

Ohio hopes to save Richter scale developer legacy

LISA CORNWELL, Associated Press



CINCINNATI (AP)

-- Fans of the Ohio native credited with developing the Richter scale of rating earthquake magnitude want to be sure that Charles Richter's name and legacy remain prominent in history.

They are concerned because many reports about earthquakes no longer mention the scale developed in the early 1930s and just refer to magnitudes in general, as newer measurement scales have been developed.

"Younger generations may never know about his contributions," said Anne Jantzen, a co-founder of the Friends of Charles F. Richter Society.

The group of historians and Richter supporters, joined by local government and parks officials, has established an annual celebration of his life near his southwest Ohio birthplace. This year's celebration of Charles F. Richter Day will be held Friday on his birthday at the site of an Ohio Historical Marker previously dedicated to him in Butler County, about 25 miles north of Cincinnati. A county road roundabout there will be dedicated as the Richter Roundabout.

"We want to be sure future generations know who he was and what he accomplished," Jantzen said, adding that Richter supporters hope to eventually get

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the day recognized statewide.

Richter, with input from colleagues including Beno Gutenberg and Harry Wood, has been credited with developing the method of rating earthquake magnitude through measuring the shock waves produced. The physicist and seismologist published the mathematical calculation in 1935 while at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena.

Other scales measuring earthquakes in various ways have since been developed, but Richter's idea of a magnitude scale brought the study of earthquakes a big step forward, said Michael Blanpied, associate coordinator for earthquake hazards at the U.S. Geological Survey.

"Providing a means by which to measure, classify, compare and even discuss earthquakes among scientists led to great improvements in our understanding of their origins," Blanpied said.

He said that within the seismology field, Richter's contributions "will never fade."

Richter, who died in 1985, was born in the village of Overpeck in 1900. The great-great-grandson of Amish pioneers spent his early life there before moving with his mother, sister and grandfather to Los Angeles. He was born Charles Kinsinger, but his father left when he was a child and Richter later took his mother's maiden name.

Susan Hough, a California seismologist and author of the 2007 biography "Richter's Scale: Measure of an Earthquake, Measure of a Man," describes Richter as a "character" who had difficulty interacting socially and may have had Asperger's syndrome. The developmental disorder affects the ability to communicate and socialize, among other things.

"He wrote that 'living' was a natural skill for most people, but for him it was a learned one," Hough said.

She said Richter was very complex and "more of an outside-the-box thinker who didn't fit the mold" of most scientists. He wrote poetry and he and his wife were avid nudists who often attended nudist camps.

He also worked extensively to promote earthquake safety, trying to ensure that buildings were as safe from earthquakes as possible.

Richter never had children to help preserve his legacy, "so now we're his family," said Jantzen, adding that the need to ensure he is not forgotten goes beyond just preserving his place in history.

"His ability to overcome difficulties and achieve greatness can be an inspiration to others," she said.

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