Remmers Lecture Series is the Talk of the Town

When Walter Remmers, MetE’23, talks about the old days, he describes the campus in monastic terms. It was a “chiselered” place, a closely-knit, isolated community of men. Students had little communication with the world beyond Rolla. Radios were rare; cars were even rarer. “You got off the train at Rolla in August,” Remmers says, “and you didn’t go home until Christmas.”

Conditions were ideal for churning out fine engineers, says Remmers, a retired Union Carbide executive who now owns a cattle ranch near St. James, Mo. But it left many graduates unschooled in the social graces they would later need to function in polite society.

“When I was a student,” Remmers says, “the graduates left the campus as well-trained, well-educated engineers. But when it came to the rest of the world, they were a bunch of country bumpkins.” As were some faculty members. Remmers recalls one professor who attended a black-tie affair in all the proper attire—except for his shoes. “He had on a pair of the yellowest bricklayer’s boots you’d ever seen,” Remmers says.

This lack of refinement led Remmers and his wife Miriam to sponsor an annual lecture series on campus that would expose students to prominent world leaders and decision-makers. Today the Remmers Special Artist/Lecture Series is one of the most popular events on campus. The series has brought luminaries to campus every year since 1979, when former President Gerald Ford was the series’ inaugural speaker. Other guest lecturers and performers include former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, ex-U.N. Ambassador Jean Kirkpatrick, TV commentator Charles Kuralt, violinist Shlomo Mintz, opera diva Anja Moffo and pianist Leonard Pennario, who has appeared twice. The most recent lecturer, former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, spoke in January (see “Campus News,” February 1993).

Remmers’ generosity in creating the lecture series was one reason the campus honored him with the Chancellor’s Medal at spring commencement—the 70th anniversary of his graduation and one day after his 90th birthday.

The idea for the lecture series was conceived as the Remmerses were driving to campus from their Tucson, Ariz., home. “I was telling Miriam about the need for some kind of humanistic program to supplement students’ rigorous technical studies,” Remmers says. He thought it might be a good idea to sponsor a lecture series that would bring world leaders to the campus. “But Miriam, being very much interested in music”—she studied piano at Wellesley and Mount Holyoke colleges in Massachusetts—“got in her part and said, ‘Not only speakers, but also musicians.’”

Although the campus and the people of Rolla may know him best for the lecture series, Remmers has made a name for himself in business as well. His career began in metallurgy, then switched to sales before leading to upper management and corporate leadership.

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Remmers started at the U.S. Bureau of Mines’ Rolla Research Center, where he worked while pursuing his master’s degree. He then joined the mechanical engineering faculty at Washington University in St. Louis and in 1929 joined Western Electric Co.’s Hawthorne Works in Cicero, Ill., as a metallurgist. There he worked on a variety of applied research projects. Remmers participated and held patents in the manufacture of magnetic materials for some important developments such as the loading coils that made transcontinental telephone service possible. He also worked on the development of magnetic parts for “movietone,” the process by which soundtracks were put directly on the movie film.

In the late 1930s, Remmers became a salesman for Union Carbide Corp.’s mining and metallurgy division. He rose through the ranks to become president of two

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