Memorial to Lee C. Armstrong
1904–1992

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Lee Armstrong was born on a farm near the southern Minnesota prairie town of Sleepy Eye on October 16, 1904. He passed away at the age of 87 on July 19, 1992, in Minneapolis, his home city since 1921, after a battle of several months with cancer. He was an outstanding mining geologist who, during the course of a 60-year career, made commercially significant contributions to the discovery, knowledge, and development of mineral projects in many countries scattered over five continents. His superb professionalism, concern for others, and infectious good humor won him friends and distinction wherever he went. He was a fine human being.

Lee was the last of nine children, all boys, born to hard-working pioneer parents, Charles and Minnie Armstrong. One of Lee's early achievements was to become the quarterback of the Sleepy Eye High School football team, which won its fair share of area contests. Shortly after he finished high school, Lee and his family moved to Minneapolis, where Lee completed his education, earning a B.Sc. degree in mining engineering in 1927, and, after ten years of work, five of them in Africa, a Ph.D. in 1937 with a major in geology and a minor in mining engineering and metallurgy.

In 1925 Lee began his career by working as a budding young engineer on the U.S. Bureau of Mines' experimental blast furnace, in 1926 as a miner in the Pioneer Mine near Ely, Minnesota, and as a geologist with the Minnesota Geological Survey. In 1927 he accepted his first foreign assignment as a geologist with Selection Trust, Ltd., searching for copper in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). During his work there he was credited with the discovery of the Baluba copper deposit, put into production in 1971. With ASARCO, in a remote region of Angola, during the next two years he continued looking for copper and other metals. He liked to recount the time on that assignment that he and two helpers had the occasion to bivouac some distance away from their base camp after dark. They awoke to find that they had shared the edge of a meadow with a magnificently maned lion and five lionesses, not more than 25 yards away. Nearly everyone in the two groups awoke at the same time, stretched, and made the startling discovery of each other. After a minute or two the lions yawned and sauntered away. Lee Armstrong was a raconteur of extraordinary talent. He thoroughly enjoyed and respected people, nature, and places. The stories of his many adventures and observations were priceless.

After Africa Lee went back home, and during a visit with his brother in Hitchcock, South Dakota, he met and courted Nina L. Wright. They were married in 1933, had a son, Robert, in 1939 and a daughter, Nancy, in 1941. Lee and Nina spent 1933–1937 working in and out of Minneapolis. At the University of Minnesota Lee completed his Ph.D. studies, taught, and did research. During this period he also explored for gold and silver in Canada for Selection Trust and investigated Utah iron ore for the USGS. In 1937 he worked as a mining engineer with the Minnesota State Planning Board on Minnesota's nonmetallic resources.

From 1938 to 1940 Lee was contracted by Socony-Vacuum Oil Company as chief-of-party
for comprehensive petroleum exploration in Venezuela. Following this work, he returned to Minneapolis, where he was hired as geologist for E. J. Longyear Company. In 1953 Longyear promoted Lee to chief geologist and mining engineer, a position he held until his retirement from the company in 1973. At Longyear Lee played major roles in a wide variety of projects, including exploration and evaluation of metallic and nonmetallic deposits involving geological, geophysical, and geochemical studies; shaft sinking; diamond drilling; mining; mineral property appraisal; and technical witness and foundation studies. In the course of this work, he wrote scores of esoteric reports dealing with nearly all segments of mineral exploration and development. The Longyear projects took him to settings worldwide. Whenever possible he had his family with him to share the wonder of new people and places. His wife, Nina, died of a cerebral hemorrhage in September 1956.

Lee and Leliah Anderson of Minneapolis were married in Mason City, Iowa, in 1958. Leliah brought four grown children to the union, James, Richard, Joel, and Nancy. The couple was blessed with 14 grandchildren, and today there are 15 great-grandchildren. After 12 years together, Leliah died of cancer in January 1970.

Following his retirement from Longyear in 1973, Lee became an independent consultant and was able to stay professionally active for most of his remaining years.

Lee Armstrong was a member of many organizations and societies, including the American Institute of Professional Geologists, American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineering, American Association of Petroleum Geologists, Society of Economic Geologists, American Society of Civil Engineers, Sigma Xi, Minneapolis Engineers’ Club, and Twin Cities Geologists’ Club. He was a Minnesota registered professional engineer, and a Fellow of the Geological Society of America.

Notwithstanding his professionalism, Lee’s strength of character and unwavering moral convictions set him apart. He was known to consider as a first priority the safety and welfare of those who worked for him. The natives of the Loma tribe in northern Liberia held him in such high regard that they conferred on him, during an impressive ceremony, the position of honorary paramount chief, which qualified him to preside at tribal councils. In the ceremony he was given an ornate ceremonial robe of native-woven heavy cotton and the blessings and good wishes of all the tribal elders.

While Lee Armstrong experienced his share of grief and sadness in his 87 years, he had a fulfilling, productive, adventurous, and joyful life, and he enriched those around him. He was a credit to those he represented, to his many friends and colleagues, and to his country. Those of us who cherished his friendship are grateful for his life.

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