

HISTORICAL SOCIETY NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

ROBERT WATSON SCHMERTZ

ROBERT WATSON SCHMERTZ, architect, teacher, troubadour, and for many years a member of this Society, died on June 7 after a long illness. He had suffered a stroke ten days previously, just after completing work on a book of his songs which is to be published soon.

Bob, as he was affectionately known to thousands, was born in Pittsburgh on March 4, 1898. He attended Peabody High School, and graduated in architecture in 1921 at Carnegie Institute of Technology, now Carnegie-Mellon University. He was associated with Ingham and Boyd before becoming a member of the firm of Fisher and Schmertz, later heading the firm of Schmertz, Erwin and Associates, retiring in 1970. He had been a practicing architect for more than thirty-five years, and had taught at Carnegie Tech for more than thirty years before retiring in 1965.

Highly respected as professor and architect, Mr. Schmertz was more widely known as a song writer, his compositions having been featured and recorded by such greats as Burl Ives and Tennessee Ernie Ford. One of his children's songs was long used nationally on a principal television show. But success never went to his head or caused him to take himself too seriously.

As an architect, Mr. Schmertz designed some fine buildings, many of them homes. He never forgot — nor as a teacher allowed his students to forget — that buildings were for people, not the other way around.

But Bob Schmertz never let himself become so engulfed in teaching or architecture that he forgot to sing. From student days when he wrote musical shows for the school, he continued his minstrelsy for pleasure, and only later for profit. It may not have been an intention; song was within him, and he could no more refrain from singing than could a robin or a lark.

For more than two decades he and his friends have from time to time brightened the spirits and enlightened the minds of the Society's attendants with programs of folk and folk-type music, more and more of his own composing.

Bob Schmertz had an amazing mastery of words and adeptness at fitting them and music together. We shall never cease to wonder at

his versatility, from the tender "Christmas Song for Gretchen" to the ribald "Monongahela Sal" and "Ladies, Beware of an Architect." He was a master of whimsy. Who can forget his Christopher Gist, who "looked mighty dapper in a coonskin capper and a buckskin negligee," or Pietro Massimi's party, to which he instructed his wife to

Send out the RSVP's

Invite only those who have evening clothes,
And well-rooted family trees.

Although Mr. Schmertz often poked fun at the religious establishment — equally at the various sects and groups — it was not because of enmity at religion itself. He simply could not subscribe — as many others cannot — to any of the standard brands. In truth, he was deeply religious and deeply troubled. He wrestled hard with its problems and never gave up the search for truth.

But perhaps the most outstanding characteristic of Bob Schmertz was his love for and understanding of people. He rejoiced with the happy and sorrowed with the sad. He looked very deeply into the human heart, and poked fun at our foibles. He sought the good. And if he found evil, he neither tried to blame nor excuse, but covered it over with a mantle of love and laughter.

In "The Knight of Small Renown" he told the story of everyman — the gap between our hopes and our achievement. Bob sang of human happiness and tragedy:

Alas, poor Knight of Small Renown,
But when he saw the stars,
He softly sang, and in his dreams
He journeyed to the wars.

For all his achievements and his losses, Robert Schmertz was a man who never ceased to dream. There is nothing finer I could wish for any of us than that our lives could touch so many people as did his, and for so much of joy and good.

GEORGE SWETNAM