

Foreword

The Foundation for Professional Practice is indebted to ASFE for allowing the Foundation to prepare its own edition of this seminal work, and all of us are indebted to the prior generation of ASFE members who began the tradition of oral history that has served ASFE members so well for so long. “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it,” George Santayana once remarked. Those who learn from the history reported here should find many “new” problems familiar, and far less difficult to deal with.

Many of the case histories relate to geotechnical and environmental practice. Those involved with different disciplines may therefore conclude that the situations encountered, mistakes made, and lessons learned do not apply to them. That would be a most unfortunate conclusion! The case histories presented here span the last four decades of the twentieth century. We have made unimaginable technical progress during that time. That even the oldest cases are as valuable today as they were then underscores a vital fact: *The knottiest problems technical practitioners face are not technical problems; they're people problems.* And because people evolve at a much slower pace than technology, the most significant problems we're likely to encounter today and tomorrow are not that much different from those faced by countless generations of our professional forebears.

The 76 case histories gathered to date are far from being all that were available, but ASFE's goal was never to capture all. Instead, through the efforts of its Practice Education Committee, the goal has been to continually present new material; i.e., new “stuff” that can go wrong. No other organization has done so much in this area, and that is not because ASFE members have been the only ones to experience such difficulties. In fact, the problems ASFE members have encountered are identical to those we know other practitioners have had to face. What makes ASFE members different is their awesome willingness to stand before their friends and colleagues – almost all of whom are competitors – and confess the errors of their ways, to help them avoid the same mistakes. It takes a tremendous amount of courage to do that, buttressed by the conviction that service to one's peers is an integral part of being a professional in business.

The 76 Member Firm principals and officers who so willingly made their embarrassments public deserve our heartfelt thanks for their contributions. We are indebted to them not only for the telling, but also because what they had to say created the knowledge base from which so much else has sprung; the case histories themselves, of course, and a wide array of publications, many of which ASFE has been willing to share with others, for the benefit of the professions and professionals involved.

Someone else also merits recognition: John Bachner. A driving force behind the Foundation for Professional Practice, John has been a part of ASFE for almost all of its history. He has counseled and cajoled ASFE members, served as a mentor, and acted as a gatekeeper of professionalism throughout his career. This collection would not have been possible without his help.

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