George Swenson
Professor Emeritus, Electrical & Computer Engineering & Astronomy
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

What is your favorite Madison/campus memory?
He remembers the department like a big family with friendly, sociable people.

He was an instructor as a graduate student, which was very unusual. The course was Acoustics, which he developed himself at UW-Madison, including lab equipment and experiments. He later published a book based on this topic.

What has helped you achieve success in your career?
He thanks several peer and professor influences over the course of his education and career, specifically mentioning his master’s thesis supervisor at MIT. He also interacted with students at the math department when writing his thesis, which was an extension of a problem worked on by a math PhD student. He really enjoyed this interdisciplinary work, and believes that it helped him achieve success in his career.

Outside of class, what experiences did you find most meaningful?
I had many interests in many outdoor activities and wildlife explorations, which are mentioned later in the interview.

What excites you about the future of Engineering?
It is so exciting to contemplate autonomous motor vehicles and aircrafts, as well as automated air traffic systems.

Besides engineering, do you have another passion you have pursued or would have liked to pursue given the time?
I’m very interested in wildlife ecology. Birdwatching was a hobby of mine – I’ve travelled all over North America and built partnerships with Ornithologists. Being a radio astronomer was helpful in pursuing this passion, as telescopes are built in remote places with interesting wildlife. I also had a short teaching adventure in Alaska before I worked at Illinois, where I enjoyed mountain climbing and canoeing. I learned to be a pilot to aid my adventures for 55 years.

Who was an influential peer/professor from your time at UW-Madison?
Thomas Higgins, an Electrical Engineering professor was an influence during my studies at UW-Madison.

What are you most proud of in life? What is your greatest achievement?
There are several significant accomplishments that I’m proud of, and mentioned a couple. For one, he designed and built two large radio telescopes used for astronomy at the University of Illinois. Also, he is proud of his PhD thesis at UW-Madison in which he developed an analog computer that was capable of analyzing DC networks and solving certain partial differential equations. This was just before digital computers took over.
What would be your advice to current students? What do you wish you had known?
He mentioned that he had ‘handicaps’ during his life, and without them he would have gone even farther. He also mentioned that he developed early family obligations that interfered with professional obligations. As evident from his great accomplishments and adventures over his lifetime, if he could overcome obstacles then current students can too.