

FACT SHEET

Talking Through My Hard Hat: Chronicle of a 20th-Century Civil Engineer John J. Scheuren, Jr. (1909–1995)

Civil Engineer • Explorer • Permafrostologist • Arctic and Antarctic Field Engineer

At a Glance

John J. Scheuren, Jr. was a civil engineer, educated at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), whose career spanned more than six decades. He was among the few civil engineers of his generation with substantial field experience in both the Arctic and Antarctic, working at the intersection of engineering, exploration, permafrost science, military infrastructure, transportation, and polar logistics.

About the Chronicle

Talking Through My Hard Hat is Scheuren's firsthand career autobiography, tracing a professional life that extended from the Great Depression and World War II through the Cold War and the great era of twentieth-century infrastructure development. His work took him across the United States and around the world, on every continent except Australia, with major assignments in Greenland and Antarctica. The chronicle combines engineering and exploration history with adventure, humor, and reflections on leadership, stewardship, technology, public responsibility, human character, and the people he encountered.

Why It Matters

A primary-source account of engineering, exploration, and construction during a formative period of the twentieth century: firsthand observations of Greenland and Antarctica during the Cold War era, including polar science, aviation, logistics, and infrastructure; a record of a civil engineer whose technical work was informed by broad interests in history, literature, philosophy, public service, and the natural world; and recollections about explorers, scientists, aviators, military leaders, engineers, Inuit communities, construction executives, and skilled tradesmen whose work helped shape the modern world.

Arctic and Antarctic Experience

Scheuren's polar work included Greenland and Canada's eastern Arctic reconnaissance and site investigations; Arctic surveying and infrastructure development; permafrost and frozen-ground engineering; snow and ice-cap operations; Antarctic engineering and logistics; and military and scientific support projects in remote environments. At Marble Point (near McMurdo Sound in Antarctica (1957–58)), he directed engineering investigations for one of the earliest proposed permanent land-based airfield sites in Antarctica and oversaw construction of an ice-free airstrip at a time when Antarctic aviation depended largely on snow and ice runways.

A Primary-Source History

The chronicle's particular value lies in its authenticity. Late in life, Scheuren dictated his recollections onto more than twenty-five cassette tapes. His daughter Margot transcribed them into an approximately 800-page manuscript, which he reviewed and corrected before his death in

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1995. Originally prepared on a Digital Equipment Corporation word-processing system and stored on 8-inch floppy disks, the electronic files eventually became inaccessible. Scheuren's corrected printout survived and was later retyped, preserved, and edited by his daughters Margot R. Scheuren and Claire E. Scheuren, with support from their brothers Frederick J. "Fritz" Scheuren and J. Mark Scheuren. The published book preserves his voice, observations, and humor. The larger archive, including recordings, manuscript materials, photographs, maps, engineering documents, and field books, has also been preserved for future historical and scholarly use.

Professional Associations and Honors

- Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Class of 1931
- Fellow, American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE)
- Member, The Explorers Club
- Emeritus Member, Arctic Institute of North America
- Member, Marine Technology Society and International Permafrost Association
- U.S. Army Patriotic Civilian Award for contributions to national defense
- Scheuren Stream*, Antarctica, named in his honor (*a seasonal meltwater stream that flows from the Wilson Piedmont Glacier)

Notable Figures in the Chronicle

Among those appearing in Scheuren's recollections are Admiral Donald B. MacMillan, Count Eigil Knuth, Bernt Balchen, Richard E. Byrd, Paul-Émile Victor, Henri Bader, Sir Vivian Fuchs, and Sir Edmund Hillary, figures associated with twentieth-century polar exploration, aviation, and scientific discovery.

Themes

Engineering and Infrastructure • Arctic and Antarctic Exploration • Greenland History • Professional Leadership • Stewardship and Responsibility • Technology and Society • Human Character and Experience • Humor, Curiosity, and Lifelong Learning

Archival Preservation

Because the original manuscript was far more extensive than the published volume, the supporting archive—including original cassette recordings, transcripts, photographs, maps, field books, editorial materials, and related historical records—has been preserved for future reference and potential scholarly use. It documents Scheuren's engineering and exploration experiences as well as his reflections on technology, stewardship, history, leadership, and the responsibilities of one generation to the next.

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