

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

JAMES D. IDOL, JR.

Transcript of an Interview  
Conducted by

James J. Bohning

at

Rutgers University

on

8 December 1994

(With Subsequent Additions and Corrections)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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Chemical Heritage Foundation  
Oral History Program  
315 Chestnut Street  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106



JAMES D. IDOL, JR.

1928 Born in Harrisonville, Missouri, on 7 August

Education

1949 A.B., chemistry, William Jewell College  
1952 M.S., chemistry/organic, Purdue University  
1955 Ph.D., chemistry/organic, minor chemical engineering, Purdue University

Professional Experience

Standard Oil Company, Ohio [SOHIO]  
1955-1956 Project Associate  
1956-1960 Project Leader  
1960-1963 Research Associate  
1963-1965 Section Supervisor  
1965-1968 Research Supervisor  
1968-1977 Research Manager

Ashland Chemical Company of Ashland Oil, Inc.  
1977-1979 Research Manager  
1979-1988 Vice President & Research Director

Rutgers University  
1988- Distinguished Professor  
Director, Center for Packaging Science and Engineering  
Deputy Director, National Center for Plastics Recycling Research

Honors

1965 Modern Pioneer Award, National Association of Manufacturers  
1968 Chemical Pioneer Award, American Institute of Chemists  
1971 Citation for Achievement, William Jewell College  
1974 Joseph P. Stewart Distinguished Service Award, American Chemical Society  
1975 Creative Invention Award, American Chemical Society

1976 Special Merit Award, Standard Oil of Ohio [SOHIO] Board of Directors  
1978 Life Fellow, American Institute of Chemists  
1979 Perkin Medal, Society of Chemical Industry  
1980 Honorary D.Sc., Purdue University  
1986 Member, National Academy of Engineering  
1988 Fellow, American Association for Advancement of Science  
1988 F.G. Ciapetti Award and Lectureship, Catalysis Society of North  
America  
1991 Rutgers University Diploma of Recognition, Distinguished/Named  
Chairs  
1994 American Management Association Council Service Award  
1996 National Historic Chemical Landmark Designation to SOHIO Acrylonitrile  
Process

## ABSTRACT

James D. Idol begins his interview with a description of his childhood in Harrisonville, Missouri. His interest in chemistry was encouraged by neighbors and by friends. He attended William Jewell College in Liberty, Missouri, where he studied chemistry under Professor Frank Edson and graduated with an A.B. in 1949. He immediately went on to graduate school at Purdue University, where he studied under Dr. Earl McBee. His interest in industrial chemistry led him to minor in chemical engineering. Upon receiving his Ph.D. in 1955, he went to work for Standard Oil of Ohio, where he soon pioneered an economically advantageous process for the production of acrylonitrile. He then served as part of the team that developed a plant in Lima, Ohio for the commercial production of acrylonitrile in a record-breaking three years. He then turned his attention to novel uses for acrylonitrile, which led to *Barex*® resin, among other things. In 1977, he moved on to Ashland Chemical, where he occupied a position that combined management and scientific duties. At Ashland, he developed the propylene-CO process for methyl methacrylate. His career in industry ended in 1988 when he was invited to become a professor at Rutgers University and head of the Center for Packaging Science and Engineering. He pays special attention to individuals who have influenced him throughout his life, and he concludes with some personal insights on the meanings of innovation, teamwork, and research in science and technology.

## INTERVIEWER

James J. Bohning is currently Visiting Research Scientist at Lehigh University. He has served as 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 written for the American Chemical Society News Service, and 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.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|    |   |
|----|---|
| 1  | Childhood and Early Education<br>Childhood in Harrisonville, Missouri. Family and early influences. Childhood interest in chemistry. Experience at Harrisonville High School.   |
| 4  | College Education<br>William Jewel College. Undergraduate influences and experiences. Chemistry and Chemical Engineering at Purdue University. Study of halogen chemistry under Earl McBee. Thesis and teaching experience.   |
| 10 | Career at Standard Oil of Ohio<br>Recruitment by Everett Hughes. Influence of Dr. Franklin Veatch. Organization and dynamics of Veatch's research group. Research leading up to the development of a new acrylonitrile process. Commercialization of the process. Uses developed for acrylonitrile. Influence of Dr. Henry Gray. Position of polymer chemistry in academia. |
| 31 | Move to Ashland Chemical<br>Combination of management and scientific opportunities. Propylene-CO process for methyl methacrylate and its economic advantages. Other projects at Ashland.  |
| 32 | Professorship at Rutgers University<br>Packaging schools at Rutgers and elsewhere. Need to acknowledge packaging engineering as an engineering field.   |
| 33 | Conclusion<br>Personal meaning of scientific innovation. Thoughts on scientific teamwork and heritage. Professional contacts and associations. Concerns about downsizing. Reflections on winning the Perkin Medal. Thoughts about development of new technology.  |
| 38 | Notes   |
| 39 | Index   |



## NOTES

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## INDEX

1, 2-bistrifluoromethylbenzene, 8  
2, 4-dinitrophenylhydrazine, 16  
3M, 10

### A

Acetylene, 16, 25  
Acrilan, 18  
Acrolein, 12, 15-17, 22  
Acrylamide, 18  
Acrylates, 12, 14, 16-18, 20, 26  
Acrylic acid, 12, 15-17  
Acrylic fiber, 18  
Acrylonitrile, 13-18, 20, 22-26, 29-31  
    world production of, 18  
Acrylonitrile a-butadiene rubber, 27  
Acrylonitrile-butadiene-styrenem [ABS], 18, 27, 29  
Adams, Charlie, 15  
Aldehydes, 15  
Allied Chemical Corporation, 17  
Allyl alcohol, 15  
Akron, University of, 30  
American Chemical Society [ACS], 21-22, 34  
American Cyanamid Corporation, 18  
American Institute of Chemists, 36  
American Red Cross, 3  
Ammonia, 17-18, 20-21, 23  
Arlington, Virginia, 1  
Ashland Chemical, 31, 32, 34, 35  
    R&D department, 35

### B

Badger company, 23-24  
Ball, Larry, 26  
*Barex*® resin, 27  
*Beilsteins Handbuch Der Organischen Chemie*, 8  
Benzene, 32  
Borg Warner, 18  
Boy Scouts of America, 1  
British Petroleum [BP], 25  
  
Brooklyn Poly. *See* New York Polytechnic Institute

Brown, Cleo, 4  
Butadiene, 18, 27

## C

California Polytechnic State University [Cal Poly], 32  
Callahan, James, 16-17, 20, 23  
Carbon monoxide [CO], 16, 31-32  
Case Western Reserve University, 13, 30  
*Cass County Democrat*, 1  
Catalytic oxidation, 11  
Chapman, Leland L., 22, 24  
*Chemical Abstracts*, 6, 8  
*Chemical and Engineering News*, 15  
*Chemical Engineering Progress*, 21  
Chicago, 10  
Chicago, University of, 1  
Clatworthy, Ed, 1-2  
Clemson University, 32  
Cleveland, Ohio, 11, 25, 30  
Coca Cola Company, 27  
Colorado, University of, 5  
Columbia, Missouri, 4  
Cornell University, 7  
Cosby, John, 17, 22

## D

Darling, Samuel, 13  
Dehydration catalyst, 17  
Delaney amendment, 26  
Depression, 1, 3  
Distillers Corporation, 15, 17, 22  
Dow Chemical Company, 18  
Dow, Willard, 14  
Duke, June, 26  
Dunavant, Bill, 26  
DuPont, E. I. de Nemours and Co., Inc., 10, 18, 25, 28  
Dynel, 18

## E

Edson, Frank, 5-7  
Electron spectroscopy for chemical analysis [ESCA], 15  
Esterification, 15-16  
Ethylene, 25, 28, 32

Excelsior Springs, Missouri, 4  
Exxon Mobil Corporation, 21

## **F**

Flanigen, Edith M., 13  
Fluid-bed reactor, 18  
Foreman, Robert, 16  
Franz, John E., 23

## **G**

Gas chromatography, 17  
General Motors Corporation, 32  
Glycerine, 12, 15  
Glycidaldehyde, 12  
*Gmelins Handbuch Der Anorganischen Chemie*, 8  
Godfriaux, Henri, 5  
Grace Lutheran Church, 11  
Grasselli, Bob, 16, 23  
Grassie, Norman, 26  
Gray, David, 28-29  
Gray, Henry, 28-29

## **H**

Haas, Henry, 19  
Harrisonville, Missouri, 1-2, 4  
Hartford, Connecticut, 28-29  
Harvard University, 30  
Heineman, Heinz, 22  
Hercules Chemical, 20  
Hexafluoroxylene, 8  
Hughes, Everett (Mike), 10, 13-14, 17, 20, 24  
Hydrogen cyanide [HCN], 17, 25, 32

## **I**

Idol, James D.  
athletics, 2  
college. *See* William Jewel College  
father, 1-4  
graduate school. *See* Purdue University  
grandfather, 2  
high school, 2, 4  
mother, 1-5  
Ph.D. thesis, 8-9  
sister, 1, 3, 8

wife, 3  
Illinois, University of, 7  
Industrial Research Institute, 34  
Interferons, 19  
Iowa State University, 7  
Isley, Ralph, 26  
Isobutylene, 17

## **J**

Jefferson, Ed, 36  
Jonak, Eva, 18  
Jones, Arthur L., 13

## **K**

Kansas City, Missouri, 4  
    Jackson County Court, 3  
Kansas, University of, 5  
Kelchlor process, 22  
Kropp, Oscar, 14

## **L**

Lewis, Jim, 31  
Liberty, Missouri, 4  
Lima, Ohio  
    Lima Locomotive Works, 21  
Liquid-phase processes, 15

## **M**

Marbon Chemical, 18  
Marshall, Missouri, 5  
    Marshall High School, 5  
McBee, Earl, 7-10  
McConnell, Elliott, 14  
Meervein-Ponndort-Veerly reduction, 15  
Mellon, Melvin G., 6-8  
Methacrylates, 31, 18  
Methacrylonitrile, 17  
Methyl acrylate, 26  
Methyl methacrylate [MMA], 31-32  
Michigan State University, 32  
Microballoons, 11-12  
Milberger, E. C., 16, 20-21, 23  
Missouri, University of, 1, 5  
Mobil Corporation. *See* Exxon Mobil Corporation

Monsanto Company, 18, 25-26  
Morrill, Ed, 20, 24  
Murphree Award, 22

## **N**

New Jersey, State University of (Rutgers), 1, 32-33  
    Engineering College, 32  
    Food Science Department, 32  
    Packaging Engineering Center, 32  
New York Polytechnic Institute, 30  
Nieuwenhaus, Herman, 20  
Nitric acid, 20  
Nitrile, 17  
Nitrile rubber, 18

## **O**

Oblad, Alex, 21-22  
Old South Congregational Church, 29  
Oldershaw columns, 23-24  
Olefin oxide, 28  
Orbet process, 26  
Orlon, 18

## **P**

PepsiCo, Inc., 27  
Perkin Medal, 36  
Phillips Petroleum Company, 26  
Phthalic anhydride, 11  
Polyacrylamide, 29  
Polyacrylonitrile [PAN], 26  
Polyethylene terephthalate [PET], 28  
Propane, 12, 17  
Propylene, 12, 15-18, 21, 31  
Propylene-selective oxidation, 12  
Purdue University, 6-9, 11, 19, 31

## **R**

Reaction injection molding [RIM] resin, 32  
Reppe, Hans, 17  
Rochester Institute of Technology [RIT], 32  
Rohm & Haas, 16  
Rutgers University. *See* New Jersey, State University of

## **S**

Sann, Ed, 20  
Sheely, Russ, 23  
Shell Chemical Corporation, 10, 15, 21  
Shreve, Norris, 9, 19  
Silica gel, 16  
Spitz, Peter, 20  
Standard Oil of Ohio [SOHIO], 3, 10-11, 14, 20-26, 28, 31, 35  
    Analytical Section and Library, 13  
    Basic Research Division, 13  
    Cornell Road laboratory, 13-14  
    Fuels Evaluation Division, 13  
    Fuels Research Division, 13  
    Heavy Products and Asphalt Research Division, 13  
    Petrochemical Research Group, 13  
    Pilot Plant Division, 13  
    plant at Lima, Ohio, 20-21, 25  
    R&D department, 14, 35, 43  
    Warrensville Road research center, 13  
Stanford University, 10  
Strecker, Art, 23  
Styrene, 29, 32  
Styrene-acrylonitrile polymer [SAN], 29

## **T**

Tarrytown, New York, 13  
Thermoplastics, 26, 32  
Tonawanda, New York, 13  
Truman, Harry, 3

## **U**

Union Carbide Corporation, 10, 15, 18, 21, 25  
University of Wisconsin, 32  
Urea, 20

## **V**

Vanadium molybdate, 17  
Vapor chromatography, 15-16  
Vapor phase catalysts, 16  
Veatch, Franklin, 5, 10-13, 16-18, 20-21, 26  
Velsicol Chemical, 10  
Vincent, Frank, 26  
Vinyl, 18

**W**

Washington, D.C., 3

Westinghouse Corporation, 8

Westminster Cathedral

350th Congregational Anniversary at, 29

Whitesides, George, 30

William Jewell College, 4-7

World War I, 18

World War II, 3-4