



Longtime Fairbanksan William W. "Bill" Mendenhall, Jr., passed away on Feb. 19, 2020, surrounded by his family and loved ones. He was just a few weeks shy of his 97th birthday.

Bill was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, on March 29, 1923, to William W. Mendenhall and Verna Sweetman Mendenhall. When Bill was 8, the family moved to Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, where they resided for the next eight years. In 1939, Bill's mother died unexpectedly as the family was preparing to move to Ithaca, New York, where Bill's father had accepted a position as director of Cornell United Religious Work. Bill was sent to attend Mount Hermon boarding school in Gill, Massachusetts, where he spent his final two years of high school. He graduated first in his class, participated in track and soccer and was voted the third worst punster in the school.

In 1941, Bill entered Cornell University to study civil engineering. The following year, he left school and joined the [Army Air Corps](#) to support the nation's efforts during [World War II](#). The Army Air Corps sent him to [New York University](#) to study meteorology, and Bill later served as a weather officer at Chanute Field. After V-E Day, Bill transferred to Muroc Air Base (now Edwards AFB) and received military training in photo interpretation, a subject in which he developed a lifelong interest. Bill was honorably discharged in 1946 and returned to Cornell to continue his engineering studies.

Seeking adventure, Bill and a college friend drove to Alaska in a panel truck in the summer of 1948. When they arrived in Fairbanks, Bill found summer work at the Fairbanks Exploration (F.E.) Company. He returned to college in the fall, graduating in December 1948 with a civil engineering degree and earning the highest GPA in the history of Cornell's engineering college. He returned to Fairbanks and worked for the F.E. Company as a "thaw assistant" and engineer.

In June 1950, the [Korean War](#) broke out and Bill was notified that he likely would be recalled to active duty. He decided to take a short trip to Europe with an Army buddy before being recalled. The two sailed on the *Mauritania II* from New York to Europe. While in France, Bill walked into a military personnel office to inquire if there were any job openings. The personnel officer replied there were not any posted positions but mentioned they could really use an engineer or surveyor. Bill spent the next three years in France working for the US Army Corps of Engineers on Marshall Plan reconstruction projects in Eastern France.

In April 1953, Bill returned to Fairbanks and worked for Philleo Engineering Service. Later that year, he met Nancy Harvey, a teacher at Nordale Elementary, on a blind date. They married in early 1954 and remained together for 62 years until Nancy's death in 2016. Together, they had three children: Bill, Susan and Jim.

Bill joined the University of Alaska civil engineering faculty in 1955. He took sabbatical leave in 1959 to return to Cornell University for graduate studies. The family drove from Fairbanks to Ithaca in a mango

green Volkswagen Microbus, stopping to visit friends and relatives as they traveled to the East Coast. Because funds were tight, at night each of the three children slept on a bench seat and Bill and Nancy slept on a piece of plywood laid across the top of the bench seats.

For his Master's thesis, Bill developed more accurate mapping procedures for high latitudes and was honored by the American Congress on Surveying and Mapping with the Wild Heerbrugg Award. Following completion of his graduate work in 1960, the family returned to Fairbanks in the Microbus and Bill resumed his teaching career at UAF.

During the summers, Mendenhall Aerial Surveys conducted extensive photogrammetric surveys throughout Alaska. Bill modified his 1946 Stinson Voyager to allow the installation of a large camera for aerial surveys. Bill performed much of the baseline mapping for Project Chariot, a U.S. Atomic Energy Commission proposal to construct an artificial harbor in northern Alaska. In recognition of Bill's considerable service to teaching and to the surveying community, the BLM Initial Point on Birch Hill was dedicated to William Mendenhall.

Bill held professional registrations as a civil engineer, land surveyor and mechanical engineer. Until shortly before his death, he held the earliest-issued active engineering registration number in Alaska.

As a professor of engineering, Bill was a master of the simple explanation - understandable, down to Earth, with examples tied to practical application. Throughout the years, countless students commented they were able to easily grasp concepts that initially appeared formidable. This simple approach to complex concepts led to what Bill often jokingly referred to as Mickey Mouse quizzes. A lifelong prankster, he would briefly slip off his traditional mortarboard during graduation processions and don Mickey Mouse ears.

Although he officially retired from UAF in 2005 with professor emeritus status, Bill maintained his interest in the college and its programs. For several years he continued to volunteer with surveying instruction and enjoyed being considered the world's oldest lab assistant.

Bill Mendenhall was a cornerstone of the community, and his contributions and recognitions are numerous. He was instrumental in helping to found UAF chapters of Tau Beta Pi, the national engineering honor society, Phi Kappa Phi, a national interdisciplinary honor society, and the Society of Women Engineers. In 2000, the national Tau Beta Pi organization honored Bill with its National Outstanding Advisor Award for that year.

In 2014, Bill and Nancy established a travel endowment for students in the College of Engineering and Mines. He maintained memberships and was actively involved in numerous professional societies, including the American Society of Civil Engineers, the National Society of Professional Engineers, the Alaska Society of Professional Land Surveyors, and others - a reminder to students and professionals that service to the profession is about dedication.

He was a member of Chi Epsilon, the civil engineering honor society, Sigma Xi, the national honor society for scientific research, and Phi Kappa Phi. Bill was named Fairbanks Engineer of the Year in 1986 and he was honored with the UAF Meritorious Service Award for 2014. In 2014, UAF dedicated the Mendenhall Classroom in Bill's honor, and members of the engineering faculty established an endowed scholarship in his name.

Bill served on the Alaska Board of Registration for Architects, Engineers, and Land Surveyors. He served on the Fairbanks North Star Borough platting board from 2001 until his death. He taught multiple short courses at the annual Alaska Surveying and Mapping Conference and was inducted into the Surveying and Mapping Hall of Fame in 1996.

Bill was the last surviving founding member of the Greater Fairbanks Community Hospital Foundation. With more than 50 years of service on the Hospital Board, Bill held trustee emeritus status and continued to attend board meetings and construction committee meetings whenever possible. He donated thousands of hours to GFCHC and he was deeply honored and proud to help establish and grow a first class community-owned hospital. It is fitting that Bill passed away in the hospital he so greatly loved and served.

Bill was a member and past president of Pioneers of Alaska Men's Igloo No. 4, and in 2008 he and Nancy were selected as Pioneer King and Queen Regent for Fairbanks. He was a longtime member of Fairbanks Sunrisers Rotary. He enjoyed attending Friday luncheons with the Fairbanks Interior GOP, where he was proud to lead the Pledge of Allegiance. He also was a member of Interior Alaska Sourdoughs and Quiet Birdmen.

Bill never tired of learning. On his 90th birthday he left his morning Rotary meeting early to attend continuing education classes in order to renew his engineering license. He greatly enjoyed OLLI (Osher Lifelong Learning Institute) classes in his later years. Bill always had a smile and a good word for all, and people were naturally drawn to his charm and genuine goodness. He generously donated his time, talents and money to help others. He was deeply loyal to his family, his friends, his community and his profession.

Though it is with sadness we mark Bill's passing, we also offer gratitude for a long life well lived. Bill was a special and unique person who gave tirelessly, never expecting praise or accolades in return. He will be missed but never forgotten for his role in leaving the Fairbanks and UAF community so much better as a result of his dedication and service.

Bill was predeceased by his mother, father, and stepmother (Ione Mack Mendenhall), his sisters Lib Milhan and Marjorie McCartney, as well as his beloved wife of 62 years, Nancy. He is survived by his three children: son Bill, daughter Susan West (Taylor) and son Jim (Carol Howarth), all of Anchorage. He also is survived by six grandchildren: Ryan West, Tara West, Erin Cravez (Aaron), Trent Mendenhall, Sierra Mendenhall, and Alexandra Mendenhall. Just two weeks before his death, Bill was thrilled to meet his first great-grandchild, Evie Cravez.

Following Nancy's death, Bill greatly enjoyed the friendship and companionship of Carol Gray, and she became an important and special part of his life in his final years.

A celebration of life will be held at 1 p.m. Sunday, March 29, 2020, in the Schaible Auditorium in the Bunnell Building on the UAF campus, followed by a reception in the Usibelli lounge of the new engineering building.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests a donation in Bill's name to one of the following: Greater Fairbanks Community Hospital Foundation, UAF Mendenhall Scholarship Fund, or the UAF William and Nancy Mendenhall Student Travel Fund.

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