Memorial to Raymond C. Becker
1906–1993

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Raymond Carl Becker, a Fellow of the Geological Society of America and its executive secretary from 1964 to 1970, was born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on October 20, 1906. His parents were Carl Theiphilis and Alma Pauline Johnson Becker. He died in Boulder, Colorado, on June 26, 1993.

Ray graduated with an A.B. degree from Clark University in 1928. Beginning graduate work at Johns Hopkins University in 1930, but lacking field experience, he was encouraged in 1931 to become one of Charles B. Hunt's field assistants in mapping the geology of the Mount Taylor volcanic field and the Mount Taylor coal field, New Mexico, by plane table and alidade. This introduction to western geology and the U.S. Geological Survey gave him the opportunity to work at the Survey on the petrography of the Mount Taylor igneous rocks, a project undertaken in conjunction with his graduate work at Johns Hopkins. Charles Milton patiently guided the novice petrographer through the mysteries of acute bisectrices and optic-axis figures.

Henry G. Ferguson recognized that Ray had many talents not exercised at the alidade or microscope. Fergie took the young man into his Virginia home, Hard Bargain Farm, where Ray shared in the musical events and archeological digs that were an important part of the Ferguson culture. Fergie had recently become one of the assistant secretaries of the 16th International Geological Congress, to be held in Washington in 1933. The Congress needed a full-time business manager, and Ray was shortly appointed to that position. The work of the Congress interrupted his graduate studies, but it paid him a living wage, which was hard to come by during the Depression. It also set him on a career in management.

With the Congress over and another year at Johns Hopkins behind him, in 1934 Ray served as a geological and topographic field assistant to John C. Reed, Sr., in mapping the southwestern Arkansas quicksilver district for the Survey. Then, because the field season had passed and permanent appointment to the staff was blocked by the chronic shortage of funds, Ray worked briefly for the Soil Erosion Service on sedimentation studies in various parts of the country before taking a job in the oil industry, where he worked in Shreveport, Louisiana, for the Union Packing Company (United Gas Public Service Company) from 1935 to 1944. There he passed from scout to district geologist before being put in charge of reserve evaluations. During part of this time he served as chairman of the subcommittee for Gulf Coast Natural Gas and Condensate Reserves.

In 1944 Ray joined the Survey’s Conservation Division and was assigned to surface and subsurface oil and gas investigations. However, World War II had brought new duties to the Survey, and Ray was soon required to take on some of them in the Geologic Division’s Military Geology unit. His boss, Esper S. Larsen III, sent him to Tokyo, where he spent two years in charge of fuels investigations while attached to the Natural Resources Section, GHQ, Supreme Commander Allied Powers. Returning stateside, and again in the Conservation Division, he was
detailed for several years to the Department of Justice, where he did yeoman service in charge of mineral evaluations for the Ute Indian suit.

After part of the Survey staff was transferred from Washington to Denver, Ray was appointed geologist-in-charge at the recently created Federal Center. Except for a brief tour in 1956–1957 as technical advisor to the Director of the Geological Survey of Indonesia, Ray was the geologist-in-charge from 1951 to 1962. Nominally he was a member of the Geologic Division; actually he was "Mr. Survey" in Denver, serving not only as chief administrator, but also as coordinator for the Survey's Missouri River Basin Studies, an ambitious 12-year program that involved the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bureau of Reclamation, and all Divisions of the Survey.

Ray, in his quiet, gentlemanly, persuasive way, changed many things and many people while serving as geologist-in-charge. One of his principal assignments was to oversee the conversion of Building 25 of the World War II Remington Arms plant into offices and laboratories of the Geologic, Topographic, Water Resources, and Conservation Divisions. He served, in effect, as clerk-of-the-works for this conversion, which made it possible in 1953 to move geologists out of their small, overcrowded brick building and the adjacent leaky wooden shacks into the commodious quarters that served us well even after the closure of the Survey's Grand Junction office nearly doubled the geological population in Denver. The move also gave us a fine library to replace the inhospitable concrete-floored area through which the winter winds made the ceiling-high tarpaulins billow as the hardier of us pursued further knowledge in the meager collection of books and journals. Unhappy with the desolate surroundings of the building, Ray persuaded the General Services Administration to plant some grass around it and set out locust trees to provide a bit of shade. In short, he gave us livable quarters for our work.

Ray's interest in Building 25 and its environs was not confined to the physical. Though the library itself was one of his principal interests, its growing collection advanced by James Gilluly, it was the librarian, Elizabeth Wellshear, arriving in 1951, who particularly caught his attention. We used to wonder at the amount of official business that could engage the librarian and the geologist-in-charge in so many conferences, but the friendship that grew between them resulted in 1961 in a happy and enduring marriage.

Betty's life was not the only one that Ray changed. In 1957, the Russians sent Sputnik aloft. Ray reasoned that if the Russians were that advanced in space technology, we might have something to learn from them in geology. He discovered that Ivan J. Mittin, a naturalized Russian-educated engineer and former translator of engineering works for the Bureau of Reclamation, had recently been transferred to the staff of the Survey library as a curator of its photographic collection. Why, Ray wondered, weren't we using this man to teach us Russian, as he was already doing for night students at the University of Colorado extension in Denver? Soon Mittin was teaching us beginning Russian—first as an after-hours, for-tuition enterprise, but ultimately as a formal part of the Survey's training program. After a year or two, a course in scientific Russian was added. Later, some of us set about exploring the vast and important Russian mineralogic and paleontologic literature by reading it informally under Mittin's direction. Ray gave us a translator who understood both the subject and the language.

For better or worse, Ray and his interest in educating Survey geologists also changed the course of my life. He persuaded me, with the help of Ray E. Wilcox, Ogden Tweto, George Neuerburg, and Harry Tourtelot, to teach a refresher course in petrography. Offered in 1959, this course spawned two others, the celebrated Wilcox course in optical mineralogy—taught perhaps half a dozen times—and a course in ore microscopy that I have taught a dozen times since 1963. The Survey has long been known for its informal training of young field geologists, but Ray Becker saw to it that formal instruction in various aspects of geology was available to seasoned employees. He would be amazed to learn that the little seeds of his pioneering training program have grown to yield a multitude of courses of university caliber.
Ray resigned from the Survey in 1962 to become in 1964 the Executive Secretary of the Geological Society of America. This move took him to New York, the cosmopolitan city that he found too parochial to be the center of the Society’s wide-ranging activities. Within a few years, he accomplished the transfer of headquarters to Boulder, where from quarters rented in 1967 he laid the groundwork for GSA’s present home, which stands as a monument to his foresight, diligence, and powers of persuasion.

Foresight also led him to resign as Executive Secretary in 1970, two years before the building was finished. The decision was characteristically unheralded and gentlemanly: he was developing the symptoms of what was later diagnosed as orofacial dyskinesia. Convinced that the Society should not suffer with him, he retired with grace, living for many years with his gardens and his birds, now and then taking long trips with Betty in their recreation vehicle, swimming regularly, and enlivening many a holiday gathering with anecdotes from happier years.

One of his favorite stories placed his old mentor, Fergie, feet on desk and field notebook in hand, in a stuffy office in the old Interior Building in Washington when in walked Harold L. Ickes, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s curmudgeonly Secretary of the Interior. Evidently Ickes was on a mission of good will, unusual for him, intent on mingling with the troops and observing their working habits. “Mr. Ferguson,” he asked, “why do you work for the Geological Survey?” Fergie replied, “Because I have an indolent disposition and an independent income.” Did Ickes smile? Ray didn’t tell us; he merely smiled when he told the story.

Ray was a friend of all dogs, his own or those that he met on his walks with Betty in Boulder. In his middle years, he raised horses and rode them well. He played the grand piano in his home (mostly classical music) almost until his life’s end.

Ray was a devoted manager and administrator—an overseer, an advisor and confidant, the man called upon to rescue programs in distress; the one who could restore order and make difficult situations tolerable. He knew people, money, responsibility, and how to make the three work together smoothly to achieve a goal. His goals were institutional, and the institutions that he served—the U.S. Geological Survey at Denver Federal Center and the Geological Society of America in Boulder—survive as memorials to him. He is also survived by Elizabeth Becker, his wife of 32 years, and by his daughter Louise Rue, and his granddaughter Christina Rue, both of Larkspur, Colorado. Louise is the child of Ray’s earlier marriage to Isabel Wegeman.

Acknowledgments

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