

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

RICHARD E. HECKERT

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

James J. Bohning

at

E. I. duPont de Nemours & Co.
Wilmington, Delaware

on

13 December 1994

(With Subsequent Additions and Corrections)

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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Oral History Program

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Richard E. Heckert

Richard E. Heckert

(Date)

Jan 13, 1997

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RICHARD E. HECKERT

1924 Born in Oxford, Ohio on 13 January

Education

1944 B.A., Miami University of Ohio
1947 M.S., organic chemistry, University of Illinois
1949 Ph.D., organic chemistry, University of Illinois

Professional Experience

E. I. duPont de Nemours & Co., Inc.

1949-1954 Research Chemist
1954-1957 Film Department Supervisor, Cellophane Research & Development Lab
Assistant Manager, Cellophane Research and Development Lab
1957 Technical Superintendent, Spruance Cellophane Plant, Virginia
1957-1958 Technical Superintendent, Clinton Cellophane Plant, Iowa
1958-1963 Assistant Manager/Plant Manager, Circleville Mylar Plant, Ohio
1963-1965 Supporting Research Director/Director, Research and Development
Division
1965-1967 Assistant General Manager, Film Department
1967-1969 Assistant General Manager, Plastics Department
1969-1972 General Manager, Fabrics and Finishes Department
1972-1973 Vice President
1973-1981 Director, Senior Vice President, Executive Committee Member
1981 President, Chief Operating Officer, Executive Committee Vice Chair
1981-1985 Vice Chairman
1986-1987 Deputy Chairman, Board of Directors
1987-1989 Chairman, Chief Executive Officer

Honors

1984 Honorary Sc.D., Miami University
1988 Honorary Sc.D., University of Delaware
1988 Honorary Doctor of Business Administration, Goldey Beacom College
1989 Chemical Industry Medal, Society of Chemical Industry (American Section)

ABSTRACT

The interview begins with Richard E. Heckert discussing his family background and childhood as the son of a Miami University of Ohio professor of education. Throughout the interview, he refers to his brother Winfield, a significantly older DuPont executive who influenced his interest and education in chemistry. The interview traces Heckert's early education and training, from high school and Miami University to Army work as a chemist at Oak Ridge, where management experience influenced his pursuit of a business career. He discusses safety considerations and atomic bomb work and reflects on dropping the bomb and developing atomic energy. Next the interview turns to Heckert's graduate career at the University of Illinois, his interest in organic chemistry, work and relationship with mentor Harold Snyder, and considerations in selecting a research chemist position at DuPont. The majority of the interview details Heckert's experience and rise through management at DuPont: early work with TCNE and tricyanovinyl compounds for dyeing; and various positions at DuPont's Spruance, Clinton, and Circleville plants and in the Film and Plastics Departments. Heckert describes management lessons emphasizing safety practices, customer relations, and decisions on dealing with product developments such as Corfam. After focusing on promotions to vice president, senior vice president and executive committee member, Heckert discusses the reasons and strategies for reducing R&D and details problems with dyes, CFCs, and TEL, emphasizing DuPont's responsibility to consider trade-offs and costs in environmental decisions. Next Heckert summarizes his involvement with environmental concerns and legislation. The final section focuses on Heckert's career as president, COO, and CEO; discussions touch on the division of labor within top management and the Board, Ed Jefferson's role, company growth and acquisitions including Conoco. Heckert describes his marketing emphasis as CEO, changes in relationships between operating departments and executive committee members, DuPont's role in global ventures, hiring from outside the company, and desire for a smooth transition to Woolard. Closing comments touch on scientific innovation, promoting creativity in personnel, major changes in the industry, chemical innovation, and the SCI award.

INTERVIEWER

James J. Bohning is Professor of Chemistry Emeritus at Wilkes University, where he was a faculty member from 1959 to 1990. He served there as chemistry department chair from 1970 to 1986 and environmental science department chair from 1987 to 1990. He was chair of the American Chemical Society's Division of the History of Chemistry in 1986, received the Division's outstanding paper award in 1989, and presented more than twenty-five papers before the Division at national meetings of the Society. He has been on the advisory committee of the Society's National Historic Chemical Landmarks committee since its inception in 1992. He developed the oral history program of the Chemical Heritage Foundation beginning in 1985, and was the Foundation's Director of Oral History from 1990 to 1995. He currently writes for the American Chemical Society News Service.

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