

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

FRED BASOLO

Reflections on the Gordon Research Conferences

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Arnold Thackray and Arthur Daemmrich

at

Northwestern University
Evanston, Illinois

on

27 September 2002

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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FRED BASOLO

1920 Born in Coello, Illinois on 11 February

Education

1940 B.Ed., Southern Illinois University
1942 M.S., inorganic chemistry, University of Illinois
1943 Ph.D., inorganic chemistry, University of Illinois

Professional Experience

1943-1946 Rohm and Haas
Research Chemist

Northwestern University

1946-1948 Instructor
1948-1953 Assistant Professor
1953-1959 Associate Professor
1959-1980 Professor
1969-1972 Chairman of the Department of Chemistry
1980-1990 Charles E. and Emma H. Morrison Professor
1990-present Emeritus Morrison Professor

Honors

1954-1955 Guggenheim Fellow, University of Copenhagen
1961-1962 Senior NSF Fellow, University of Rome
1964 Award for Research in Inorganic Chemistry, American Chemical Society
[ACS]
1969 NATO Distinguished Professor, Technische Universität München
1971 North Regional Section Citation of Excellence,
ACS
1972 John C. Bailar, Jr. Medal, University of Illinois
1974 Alumni Achievement Award, Southern Illinois University
1975 Award for Distinguished Service in Inorganic Chemistry,
ACS
1976 Francis Patrick Dwyer Medal, University of New South Wales, Australia
1977 Fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science
1977 Honorary Member, Phi Lambda Upsilon

1979 Fellow, Japanese Society for the Promotion of Science
1979 Member, National Academy of Sciences
1981 Honorary Member, Italian Chemical Society
1981 James Flack Norris Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Teaching
of Chemistry, Northeastern Section, ACS
1983 President, ACS
1983 Oesper Memorial Award, ACS, Cincinnati Section
1983 Corresponding Member, Chemical Society of Peru
1983 Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences
1985 Honorary Professor, Lanzhou University, China
1984 D.Sc. (*honorary*), University of Southern Illinois
1987 Foreign Member, National Academy of Science, Italy
1988 Laurea Honoris Causa, University of Turin
1988 IX Century Medal, Bologna University
1988 Award for Research in Inorganic Chemistry, Italian Chemical Society
1988 Honorary Professor, Zhongshan University, China
1990 Harry and Carol Mosher Award, ACS, Santa Clara Valley
1991 Padova University Medal
1991 Distincion Bicentenario, University of Los Andes in Merida
1991 Chinese Chemical Society Medal
1992 Chemical Pioneer Award, American Institute of Chemists
1992 Sigma Xi Monie A. Ferst Award
1992 Humboldt Senior U.S. Scientist Award
1993 Gold Medal Award, American Institute of Chemists
1996 First Lecturer and Medalist of the Royal Society of Chemistry
Joseph Chatt Award
1996 Josiah Williard Gibbs Medal
1996 Member, Chemistry Department Hall of Fame,
University of Southern Illinois
1997 Laurea Honoris Causa, University of Palermo, Sacconi Memorial Lecture
2000 Obelisk Leadership Award, University of Southern Illinois
2001 Joseph Priestly Medal

ABSTRACT

Fred Basolo begins the interview discussing his arrival at Northwestern University as an inorganic chemist in 1946. At that time, organic chemistry dominated the field of chemistry, and inorganic chemistry was seen as insignificant. Over the next few years, inorganic chemistry developed into a substantial component of chemistry. Basolo played a major role in that expansion—what he refers to as “the birth of inorganic chemistry.” The formation of the Inorganic Chemistry Gordon Research Conference, which Basolo helped organize, was a key factor in inorganic chemistry’s rising significance. Although there was no funding for the first conference and attendees had to pay their own travel and registration expenses, enough chemists participated to make the Inorganic GRC successful, and it developed into an annual event. Basolo describes the Inorganic GRC, as well as his heavy involvement in it, for which the conference presented him an award for his fifty years of service. Basolo also talks about his graduate studies under John C. Bailar, Jr., a coordination chemist for whom Basolo had a great deal of respect, and who instigated the first Inorganic Chemistry GRC. Following in Bailar’s footsteps, Basolo specialized in coordination chemistry, and discovered the coboglobin site. Basolo also discusses his role in GRC governance, first being nominated to council, then to the board of trustees, and eventually becoming the board chairman. Basolo had concerns that the rapid growth of the organization and the Inorganic Conference could cause applicants to be turned away. Basolo ends his interview with his thoughts about the future of chemistry and GRC.

INTERVIEWERS

Arnold Thackray is President of the Chemical Heritage Foundation. He majored in the physical sciences before turning to the history of science, receiving a Ph.D. from Cambridge University in 1966. He has held appointments at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, the Institute for Advanced Study, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1983 he received the Dexter Award from the American Chemical Society for outstanding contributions to the history of chemistry. He served on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania for more than a quarter of a century. There, he was the founding chairman of the Department of History and Sociology of Science, where he is the Joseph Priestley Professor Emeritus.

Arthur Daemmrich is a policy analyst at the Chemical Heritage Foundation in Philadelphia. He holds a Ph.D. in Science and Technology Studies from Cornell University and has published on biotechnology policy and politics, the sociology of medicine, and pharmaceutical drug regulation. In his research, he brings long-range perspectives to bear on the analysis of globalization, risk, health, and environmental policy. Daemmrich has held fellowships from the Social Science Research Council/Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies, and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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2. Alfred Werner, "Beitrag zur Konstitution anorganischer Verbindungen." *Zeitschrift für anorganische Chemie* 3 (1892): 267-330.
3. Fred Basolo, *From Coello to Inorganic Chemistry: A Lifetime of Reactions* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2002).

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