resigned in 1943 to accept a position in the petroleum industry. His Venezuelan colleagues credit him with having played a dominant role both in developing the Escuela de Geología into the leading department of the Universidad Central de Venezuela in Caracas at the time and in training many of the fledgling geologists of that period.

Mencher's contributions to Venezuelan science in general, and to geology in particular, were recognized by industry when in 1943 he was invited to join Socony-Vacuum Oil Company of Venezuela as senior field geologist. He served in this capacity as field geological party chief for almost four years, after which he was assigned to the position of research geologist, which he held until he returned to the United States in 1952 to join the M.I.T. faculty as an associate professor of geology.

At the end of his fourteen years (1938–1952) of academic and industrial work he was considered one of the three or four leading authorities on the geology of Venezuela. When the Venezuelan government began planning for the National Petroleum Convention to be held in Caracas in 1951, they selected Mencher to help organize the symposium and to serve as editor of the symposium volume that was ultimately published by the government. In 1963 the American Association of Petroleum Geologists asked him to contribute a major article on the "Tectonic History of Venezuela" to the *Backbone of the Americas* symposium volume.

Immediately upon joining the Department of Geology at M.I.T., Mencher assumed a full teaching load of lecturing and laboratory instruction in petroleum geology, regional stratigraphy and tectonics, historical geology, and sedimentology. During the next fifteen years (1952–1967) he not only taught most of the M.I.T. undergraduates in geology but also led them on annual field trips to western Massachusetts and to the area in the Catskills that he had studied for his doctoral thesis; he made these extra excursions for the express purpose of emphasizing the great importance of field experience for later work in practical geology. He also supervised more than his fair share of bachelors' theses.

In 1961 Mencher became interested in the Paleozoic geology of Maine, and during the next five years (1962–1967) he and some of his students spent their summers in northeastern Maine investigating the Ordovician, Silurian, and Devonian rocks of that region. He was co-author of three reports on these investigations and was writing a major report on his work at the time of his death. He also contributed importantly to the early program in oceanography at M.I.T. by organizing courses in marine geology and advanced sedimentology and by directing several students' theses investigations of the bottom sediments of Boston Harbor. Additionally, he had his own oceanographic research program well under way when he resigned from the faculty in 1967.

During the 1955–1956 school year he was a Visiting Lecturer at Harvard, where he gave a two-term course in petroleum geology, and again in 1963–1964, when he offered night lectures in the same subject in the Harvard University extension program. He also continued consulting work for his former employer, Socony-Mobile Oil Company (1952–1960), and made numerous trips to Mexico and to more than a dozen countries in the Caribbean and Central American regions.

In September 1967 he returned to his alma mater, the City College of New York (CUNY), as a professor of geology. A year later he was elected chairman of the Department of Geology and quickly demonstrated his tolerance and administrative ability during the years of student unrest. Although elected to a second term as chairman, in 1972 he resigned from the position because he could no longer accept some of the conditions that the new administration imposed on his colleagues and students. He resumed a full-time load of teaching, with summer field work in Maine, and kept quite busy for the next five years. His colleagues credit him with the great improvement in the organization of the department and the planning and development of several graduate programs in geology. When a financial crisis arose in the college, he was again asked to assume the chairmanship of the department, which had been renamed the

Department of Earth and Planetary Science. As would be expected from his loyalty to his fellow colleagues and students and to his alma mater, he accepted the appointment in 1977 and continued in that capacity until taking the semester leave that ended with his death on December 11, 1978.

Mencher maintained a continuous interest in the latest advances in geology by membership and participation in numerous professional organizations. Early in his career he became a member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers, the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, and the Geological Society of America. He was also a member of the American Geophysical Union, the Marine Technology Society, the Mineralogical Society, the New York Academy of Science (serving as chairman of the Geological Section in 1972–1973), and the Society of Economic Paleontologists and Mineralogists. In Venezuela he was a founding member of the Asociación Venezolana de Geología, Minería y Petróleo and of the Asociación Venezolana para el Avance de la Ciencia. He served the latter as a director for five years and as coordinator of the Geological Section during the 1952 session. He was also named honorary curator of Paleontología y Conquillología, Museo de Historia Naturel, in Caracas (1941–1944). In 1956 he became a member of the Asociación Mexicana de Geólogos Petroleros.

Ely married Miriam B. Pollak of New York City on May 10, 1951, a year before he left Venezuela for his return to Massachusetts. Miriam had earned an A.B. degree in geology from Hunter College in 1933 and an M.A. in geology from Columbia University in 1936. She was a sympathetic and devoted wife and companion who always kept Ely's best interests in mind. Their only child, Frederick Marshall, graduated from Harvard University in 1974 with an A.B. in biology and received an M.S. in oceanography from the University of Hawaii in 1978. He is planning to work toward a doctorate in oceanography, with special interest in the aquaculture of marine invertebrates.

Ely Mencher was primarily a student and teacher in the field of sedimentary rocks, having been most interested in their physical and chemical properties, conditions of deposition, and tectonic history. Although he knew quite a bit about petrology and paleontology, he preferred to leave those aspects of sedimentary rocks to others. He was a thorough and exacting teacher and supervisor, yet he was kind and considerate and always kept the interests of his students uppermost in mind. Ely was conscientious almost to a fault; those of us who had occasion to ask him to take on extra tasks that were often uninteresting and unrewarding but nevertheless necessary, always found him willing to do so. He was that rare general-utility department member on whom one could depend for such extra assignments. He used his time, energy, and abilities to the fullest, maintained the highest professional standards, and taught with complete commitment to both subject and student. Colleagues and students alike will remember him as a sensitive and compassionate person and a sincere and loyal friend.

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