Charter ATA Member Robert L. Addis • 1923-2005

Robert L. Addis, one of the few remaining charter members of the American Translators Association and a key figure in the organization’s early growth and development, died of a heart ailment at his home in Woodside, California, on November 7, 2005. He would have turned 83 years old in January 2006.

Mr. Addis was also one of an ever-shrinking group of so-called “translator-merchants,” men and women who were active translators throughout their lives, but also combined their language skills and talents with business acumen to establish prosperous and durable translation service companies.

Robert Lester Addis was born in Mt. Vernon, New York, on January 31, 1923, graduated from A. B. Davis High School (today Mt. Vernon High School), and was admitted to Yale University before his 17th birthday. He graduated from Yale in three years and was inducted into the United States Army. Because of his outstanding language skills, he was assigned to Army Intelligence and served in the European Theater of Operations between 1943 and 1945.

After the war, he served several years in the U.S. Diplomatic Corps, and then found his way to California, where in the next five or so years he literally roamed all over the state, taking odd jobs that ranged from fruit picker to corporate employee. He settled down with his wife Louise in the mid-1950s in Menlo Park (in the heart of what would one day become “Silicon Valley”). As Mr. Addis related it, it was in the kitchen of his house that he started a translation bureau in 1957 (the term “translation agency” would not come into use until a decade later), called simply “Addis Translations.” Although the focus of his education had been languages and the liberal arts, Addis had a natural bent for and a keen understanding of business. Translation in the mind of Robert Addis was not only about language and writing, but also a business, and he approached it as such in 1957 and maintained that same approach until the end of his career.

He was an avid believer in advertising and never once in his many years as a translator-businessman did he ever hesitate about spending money for advertising. Mr. Addis advertised anywhere and everywhere he believed he could get business: newspapers, magazines, professional journals, radio, direct mail (and eventually the Internet), and any other medium that could deliver his message. In addition, he was quick to adapt to new technology, and was literally always first in line to buy a new product that meant more efficiency. When the electric typewriter became the instrument of production, Addis purchased one immediately; when the “Selectric” replaced the electric typewriter, Addis was there to buy this new replacement (also purchasing every ball typing element he could lay his hands on), and when the first “Selectric” came out with memory capability, Addis was one of the early customers. And the same applied to the copying machine, the fax machine, the computer, the toll-free 800 number, the acceptance of credit cards as a method of payment, etc., etc. However, he drew the line at so-called translation-assistance tools, for those, in his view, were anathema to the process of translation.

Mr. Addis joined the ATA in early 1960, and very soon thereafter became involved in its development. In 1962, he established ATA’s second chapter, the California Chapter of the American Translators Association (“CalChapATA”), which eventually evolved into the Northern California Translators Association. He produced an endless flurry of little newsletters called “CalChap Notes” and served a term as ATA’s vice-president (today, the vice-president of ATA is called the president-elect). In 1972, he became editor of the then-newsletter of the ATA, called “ATA News,” and promptly re-named it The ATA Chronicle. Although his editorship lasted for only three issues, the name The ATA Chronicle continued on and even outlived him. It was also around that time that Mr. Addis became ATA’s biggest, if not only, advertiser, and the full-page advertisements of his translation service company appeared in all sorts of ATA publications for almost two decades. To many observers of the ATA scene, it appeared that Mr. Addis enjoyed certain privileges from his status as the association’s biggest, and only, advertiser: his
often acerbic and extremely cutting criticism of association policy and officials was more times than not totally absent any official rebuttal, and worse, censorship.

But missing from Addis’ criticism of ATA policy was vehemence and anger. He much preferred sarcasm, facetiousness, and most of all wit. He saved his best for what the ATA then called the “accreditation” program (today the “certification” program). Mr. Addis referred to it constantly as the “accreditation rental program,” taking his clue from the fact that ATA referred to the obtainment of an accreditation certificate as a “credential” and “achievement,” but invalidated the certificate (and therefore, in the view of Mr. Addis, both the “credential” and the “achievement”) if the holder ceased his or her membership in the association. Mr. Addis, who himself translated from Russian, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian, and was a demanding taskmaster, was openly contemptuous of the entire program, from the very concept of testing translators to the methods employed by the association for testing, to the examiners themselves. He was equally critical of the association’s policy of comparing translation to other professions and then attempting to establish parameters for translation that worked for other professions, but were totally foreign to translation. “Translation sits in its own category and does not withstand comparisons to other professions,” he often said and wrote.

Mr. Addis’ career as a translator and translation businessman took a quantum leap around 1967 as a result of two significant events. He landed the account of the Lawrence-Livermore Laboratories, and began a long-standing relationship with a British translation company called Express Translation Service, which specialized in the translation of scientific and medical documentation, and to whom he subcontracted a portion of the enormous volume of work he was receiving from Lawrence-Livermore.

From that relationship ensued an informal partnership called Ad-Ex (obviously derived from “Addis” and “Express,” but Mr. Addis liked to tell others that it came from the Latin “to” and “from,” as “into” and “from” a foreign language). By the early 1970s, this informal partnership became a loose confederation of Ad-Ex companies, with units in the U.K., Japan, New York, and California. Eventually, Mr. Addis changed the name of his company to “Ad-Ex Worldwide.”

Mr. Addis’ approach to the business of translation was predicated on providing the highest quality of writing and communication, and every translation, whether done by him or one of his in-house associates or a member of his far-flung staff of freelance translators, went through an arduous editing and verification process. And it was this process and his unwavering belief that quality translation was a valuable and unique communications product that led him to demand—and get—some of the most handsome fees known to the industry at the time.

But what Mr. Addis was incapable of doing was to hold back the tide of change that began to affect the world of industrial translation, and particularly the U.S. translation market in the very late 1990s and at the turn of the century. For the first time in his long career, Mr. Addis was forced to admit to a few confidants that 2001 was the worst year he had ever experienced. The “globalization” or “internetization” or “Wal-Martization” of translation had impacted what had once been his impregnable translation fortress. But he continued to survive until advancing age and ill health closed the doors on a long, successful, and remarkable career.

Mr. Addis is survived by his wife, Louise, and a daughter, Vanessa.

This obituary was written by Bernie Bierman, a long-time colleague and business associate of Robert Addis. Mr. Bierman, an ATA member since 1961, has served the association in various capacities for over 30 years. He has written over 200 articles about the U.S. translation scene, and is the author of A Translator-Warrior Speaks: A Personal History of the American Translators Association (1959-1970).