Geo-Strata

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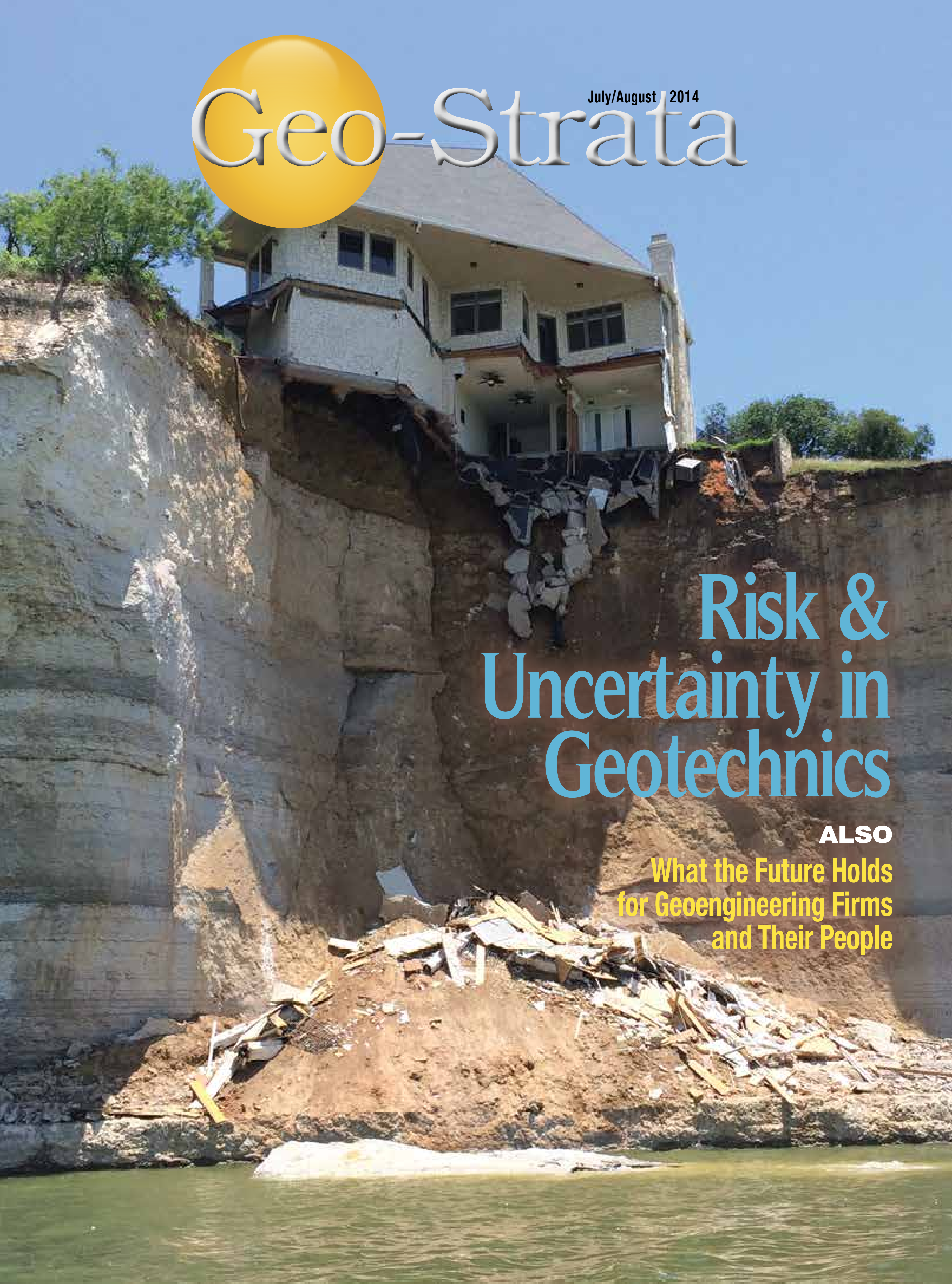

Risk & Uncertainty in Geotechnics

ALSO

What the Future Holds for Geoengineering Firms and Their People

Bram McClelland and Personal Diplomacy

Bramlette "Bram" McClelland, D. Eng., PE, was an amazing man: a pioneering geoprofessional whose firm – now part of Fugro – specialized in subsurface exploration at the ocean floor. He was a no-nonsense individual with extraordinary vision. He not only was a founder of what today is ASFE/The Geoprofessional Business Association, he created Organizational Peer Review based on a model his firm's accounting staff followed per requirements of the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants. In 1999, celebrating its 125th anniversary, *Engineering News-Record* identified the 125 most significant construction-industry innovations since 1874. ASFE was the only association cited, for its ground-breaking (and still robust) Peer Review program.

Given such accomplishments and his imposing presence, Bram was a formidable individual — a true leader. That's why so many people attending an early 1970s ASFE conference were taken aback when Bram announced from the podium that he was about to share a case history with them. But not just any case history. This was going to be a case history about a mistake. And not just any mistake. It would be about *his* mistake – a personal failure – something no one else had had the courage to talk about in public. Bram would be the first, in hopes that his sharing would be of value to his fellow members. In true Bram fashion, the lessons to be learned from that case history are as fresh and relevant today as they were almost 40 years ago. Even more important: Bram's willingness to share encouraged others to follow his lead, resulting in 100 published ASFE/GBA case histories that are extraordinarily valuable for those who need to understand what the risks are and how to confront them.

As Bram related the story, and as best as I can remember, a first-time client – a major organization – retained McClelland Engineers to perform a somewhat complex geotechnical service. His staff completed the service without incident and the firm submitted an invoice. Thirty days passed, no payment, a situation that recurred after 60 days, then 90 days, and – finally – 120 days. That's when Bram got involved and decided to turn the bill over to his attorneys. They were successful and, within a month or so, they reported that the client had paid in full. But they also noted that the organization's CEO was angry. In his opinion, McClelland had not performed well at all; he was paying the bill solely to avoid litigation. However, he said, his company would never deal with McClelland again.

Bram said his reaction was somewhat cavalier. He believed his staff had performed well and the client CEO was wrong to say it had not. It was too bad his firm was losing a client, but some relationships just don't work out.

About a year went by. McClelland was once again engaged for a project being taken forward by the same client company, except – in this case – it was as a subcontractor to the civil-engineering firm that dealt with the client company directly. The project went forward without a hitch, until the civil-engineering firm sent its final invoice. The client's attorney let the civil-engineering firm know that the client was totally dissatisfied with the services of McClelland Engineering and was not about to pay for them.

Bram became enraged, but he was smart enough to restrain his anger. He discussed the best course of action with colleagues and realized that he was the guilty party, for failing to apply what he called "personal diplomacy" after the client passed the 60-day mark. What he said, in his highly refined Texas drawl, was, more or less: "This is a client that was known for always paying its bills. In this case, it wasn't paying. Why? Rather than getting an answer, we kept sending bills and ultimately sent a lawyer. If I had merely called the CEO and asked for an appointment – maybe even offered to take him to lunch – I would have learned what the problem was, and I would have had the opportunity to have apologized for what we did wrong, or to explain why he was mistaken about our performance."

But that didn't happen, and Bram was faced with the same kind of legal situation he had created for the client organization, making the CEO even angrier about whatever it was that had gone wrong. "We are in the people business," Bram said, and – when it comes to confronting geoprofessional risks – wiser words have still not been uttered. The lesson cost Bram a small fortune, in the form of the business he did not gain from what could have been a client for life, worth millions of dollars to the firm over time, in fees, referrals, and opportunities. He shared the lesson freely. And after the audience got over its shock, my goodness how loud the applause.

AUTHOR

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