

DailyCamera

'World authority' on watersheds dies at 94

By Laura Snider, For the Camera
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Gilbert White was a world-renowned geographer who dedicated his career to researching how to manage floods and other natural disasters.

But people who knew White, who died Thursday at the age of 94, recall his compassion before his scientific accolades.

"Gilbert was a wonderful, warm, caring person," said Jane Menken, who followed in White's footsteps as director of the Institute of Behavioral Science at the University of Colorado. "He was a rare combination of wonderful scientist and humanitarian. He was someone we relied on for his leadership, his wisdom and his friendship — and he always gave the office staff chocolate."

White came to CU in 1970 as a geography professor and director of the Institute of Behavioral Science, where, four years later, he founded the Natural Hazards Research and Applications Information Center. Under White's leadership, the center became the nation's leading resource for information about how people behave in disasters, according to CU.

White's extensive research on floods, dating back to his graduate-school days at the University of Chicago, earned him the nickname "the father of floodplain management."

He was particularly interested in how people could use his research to prevent damage and loss of life. In his 1942 doctoral dissertation, White wrote: "Floods are 'acts of God,' but flood losses are largely acts of man." Since then, White advocated that the best way to deal with floods is to get out of their way.

"I think the thing that characterized his work in the most critical way was his attempt to make scientific knowledge available and implementable by the people who need to use it," said Richard Jessor, another former director of the Institute of Behavioral Science.

And though Jessor has incredible respect for White's work, he said he will remember White's kindness with equal reverence.

"He is probably the most humane person that many of us have ever known," Jessor said. "He was very rare. To be with Gilbert makes you feel how far short you've achieved from what he represents."

Locally, what White represented was an unwavering commitment to protecting Boulder Creek, building smart and making sure residents were educated on an emergency flood plan. He is credited with keeping Boulder Creek wild by not allowing the Army Corps of Engineers to straighten it into a ditch and by lobbying for open space lands and parks, instead of buildings, on the banks. Most of the "Climb to Safety" signs in Boulder Canyon are partly White's doing as well.

White's many accomplishments were not limited to Boulder. He traveled to watersheds all over the globe to offer his floodplain expertise.

"He was a world authority," said Albert Bartlett, a retired CU professor. "Chances are he'd be in some distant country as he'd be here. He could be studying the Mississippi River or the Irrawaddy River in Burma."

As recently as 1999, White's work took him to the Middle East to help mediate water-supply issues among Israel, Jordan and the Palestinians.

White's work earned him a list of honors including the National Geographic Society's highest award, the Hubbard Medal; the United Nations' Sasakawa International Environmental Prize; and the Association of American Geographer's Lifetime Achievement Award.

"He so deserves our gratitude for living his life — for being the person he was," Menken said.

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