

THE BECKMAN CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF CHEMISTRY

MALCOLM M. RENFREW

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

James J. Bohning

at

New Orleans

on

31 August 1987

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

THE BECKMAN CENTER FOR THE HISTORY OF CHEMISTRY

Oral History Program

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MALCOLM M. RENFREW

1910 Born in Spokane, Washington on 12 October

Education

1932 B.S., chemistry, University of Idaho
1934 M.S., chemistry, University of Idaho
1938 Ph.D., chemistry, University of Minnesota

Professional Experience

University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho
1932-1933 Fellow in Physics
1933-1935 Teaching assistant in Chemistry

University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota
1935-1937 Teaching Assistant in Chemistry
1935-1938 du Pont Fellow

E. I. du Pont de Nemours & Co., Inc., Plastics
Department, Arlington, N. J.
1938-1944 Research Chemist
1946-1946 Supervisor of Process Development
1946-1948 Supervisor of Product Development

General Mills, Inc., Minneapolis, Minnesota
1949-1952 Head of Chemical Research Department
1952-1953 Director of Chemical Research
1953-1954 Director of Chemical Research and Development

Spencer Kellogg and Sons, Inc., Buffalo, New York
1954-1958 Director of Research and Development

University of Idaho, Moscow, Idaho
1959-1967 Head of Physical Science Department
1968-1973 Head of Chemistry Department
1959-1976 Professor of Chemistry
1976- Professor Emeritus
1977-1978 Executive Vice President, Idaho Research
Foundation, Inc
1978-1986 Patent Director, Idaho Research Foundation, Inc.

Honors

1976 Honorary D.Sc. University of Idaho
1976 Norris Award, Northeastern Section, American
Chemical Society
1977 University of Idaho Alumni Hall of Fame
1977 College Chemistry Teacher Award, Manufacturing
Chemists Association

1977 University of Minnesota Alumni Achievement Award
1985 Division of Chemical Health and Safety Award,
American Chemical Society
1986 Mosher Award, Santa Clara Valley Section, American
Chemical Society

ABSTRACT

Malcolm Renfrew grew up in the northwest. Despite an early interest in music, drama, and the arts, Renfrew studied chemistry at the University of Idaho, in part influenced by a chemist uncle. After serving as a teaching assistant in both physics and chemistry and completing a Masters thesis, he joined George Glockler at Minnesota for research on Raman spectroscopy. He recalls contemporaries at both Moscow and Minneapolis as well as a summer spent on the road with a tent show. When Renfrew joined the Arlington laboratories of Du Pont he was much involved with plastics development, especially of Teflon and he recalls the enthusiastic interest aroused by the disclosure of its properties at an ACS meeting in 1946. Malcolm Renfrew has long had a special interest in health and safety in the chemical environment and he recounts laboratory accidents during the development of PTFE. After moving to General Mills and then to Spencer Kellogg, ascending the research management ladder, Renfrew went back to his alma mater in 1959 as head of physical science. He completes the interview with an account of his return to teaching.

INTERVIEWER

James J. Bohning holds the B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in chemistry, and has been a member of the chemistry faculty at Wilkes College since 1959. He was a chair of the Chemistry Department for sixteen years, and was appointed chair of the Department of Earth and Environmental Sciences since 1985, and was elected Chair of the Division of the History of Chemistry of the American Chemical Society for 1987.

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