Memorial Resolution of the Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison
On the Death of Professor Emeritus Robert H. Dott, Jr.

Robert H. Dott Jr., a renowned teacher, scholar, author, mentor, and humanist who served 35 years on the faculty, died on February 27, 2018, in Madison, Wisconsin.

Bob was born in 1929 in Tulsa, Oklahoma, then known as the “Oil Capital of the World.” His father, Robert H. Dott Sr., was a noted petroleum geologist and later the Director of the Oklahoma Geological Survey. As a boy, Bob Jr. spent his summers at camps in Colorado and New Mexico, which began a life-long interest in the Rocky Mountains. He began college at the University of Oklahoma before following his grandfather and father to the University of Michigan, where he obtained a BS in 1950 and an MS in 1951.

Bob met his wife Nancy (an avid birder and botanist who died on January 13, 2018) at the University of Michigan, and they were married on February 1, 1951. Nancy and Bob were intellectually equal partners in their exploration and fascination of the natural world. Nancy provided the logistical and emotional support that allowed Bob to thrive as an academician. She and their children were typical participants on the field excursions and the 6-week long fieldcamps run in the western US. Moreover, Nancy would help other faculty spouses (and families) adjust to the camping life. In Madison, the Dotts always welcomed faculty, students, and visitors to their house that proudly featured the Cambrian/Ordovician boundary in their backyard.

He received a Ph.D. at Columbia University in 1956 under the guidance of Marshall Kay, a proponent of both the geosyncline concept and continental drift. Bob served two years of active duty in the U.S. Air Force, participating in several Arctic research projects, and then worked in the petroleum industry in Oregon and California for three years. He accepted a faculty position at the University of Wisconsin in 1958. Over his long career he became one of the best known and most widely respected figures in sedimentary geology. He possessed a talent for recognizing classically important problems, and a determination to address them in a meticulous and rigorous manner.

Early in his career Bob was a pioneer in integrating sedimentary geology with the nascent theory of plate tectonics. He also made seminal contributions to our understanding of sedimentation in deep waters adjacent to the continents, a phenomenon that had long been shrouded in mystery. Bob also had a longstanding fascination with a common but enigmatic feature of Midwestern geology: widespread quartz sandstone deposited ~500 million years ago, when Wisconsin lay south of the equator. Bob, his students, and his collaborators advanced a number of innovative ideas to help explain the origin of these important deposits. Among the most famous of these ideas is that Wisconsin was raked by cataclysmic storms, implying that long intervals of tropical boredom were interrupted by brief moments of tempestuous terror.

Starting in the 1960s Bob was also captivated by the history of geology, an interest that eventually blossomed into a parallel career. He began a longstanding association with the UW History of Science Department, taught a course on the “History of Geologic Thought”, and wrote 20 journal articles and numerous book reviews and editorials, along with editing two volumes on this vein. He embraced the view that geologists and historians need each other, and that science and history should be integrated rather than stand apart as two separate cultures. This enlightened perspective has never been more relevant than it is today, as we grapple with how to respond to the challenges of environmental change.
Bob was very active in professional societies, including SEPM, GSA, and IAS, and served as President of SEPM from 1981-1982. He was co-convener of the First SEPM Research Conference held in 1980 in the Baraboo Hills of Wisconsin, which was entitled “Cratonic Shelf Sedimentation: The Orthoquartzite-Carbonate Suite Revisited”. Bob was awarded Honorary Membership by SEPM in 1987, as well as the Twenhofel medal from SEPM in 1993. In 2001, he received the Laurence L. Sloss Award from the Sedimentary Geology Division of the GSA. Bob was also the national chair of the History of Geology Division of the GSA, and in 1995 received the Division's Mary C. Rabbit Award for exceptional scholarly contributions of fundamental importance to our understanding of the history of the geological sciences. In 2011, he received the American Geological Institute's Marcus Milling Legendary Geologist Medal, and was named a Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters Fellow.

In 1971 Bob authored a textbook with Roger Batten called Evolution of the Earth, that transformed the way in which the Earth history is taught. Previous books generally adopted a dry, encyclopedic approach that geologist Larry Sloss once derided as a “roll call of the ages.” Dott and Batten brought the Earth to life, with an emphasis on scientific reasoning and the question “how do we know?” It ultimately proved to be one of the most successful textbooks in the geosciences. Bob and coauthor John Attig also published the popular Roadside Geology of Wisconsin in 2004. This insightful and accessible volume stands as one of the best of the Roadside series, and has helped to build public appreciation of the state’s diverse natural resources.

Bob successfully mentored 5 dozen graduate students, half of whom received PhDs. Many of his former students became academic leaders in their own right, and pursued diverse research topics such as ancient sand dunes of the Colorado Plateau, tsunami deposits caused by asteroid or comet impact, the paleoclimate record of ancient soils, the geology of Mars, and others. Other Bob Dott students became leaders in the petroleum industry, in environmental consulting, and at governmental agencies, and one served as Director of the U.S. Geological Survey. The successive generations of Bob’s academic offspring number in the hundreds, and they have been a major force in shaping the field of sedimentary geology as we know it today.

In addition to his significant academic achievements, Bob was also known for his humility and good-natured interactions with colleagues and students. Although Bob retired in 1994, he continued to contribute to geology, the history of science, and the Department of Geoscience throughout his emeritus years, setting a memorable example for the generations following him.