Suomi's view of world changed us all

Terry Devitt

The death last month of Verner E. Suomi, the first man to envision the world through the eye of a satellite, was a milestone in the history of Wisconsin science.

The loss of a man whose genius was born in making complicated things simple and accessible leaves a hole in the fabric of the university, but it by no means marks the end of Suomi's enormous influence on the scientific enterprise here.

An experiment born in his work is now nearing its rendezvous with Jupiter; another project yields new ways to image the invisible constituents of the atmosphere; yet another is adrift in the Atlantic, an attempt to provide "ground truth" for new and critical measurements of the energy exchange between the ocean and the atmosphere.

Suomi's passing was a reminder of an influence that went beyond science to the human psyche, according to Dennis W. Thomson who, as a graduate student, experienced firsthand the methods and approach to science embodied by Verner Suomi.

The pictures from his cameras, positioned high above the Earth, changed forever the way humans viewed and think about the world, said Thomson who now directs the department of meteorology at Penn State.

— from determining the energy budget of a corn field to exploring atmospheres of planets — earned him awards such as the National Medal of Science, the American Meteorological Society's Charles Franklin Brooks Award, the Nevada Medal and the International Meteorological Organization Prize.

He was also the 103rd recipient of the Franklin Medal, an award previously given to Enrico Fermi, Albert Einstein, Orville Wright and Thomas Edison.

He molded UW-Madison's Space Science and Engineering Center (SSEC) into a premiere center of satellite meteorology that now employing 190 people and attracts scholars from around the world.

"Professionally, Vern Suomi was a giant, a superman," said William L. Smith, SSEC associate director. His "intellectual genius was intimately connected to his unique vision of simple and elegant solutions to important and often complex problems."

Suomi, said Smith, was known as a generous and compassionate father figure to students and colleagues alike. On the occasion of advising an indigent undergraduate in the 1960s, he reputedly paid the student's tuition out of his own pocket.

Born Dec. 6, 1915, at Eveleth, Minn. He received a bachelor's degree from Winona Teachers College, Winona, Minn., in 1938 and worked for several years as a junior-high mathematics and science teacher.

He received his doctorate in meteorology in 1953 from the University of Chicago and in 1948, at the invitation of Reid Bryson, he joined the faculty here as the second member of the meteorology department.

In 1964, he served as chief scientist for the U.S. Weather Bureau. In 1965, with the late Robert Parent, he founded the SSEC with $500,000 in seed money from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

His death on July 30 at 79 was deeply felt by the university community, said Provost John D. Wiley. "Verner Suomi was a giant of modern science. His inventions were simple and elegant, and their consequences are ubiquitous. Anyone looking at a satellite image of the Earth on the evening weather is looking at the product of a rare mind."