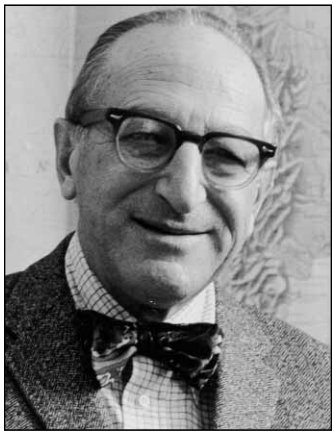
Memorial to Laurence L. Sloss
1913–1996



Laurence L. Sloss, professor emeritus of geological sciences at Northwestern University, died on November 2, 1996, shortly after returning to Evanston, Illinois, from the Geological Society of America Annual Meeting in Denver.

Sloss was born in Mountain View, California, August 26, 1913. He received his undergraduate education at Stanford University and his Ph.D. (1937) at the University of Chicago. He joined the faculty at Northwestern in 1947 and was named the William Deering Professor of Geological Sciences there in 1971, a position he held until his retirement in 1981.

Sloss was widely recognized as one of the pioneers of the concept of sequence stratigraphy, and many credit him with instigating a revolution in stratigraphic thinking. His publications include a seminal 1962 study on the cratonic megasequences of North America.

Sloss was awarded the William H. Twenhofel Medal by the Society of Economic Petrologists and Mineralogists (SEPM; now the Society for Sedimentary Geology) in 1980. His acceptance speech describes his career and illustrates his sense of humor:

> Mr. President, I accept this handsome award with equal measures of gratitude and astonishment—the gratitude extends to the research committee and the council of the society for their generosity and to Ed Dapples for his kind words; the reasons for my astonishment will be detailed shortly. First, however, let me note that when Ed Dapples says good things about his friends (even non-Republican friends) he really believes what he says, irrespective of the state of delusion or hallucination that may seem to affect him at the time. Ed and I have been in close contact for well over 30 years, we have written papers and books together, we have jointly nurtured uncounted billions of chiggers, together we have located drill sites only to agonize over terminal drill stem tests, and we have made common cause to disrupt the solemn business sessions of this society. Thus, if Ed thinks that I belong here, I am almost (but not quite) persuaded that irreversible damage to SEPM need not necessarily result.
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> Why am I astonished? Well, I have been in attendance at many occasions devoted to the bestowal of awards and have read the records of others. Award winners tend strongly to fit the American dream in which, through diligence and perseverance significant scientists emerge from humble backgrounds to triumph over fiscal adversity. A review of a number of previous Twenhofel medalists—Moore, Pettijohn, Shrock, Krumbein, and Dunbar, for instance—confirms the pattern, and all of these but Bill Krumbein were born or raised on farms or in rural communities surrounded by orderly successions of strata, commonly, in one of Twen's favorite phrases, "ram-jam full of fossils."
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> I, too, was born and raised on a farm and learned the three R's at a two-room school, but my upbringing was sadly disadvantaged with respect to the benefits conferred by low income. My grandfather had gone to California in '49 and not long after he amassed a considerable fortune by killing nearly all the seals on the Pribilof Islands—an enterprise unimpeded by a Sierra Club and not even requiring an environmental impact statement. One product of all this was a gentleman's farming

retreat in the foothills not far from the San Andreas rift; here, I arrived simultaneously with the Panic of 1913, a financial event that greatly depleted grandfather's estate without forcing me to adopt the character-building work habits of my intellectual betters. All my friends went to Stanford so I did likewise; there, impelled only by a vague interest in dinosaurs, I enrolled as a geology major with the intention of becoming a paleontologist, although the only fossil I had seen outside of a museum was the imprint of a *Turritella* exposed on the sandstone wall of a Stanford building. Four delightful unmotivated years later I had a Bachelor's degree and no job prospects.

My brothers had gone from Stanford to Harvard so I, in all innocence, applied there for admission as a graduate student. Someone at Cambridge took one glance at my transcript and politely told me to try elsewhere. I knew nothing about the University of Chicago except that it, too, was "back east" and that Carey Croneis was reputed to be a rising young paleontologist. Chicago admitted me to the company of Croneis and Francis Pettijohn and Bill Krumbein and made me a part of a graduate body of mature men and women, largely there because their jobs in oil and mining had evaporated with the Depression. Thanks to all these good people, it gradually dawned on me that life existed beyond the Junior Prom and that intellectual effort could be rewarding.

The first pulse of intellectual effort produced a dissertation of doubtful relevance and of concern to no more than six other paleontologists. Nevertheless, shortly before achieving my 24th birthday, Robert Hutchins draped a hood around my neck and I was off on a honeymoon. On returning, I learned that, without so much as a lifted finger on my part, Carey Croneis had nailed down a job for me in Montana.

The job was to teach paleontology and historical geology at the School of Mines in Butte and to operate as the stratigrapher for the State Bureau of Mines and Geology. Each summer the latter agency provided a pickup truck, a field assistant, and expenses; the good Lord provided an abundance of rocks that no one had looked at seriously before. Looking back on the Montana years, it is clear that I had fallen into a guaranteed fail-safe, no-lose situation. I was being paid to roam around in a fly-fisherman's paradise where a few primitive observations could yield regionally significant results. Montana is a big state; the mid-Paleozoic outcrops that became my playground are separated by broad expanses of wheat land and sagebrush. No stroke of genius was required to see that the big picture could not be assembled without recourse to the subsurface. Entry into the art and lore of subsurface stratigraphy supplied the three-dimensional view requisite to an understanding of facies patterns and of unconformities of interregional scale.

I was in danger of becoming the Grand Old Man of the Northern Rockies and Great Plains before the age of 35—time to talk to Carey Croneis again. Carey had learned that Bill Krumbein was going to Northwestern—why not try to join him there? Northwestern was by no means enthusiastic about doubling its commitment but, between a part-time appointment, a few months of company employment, and grandfather's poor dead seals for back-up, a meeting of minds was arranged. The rest, as Dapples has recounted, is on the record. Ed, Bill, and I formed one of those infrequently encountered teams in which the experience and competence of each member strengthens the other players, and I was in a position to gain more than my share of undeserved stature from this happy combination. For example—in earliest 1947 the SEPM Research Committee was getting properly exercised over the tectonic implications of sediment composition and texture. Dapples and Krumbein had been delegated the shales and sandstones and the third party was to discuss carbonates; this third man inconveniently died and the question of limestones and dolomites fell into my lap for no better reason than propinquity. We became instant savants in the emerging field of sedimentary tectonics—for me, at least, it was another case of being with the right people in the right place at the right time and that, I must presume, is why I stand here today.

I wish I could leave you with some pithy aphorism, some trenchant maxim, that would make me seem a more worthy role model for rising young geologists; instead, all that runs through the mind is that a lack of virtue does not necessarily lead to a lack of rewards, that procrastination saves time (the problem may go away) and that there is, indeed, a free lunch and I just had one.

Among Sloss's many other professional honors, he was awarded the Geological Society of America Penrose Medal (1986) and the American Association of Petroleum Geologists President's Award. He served as president of several major geological societies, including the Geological Society of America, the American Geological Institute, and SEPM.

Sloss is survived by his two sons, Laurence J. Sloss, a cardiologist, and Peter W. Sloss, an atmospheric scientist; two daughters-in-law; and six grandchildren.

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