Gertrude Killeen

In 1979, Caltech archivist Ann Scheid asked Charles Richter about women who had made research contributions during the early years at the Caltech Seismological Laboratory. Richter replied, “For many years two of the mainstays of the routine of the Laboratory were Gertrude Killeen, who did most of the photographic work, and Violet Taylor, who became my assistant in the measuring department.”

In the mid-20th century the Southern California Seismic Network comprised only a handful of independently operating stations, and the routine business of developing the records was a long way from the automated procedures and real-time communications that networks employ today. Film records from stations elsewhere in California were mailed to Pasadena in special black envelopes once a week, mostly courtesy of a network of volunteers enlisted to help with early—and very poorly funded—earthquake monitoring efforts. Killeen handled the development of these records for many years. Those who knew her speak highly of her abilities; they also paint a portrait of a lively—perhaps one might say colorful—personality. Betty Shor, who also worked as a paid assistant to Richter in the 1950s, recalled Gertrude as having done an outstanding job printing the photographic records, adding, “One could tell when things weren’t going as well as she wished, because she would burst into some great swearing.”

A chain-smoking Irish woman, Killeen brooked no nonsense—with anyone. She made coffee for the lab and, as long-time Seismo Lab technician David Johnson said, “You didn’t complain about the coffee,” hinting that one might have had cause to complain. Colleagues also recall Killeen’s visceral dislike of lizards, an unfortunate characteristic for someone employed in the semi-arid foothills of Southern California. But mostly they recall her warm humor and smile, and her long years of valued contributions to the early days of network operations. Killeen died in 1978 at the age of 76. 

Susan Hough
Robert Wilcox Sayles

On 29 November 1911, SSA member Robert Wilcox Sayles of Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, wrote to an SSA committee consisting of John C. Branner, Andrew C. Lawson, and Jay B. Woodworth regarding his gift of $5,000 to the Seismological Society of America:

I feel that you can best manage this gift and have therefore decided to leave the disposition of it entirely in your hands. As long as it is used primarily for the Bulletin of the Society I care not how you dispose of it...it is a great pleasure to me to be able to give aid at this critical time, and I should say also a privilege.

Sayles could not have imagined how important his donation would become to the Bulletin of the Seismological Society of America, or that it would play a role in the electronic publication of BSSA nearly a century later.

SSA began publishing BSSA in March 1911, and in those early years Sayles's donation provided security as SSA struggled to publish each issue. During the Depression, part of the fund was lost due to failed investments. By 1961, however, it had regained a balance of $3,900. After that, the Sayles fund grew steadily, with no withdrawals until 1978, when it financed a project to photograph back issues of BSSA for microfilm and microfiche. The fund then sat untouched, compounding until 1999.

At the turn of the 21st century, the Sayles fund provided the same security for the electronic publishing of BSSA that it had provided for print publication in the early 1900s. Modest withdrawals eased the financial pain of digitizing issues from 2000 to the present and posting them on the Web. In January 2006, SSA exhausted the fund by utilizing its remaining $58,858 to scan and electronically deliver all the previous issues of BSSA—the so-called "legacy issues" from 1911 through 1999.

Robert Wilcox Sayles was born 29 January 1878 in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. Throughout his lifetime, he worked for and eventually became an officer of Baltic Mills, his family's prosperous textile business, but he also sustained a lifelong love of geology developed as an undergraduate at Harvard. Sayles's interest in seismology began through his association with Harvard professor Jay B. Woodworth, who was active in the newly formed Seismological Society of America. Sayles joined SSA in 1908, and following his donation he was elected a patron in 1912. His obituary, which appeared in BSSA volume 34, number 4, reports that he served as curator of geology for the Harvard University Museum for many years and made his greatest contribution to earth science research in the field of glacial geology.

The BSSA tribute tactfully characterizes Sayles's research interests in seismology: "Related to glacial geology were his interests in climatology and meteorology, and he sought relationships between them and seismology. He watched closely the incidence of earthquakes and the distribution of atmospheric pressure." Some additional hint of the discomfort that society leaders felt about Sayles's unorthodox scientific beliefs exists in the old correspondence.

Nevertheless, Sayles was elected president of SSA in 1928. He quickly declined but was pressed to change his mind; he reluctantly agreed but then firmly declined again, citing health and business pressures.

Robert Wilcox Sayles died 23 October 1942 at the age of 64. Thanks to his 1911 donation to the Seismological Society of America, SSA members now may access his obituary, as well as every BSSA article ever published, at http://www.seismosoc.org.

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