

Charles G. “Gil” Mull

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The geologist whose exploration of northern Alaska geology helped build the foundation for Alaska’s oil and gas industry has passed.

Charles Gilbert Mull died at age 86 from complications of Parkinson’s Disease in Salt Lake City on October 4, 2021. He is survived by his wife, Yvonne, son David Mull, daughter Christina Beckmann, and his grandchildren Atigun Mull, Parker Mull, and Jack Beckmann.

He also leaves behind scores of peers and friends who benefitted from his leadership, teamwork, and mentorship as they built their own careers in Alaska’s globally significant oil and gas industry. Alaska’s North Slope has produced more than 18 billion barrels of oil since the discovery of the Prudhoe Bay oil field, with oil production becoming an important engine of economic growth in Alaska.

Described by friends and colleagues as “a giant among us” with an “encyclopedic memory” of Alaskan geologic outcrops, Gil played a key role in the discovery of Prudhoe Bay, a world-class, Persian Gulf-sized oilfield that is the largest in North America. The discovery made global headlines, reshaped the Alaskan economy, and was crucial to building American energy independence during the oil shocks of the 1970s. It injected much-needed income into Native Alaskan villages, and led to the creation of Alaska’s Permanent Fund, a trust fund has grown to almost $80 billion, and pays annual dividends of over $1,000 to every Alaskan resident.

Gil’s proudest geologic discovery came not long after the Prudhoe Bay discovery. While guiding another geologist on Alaska’s North Slope, the two men noticed rock formations that his colleague suspected were caused by plate tectonics—a theory that had only recently come into wide acceptance. Two years later, as Gil stood on the flank of Alaska’s remote Mount Doonerak, he noticed a distinctive rock outcropping. He realized it provided dramatic evidence of “hundreds of kilometers of crustal shortening.” It was a discovery that helped clarify the geologic history of a huge swath of northern Alaska and further bolstered plate tectonics theory. Gil described his discovery using one of his favorite phrases: “mind boggling.”

Born in 1935 in Edwardsville, Illinois, Gil’s father was a chemical engineer and his mother was a school teacher. His upbringing was shaped by his parents’ experiences enduring the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Gil moved to Colorado in 1947, there beginning his love with the Southwest for its rocks – rich in geologic stories – and the skiing. He and his sister Marilyn inherited a collecting gene from their father, with Gil becoming particularly fascinated with southwest Native American blankets and basketry. As a sophomore at the University of Colorado in 1954, the chemistry major found himself gazing out of the windows of an odorous chemistry lab, entranced by the beauty of the Flatirons. He longed for the outdoors and changed his major to geology as a way to get there.

While earning his master’s degree, Gil found summer jobs in the Southwest as a geological field assistant with Richfield Oil Corporation, a small oil and gas company. He spent months mapping Utah’s unique geology not too

far from the same areas that his own father had worked as a chemical engineer during Moab's uranium boom. Richfield hired him after graduation and sent him to Alaska in 1961, and eventually on to the North Slope in 1963. It was there that he and his field partner confirmed what only a few others before them had suspected: the area held tremendous oil and gas potential. They suggested that drilling an exploratory well at Prudhoe Bay would be a good idea.

Gil spent much of his 40-plus year career in remote northern Alaska wilderness. During summer field mapping seasons, he lived in an 8- by 10-foot canvass tent, slowly piecing together a framework of the subsurface from the rocks he studied. Hearing that his company might give him a big pay raise to move to Houston and run operations from an office in a skyscraper, he dodged the office job and took a lower-paying job with the United States Geological Survey instead. That was followed by positions with the Alaska Department of Natural Resources' Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys, and later, Alaska's Division of Oil and Gas. Throughout his career, he authored or co-authored an estimated 60 technical papers and maps on North Slope geology and was a mentor to dozens of geology graduate students at the University of Alaska – Fairbanks. He also took spectacular photographs of Alaska's remote beauty, with many of them featured prominently in publications such as Alaska Magazine.

When he wasn't studying Northern Alaska geology, he was building relationships in Anchorage. He met a young nurse with strawberry blonde hair after a day of skiing at Alyeska Resort. That nurse was named Yvonne, and she would become his wife. As a young couple, they moved to Denver, Colorado and then to Santa Monica and Redwood City, California. By the time they returned to Anchorage a few years later, they had two young children, Christina and David. Gil took over the entire basement of their house in Anchorage with his collections of vintage books, maps, Navajo art, and rock. Yvonne patiently accepted his relentless collecting, which continued over the entirety of their 54 years of marriage.

Gil and Yvonne retired to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 2003. In his home office he maintained a collection of tribal art along with a plethora of old core samples, thousands of Kodachrome projector slides from his field days, books on the history of Prudhoe Bay, and hand-drawn geological sketches of the Southwest that resembled art more than science.

The geological community of Alaska and beyond consider Gil a legend and have long held on to photos and stories of the man who, rock by rock, permanently wove himself into the Alaskan landscape. But it was not just his work ethic or unrivalled understanding of northern Alaska geology that built his reputation – it was his curious, friendly, mellow, and supportive attitude toward all he met. Gil was loved and respected by all who knew him and is sorely missed.

A celebration of life is planned for December 17, 2021 in Santa Fe, New Mexico.