

Robert E. Sheriff

By Fred Hilterman

". . . we have endeavored to explain in words rather than merely letting the equations speak for themselves."

Thus is Bob Sheriff's dictate in the preface of his recent book, "Exploration Seismology," and he aptly keeps his promise. But this is not unusual. Bob has long delighted geophysicists from eager young students to seasoned interpreters with his lucid and enthusiastic lectures. The far-reaching impact of his contributions results from their quality and intensity as well as to the fact that he has delivered them consistently for more than 40 years. As the Honors and Awards Committee noted:

"For many years, Bob has devoted his energies to teaching aspiring young geophysicists at the University of Houston. His distinguished career and his devotion to teaching have inspired his many students who hold him in the highest regard."

Few SEG members would fail to recognize Bob in a crowd; at the very least, his name is familiar to geophysicists the world over. Kauffman Gold Medal (1969), Distinguished Lecturer (1977), Honorary Member (1979). But, first and foremost, Bob's name has come to be linked consistently to the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Exploration Geophysics, SEG's standard for terms (decreed in the Instructions to Authors for Geophysics) since its first edition.

Who has not, at one point or another, been exposed to Bob? One could hardly avoid it as he has zealously volunteered time and talent in the Academic Liaison/Student Sections, Continuing Education, OTC, Public Relations, Development and Production Geophysics, Interpretation, and three SEG Annual Meeting Technical Program committees.

Highlights of Bob's career can be found in "Bob Sheriff, getting a better picture," and "How in the world I came to write the Encyclopedic Dictionary," which appeared in TLE in September 1995 and April 1991, respectively. What cannot be found in those articles because it is, in fact, hard to put into words, are the "mentor meetings" Bob Sheriff has so graciously offered to many younger geophysicists as they were about to undertake various professional endeavors, from SEG committee assignments to crucial career decisions. Never was he stingy with either information or time, both freely given during innumerable mentor meetings that undoubtedly helped shape the careers of many.

Bob's own career was straightforward. After graduating from Ohio State (Ph.D. 1950), he joined Chevron and remained there until 1975, when he opted for early retirement to work for Seiscom Delta in Houston. Earlier in the decade, Bob had begun teaching as an adjunct professor at the University of Houston. He, along with Milton Dobrin, was also one of the principal lecturers in the newly founded graduate geophysics program. Bob Sheriff was a natural for academia. His ability to teach was instinctive and included a gift to make complex matters easily understandable. In 1981, he accepted a full professorship at UH where he is currently also acting director of the Allied Geophysical Laboratories.

Wishing to leave no accomplishments untold in this citation, I canvassed my bookshelves for additional material. After spotting the seventh book with Sheriff's name on the cover, including:

Applied Geophysics , 2nd Ed., 1990 (Coauthors: W. M. Telford and L. P. Geldart)
Encyclopedic Dictionary of Exploration Geophysics , 3rd Ed., 1991
Exploration Seismology , 2nd Ed., 1995, (Coauthor: L. P. Geldart)
Geophysical Methods, 1989, ISBN 0-13-352568-6; Prentice Hall.
Reservoir Geophysics (ed.), 1992, ISBN 1-56080-46-X; SEG
Seismic Stratigraphy , 1980, ISBN 0-934634-08-4; IHRDC, Boston
Problems in Exploration Seismology and their solutions by Lloyd P. Geldart and Robert E. Sheriff, 2004, Tulsa, Soc. Explor. Geophysicists, 514 p. ISBN 1-56080-115-8

I realized the difficulty of summarizing his vast body of work and influence. It is, in short, an illustrious career.

Bob has been recognized many times for his outstanding contributions as an author, teacher and mentor. These include:

1969: Kauffman Gold Medal of SEG for outstanding contribution to geophysics
1977: Distinguished lecturer, Society of Exploration Geophysicists
1979: Honorary Membership in Society of Exploration Geophysicists
1980: Honorary Membership in Geophysical Society of Houston
1993: Distinguished lecturer, Australian Society of Exploration Geophy.
1993: Hayden Williams Fellow, Curtin Univ. of Tech., Perth, W. Australia
1996: Special Commendation Award, Society of Exploration Geophysicists
1997: Quest for Excellence Award, University of Houston College of Natural Sciences and Mathematics
1998: Maurice Ewing medal of SEG for lifetime work in geophysics

Few in our profession have been more ecumenical than Bob Sheriff in their contributions. He has taught not only with his considerable knowledge and facility but also with his example. It is geophysicists like him who cleared the path and point the way toward the internationalization of SEG and the profession in general. He continues to give back to the profession more than he ever took from it.