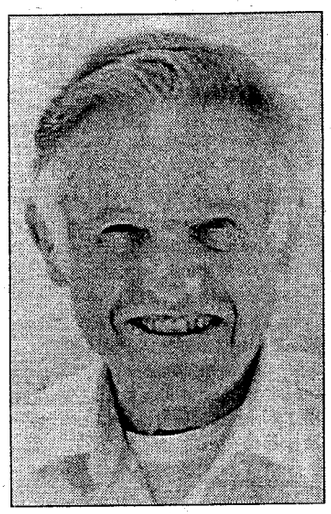
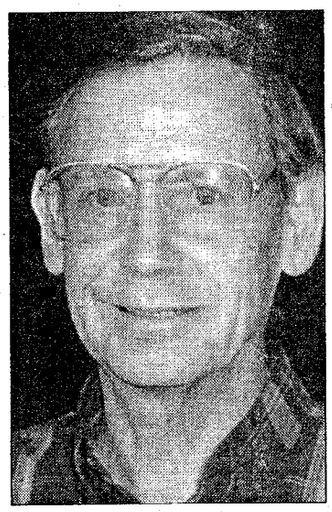
Menlo Park, Calif.





Art Ford, left, and Chet Wrucke are continuing research in Alaska in spite of USGS layoff.

Laid-off geologists publish ground-breaking work on Alaskan earthquake fault

By MARION SOFTKY

Geologists Art Ford of Menlo Park, Chet Wrucke of Portola Valley and Bela Csejtey of Palo Alto will have to pay their own way to Alaska this summer to continue research that may change scientific understanding of the size — and danger — of an earthquake fault longer than the infamous San Andreas Fault in California.

The three scientists are unemployed; they are victims of the RIF (reduction in force) that rocked the U.S. Geological Survey in 1995. In Menlo Park alone, almost one-third of the Geologic Division — more than 100 people — were removed, demoted or reassigned in a major downsizing and reorganization.

While the local trio will receive some support, including a helicopter, from the National Park Service, they will have to pay airfare and some of their expenses in order to continue their ground-breaking work, says Dr. Wrucke, a 40-year employee of the Geological Survey and a World War II veteran.

A technical paper describing their work on the Denali Fault was recently recognized as one of the most newsworthy papers to be given at the Hawaii meeting of the Geological Society of America in May.

"The Denali Fault in Central Alaska: Fact or Partly Fiction" questions the general understanding that the fault really runs all 800 miles from Canada across Alaska into the Bering Sea. "There's no question it exists in Canada and eastern Alaska. We think it may end in the (Denali National) Park," said Dr. Wrucke.

National Park Service Geologist Phil Brease added, "This is one of the most important geologic discoveries made recently in Denali National Park."

The discovery that the Denali Fault is possibly much shorter than previously thought means re-evaluating current theories about the geologic evolution of Alaska, Dr. Wrucke said. In addition, it suggests that earthquake dangers from the fault are also not as great as once thought. "This may help explain the fact that there is not much seismic activity along the fault," he added.

The discoveries about the Denali Fault abound with ironies. Drs. Ford, Wrucke and Csejtey, and their co-author Joseph Arth, were scrambling around high passes and glaciers in Denali National Park in 1995 when they got the word by telephone that they had all lost their jobs. Their continued work on this study of the structure and hazards of Alaska will continue only with the support of the National Park Service and the scientists' personal resources.

They could not even go to the Hawaii meeting. "We really regret we can't give the speech on our discovery, but the lawsuit to regain our jobs is being heard right now so we have to stay close to home," said Dr. Ford, another veteran of the survey and pioneer in Antarctic geology, who wrote the section on Antarctica in the latest Encyclopedia Britannica.

The geologists are among a group of 36 who jointly appealed their dismissals to the federal Merit System Protection Board. Hearings started last December and are nearing completion, with a decision expected by fall. Of the 36, 12 have so far been reinstated or settled their appeals.

Now the scientists are excited about going back to Alaska in August to look for evidence of off-setting along the Denali Fault in several key locations in the park. "We want to do it. It's tremendously exciting," said Dr. Wrucke. "Scientists like new challenges."