Donald Helfrecht
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What is your favorite Madison/campus memory?
I enjoyed walking through the campus. I was born and raised in Madison, so I was always nearby, but taking classes at the University got me out and about much more. Classes could span from the Red Gym to the Engineering Campus and back to Bascom. The campus was always an interesting place to walk through and provided a nice routine.

What has helped you achieve success in your career?
MG&E had a very strong link to the university, which directed me to apply there and helped greatly in starting my career with the company.

Outside of class, what experiences did you find most meaningful?
I enjoyed attending church at St. John’s Lutheran church on East Washington Ave. There was a young person’s group that drew from schools in the area. I met many friends who remained my friends for their entire lives.

What excites you about the future of Engineering?
It has changed so much with computers. Engineering used to rely so much more on drafting techniques, but modern processing capabilities mean a completely new game for engineers.

Besides engineering, do you have another passion you have pursued or would have liked to pursue given the time?
In my school days, I worked to help restore used toys that could be re-used by local groups. This built strong friendships with peers who helped to refurbish and sell the toys. More recently, I spent more than two decades on the Service Corp of Retired Executives advising new, small businesses in the Madison area. The non-profit organization currently meets in UW Research Park and maintains a good relationship with the surrounding groups.

Who was an influential peer/professor from your time at UW-Madison?
In the ROTC, many of my peers were quite successful. Everyone in the Madison program at the time went on to successfully receive an officer’s commission. Within the ECE Department, Professor Harold Peterson was an influential presence.

What are you most proud of in life? What is your greatest achievement?
My largest achievement was when I was superintendent of transmission at MGE. During that time, MGE built, constructed, operated and maintained its own high voltage, underground piped cabling system. It was the only such small utility to do so and required extensive and careful planning. At the end of it all, the network functioned and was well enough documented to be easily maintained.

What would be your advice to current students? What do you wish you had known?
Electrical Engineering has changed so much. Computers weren’t being used at all in the 1940’s. Education was very different now, but there’s no substitute for hard work. One of the most important things students can do is reach out for work experience and search for job opportunities.