

Leif Johan Sverdrup

Engineer of Bridges

1924 - 1928

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Born in Norway, Leif Sverdrup immigrated to the United States at the age of sixteen, when he boarded the Kristianiafjord and left Norway for America. Arriving in New York Dec. 7, young Sverdrup took a train to Minneapolis and his Uncle George's home. Two years later, he had earned enough money to begin Augsburg College in Minneapolis. He graduated in May 1918 with a Bachelor of Arts degree and later that summer, enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army.

Sverdrup enlisted in the US Army at Fort Snelling, Minnesota on 26 July 1918. He was posted to Camp Devens, Massachusetts for training with the 36th Division.

While there he took advantage of a regulation waiving the normal five-year residency requirement for members of the armed services seeking to take out US citizenship. Sverdrup formally took the oath as a citizen in Boston on 30 September 1918. The US Army then sent him to the Field Artillery's Officer Training Center at Camp Zachary Taylor, near Louisville, Kentucky, where he was commissioned as a second lieutenant on 18 January 1919. The war having ended, Sverdrup was immediately placed in the inactive reserves. He was honorably discharged after nominally serving two five-year terms on 17 January 1929.

Sverdrup decided to become an engineer and enrolled in a civil engineering course at the University of Minnesota in 1919, where he first met Professor John Ira Parcel, his indeterminate structures professor who would later become his business partner. During the 1921 Spring break he returned to Norway, accompanying his parents on a short holiday in Germany. He graduated with his Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering degree in June 1921. After graduation, he took the first job he was offered – bridge inspector with the Minnesota State Highway Department. He spent a year in that job before moving to the Missouri State Highway Department in 1922 where he started as a bridge designer.

His first major project involved supervising the construction of a bridge for U.S. Route 50 in Missouri over the Gasconade River. During 1923 he became resident engineer for the department's Gasconade River Bridge project at Mount Sterling. Around this time, frustrated by Americans who pronounced his name "leaf" instead of "lafe", he started calling himself "Jack".

Succeeding Chester Mann as Engineer of Bridges on January 1, 1924, Sverdrup oversaw completion of four Missouri River bridges. His bureau also revised the standard bridge specifications, and developed a Manual of Bridge Construction for the project engineers and bridge inspectors.

In September 1925, Sverdrup was promoted to Assistant to the Chief Engineer, with Vaughn W. Enslow filling in as Acting Engineer of Bridges.

In 1928, Sverdrup joined with his former University of Minnesota engineering professor John Ira Parcel in the formation of Sverdrup & Parcel, a civil engineering firm with a speciality field of bridges. Parcel had tenure at Minnesota for a long time and was reluctant to sever his ties completely, but eventually, he decided to join the new company, taking an unpaid sabbatical from the university for one year. Sverdrup owned 60% and Parcel 40% of the new firm, which opened its doors on 1 April 1928. The company's headquarters was located in St. Louis, Missouri.

Sverdrup & Parcel's first contract was for the design of a bridge over the Missouri River at Hermann, Missouri, for which it received a fee of \$33,000. While at the Missouri State Highway Department Sverdrup met D. C. Wolfe and E. R. Grant, and he asked them if they would join the company. Sverdrup subsequently borrowed design engineer Brice R. Smith from Missouri's leading supplier of bridge components, Stupp Bros. Bridge & Iron Co. By 1936, all three would become partners in the firm.

Initially the young firm struggled, with no contracts for major jobs lined up after the Hermann bridge, and by early 1929 it faced insolvency. However neither Sverdrup nor Parcel wished to let well-trained employees go, something which became an informal company policy over the years.

A \$17,000 fee for the design and supervision of the construction of the 7th Street Trafficway Bridge in Kansas City, Kansas, and then a \$32,000 fee for the Fairfax Bridge over the Missouri River helped Sverdrup & Parcel weather the worst of the Great Depression. The subsequent New Deal involved a major program of public works. Sverdrup & Parcel applied to the Public Works Administration for the design commissions for the Washington Bridge over the Missouri River at Washington, Missouri and the Hurricane Deck Bridge over the Lake of the Ozarks in Camden County, Missouri. Sverdrup & Parcel was awarded both contracts, valued at \$42,000 and \$43,000 respectively.

During 1934, it was awarded the contract for what is now known as the Amelia Earhart Bridge over the Missouri River between Atchison, Kansas and Buchanan County, Missouri. Sverdrup & Parcel was now becoming involved in projects further afield. A project to generate electricity from tidal power at Passamaquoddy Bay brought Sverdrup into contact with Captain Hugh J. (Pat) Casey of the US Army Corps of Engineers, the chief engineer on the project. The project folded when federal funding was withdrawn in 1936, but Sverdrup and Casey became friends. In 1940, Sverdrup was appointed to the board of inquiry that investigated the collapse of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge.

While still a civilian, in 1941 Sverdrup and his company were commissioned by the US Army's Engineering Department to oversee the construction of a chain of air bases for a route from the United States to Australia and one to the Philippines. After the United States had entered the war, Sverdrup was appointed colonel in the Army Corps of Engineers in 1942 and was in active service until the end of 1945; as a member of General Douglas MacArthur's staff, he rose to the rank of major general and commander of the Engineer Construction Command in the Pacific Southwest.

When MacArthur pinned the Distinguished Service Medal to Sverdrup's chest in 1945, he described him as "the engineer soldier at his best". He oversaw the construction of over 200 airstrips and airfields on Pacific islands, as well as military roads and bridges, as well as hospitals, docks, and other military installations.

He earned military citations and medals from England, Australia and other nations, including Norway's esteemed Order of St. Olaf. After the war, he reactivated the 102nd (Ozark) Division of the U.S. Army Reserve.

For his service as commanding general of the division from 1947 to 1958, the Army added an Oak Leaf Cluster to his Distinguished Service Medal.

Sverdrup died in 1976 and was buried with full military honors in Valhalla Cemetery in Hanley Hills, Mo.

A detailed history of firm of Sverdrup & Parcel can be accessed at:

Company-Histories.com Sverdrup Corporation

<https://www.company-histories.com/Sverdrup-Corporation-Company-History.html>

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