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# History in the making – the Chemical Heritage Group of the Victorian Branch

"Why John, you don't look a day older than when I last saw you – five, ten or whatever years ago!" "So glad you could make it!" "Isn't it fun, meeting one's friends from the 'olden days' on such a congenial occasion."

JUST A SELECTION of remarks heard in the Vale Street meeting rooms among the milling throng of over seventy "golden oldies", some less old than others, of course, who came to attend the "(Auto)Biographical" Evening arranged by the History & Archives Committee of The Royal Australian Chemical Institute.

John Spink, FRACI, then Chair of the History & Archives Committee, gave a brief outline of the Committee's activities, then introduced the speakers.

The then doyen of the Chemical Industry, Len Weickhardt, FRACI, gave a most interesting and entertaining account of "Sulphamerazine – Personal Recollections of a Wartime Project" with which he had been intimately involved; John Willis, FRACI spoke about "Sir Ian Wark – A Long-Overdue Obituary"; the late John Clarke, FRACI presented "J.M. Hennessy – 50 Years with the Gordon Institute"; and Ian Rae, FRACI presented on behalf of Tom Spurling, FRACI and himself "Adrian Albert – Retrospective".

Clearly, there was a demand for such meetings and a special interest group was proposed, initially organised by George Mapstone, Bill Purnell, Peter Strasser, Alf Watson and Peter Wilkinson who formed the committee which met in mid-December to establish what was named, at Bill Purnell's suggestion, the Chemical Heritage Group. Lunchtime meetings were decided on, as many of the more senior participants would prefer that to going out in the evening.

Twenty-five members attended the inaugural meeting of the Chemical Heritage Group on 16 March 1995. Two talks were given, by one Dr Joy Bear, FRACI about "The Significance of

Froth Flotation in the History of the CSIRO Division on Mineral Chemistry", the other by the late Dick Edquist, FRACI about "The Australian Novel Continuous Process for Phosphoric Acid Manufacture in the 1940s". The latter was a cautionary tale about how Australian developments

can "leak" overseas and be used without recognition to the local inventors. A tasty sandwich lunch followed, over which much reminiscing was expected to, and did, occur.

At the Committee meeting following the lunch, the program for the rest of 1995 was decided and the objectives of the group crystallised.

## Chemical Heritage – Speakers List

### Autobiographies meeting – 24 November 1994

Mr J.A. Spink: "Introduction – A Brief Outline of What the History and Archives Committee is Doing in Collating Biographical Material"

Dr L.W. Weickhardt: "Sulphamerazine – Personal Recollections of a Wartime Project"

Dr J.B. Willis: "Sir Ian Wark – a Long-Overdue Obituary"

Mr J.R. Clarke: "J.M. Hennessy – 50 Years with the Gordon Institute"

Professor I.D. Rae and Dr T.H. Spurling: "Adrian Albert – A Retrospective"

### Inaugural meeting – 16 March 1995

Dr I.J. Bear: "The Significance of Froth Flotation in the History of the CSIRO Division of Mineral Chemistry"

Mr R.C. Edquist: "The Australian Novel Continuous Process for Phosphoric Acid Manufacture in the 1940s"

### Meeting – 20 July 1995

Dr P. Dunn: "The Early Days of Chemical Defence Research and Development in Australia"

Dr A.J. Farnworth: "The Development of Permanent Pleating"

### Meeting – 16 November 1995

Emeritus Professor T.A. O'Donnell: "Early Post WWII Days of the Chemistry Department of Melbourne University"

### Meeting – 21 March 1996

Dr D.E. Bland: "Recollections of Field Trials with Poison Gas in the Tropics during WWII"

Mr A.J. Watson: "Early Days of the CSIR Division of Forest Products"

### Meeting – 13 June 1996

Mr R.C. Stanhope: "Early Days of Food Science and Legislation"

Mr W.E. Purnell: "The Royal Australian Chemical Institute"

### Meeting 19 September 1996

Mr H.G. Higgins: "CSIRO Division of Forest Products Post WWII"

Mr G.E. Mapstone: "A Chemist in the Bush – The Shale Oil Venture at Cilen Davis 1941–1951"

### Meeting – 21 November 1996

Emeritus Professor R.D. Brown: "The Beginnings of the Chemistry Department of Monash University"

### Meeting – 20 March 1997

Dr M. Lipson: "Background to CSIRO Wool Research"

Dr K.G. Neill: "Early Days of Research in ICI Australia"

Dr N.E. Norman: "The Role of a Chemical Engineer in the Paper Industry in the 'Olden Days'"

Mr G.R. James: "Tales of the Early Surfactant Industry"

They are:

(i) to provide a continuing interactive interest in chemistry for retired and semi-retired chemists by organising appropriate meetings;

(ii) to encourage wider involvement in the history of chemistry, especially in Australia; and

(iii) to encourage preservation of material pertinent to chemical history in Australia, by donation and/or bequest to the appropriate authorities.

Some thirty members came to the second meeting in July 1995. The most interesting speakers were Peter Dunn, "The Early Days of Chemical Defence Research in Australia" and Arthur Farnworth, "The Development of Permanent Pleating". To avoid clashing with the 10th National Convention, no meeting was held in September 1995 and the year concluded with a luncheon at University House of The University of Melbourne which was addressed by Professor Emeritus Tom O'Donnell who talked about "The Melbourne Chemistry Department from World War II to Monash".

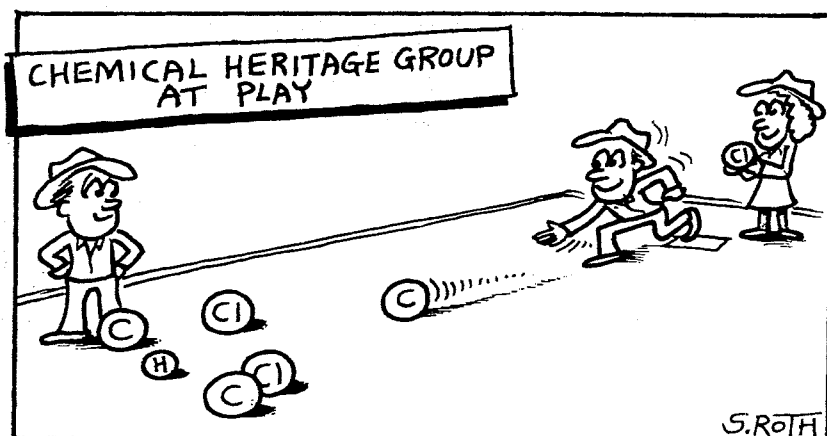
Thus the pattern of meetings was established. Three lunchtime meetings at Vale Street in March, July and September, with two talks, and a more formal end-of-year luncheon with a single speaker about the development of tertiary education in chemistry in Melbourne. At the request of the History & Archives Committee, talks were recorded and the transcription, after approval from the speaker, lodged in the archives.

In 1996, the Committee was expanded with the addition of Ian McFarlane, MRACI, who became treasurer of the Group, and Peter Wailes, FRACI. Topics of the talks were again

wide ranging, "Recollection of Field Trials with Poison Gas in the Tropics during WWII" by David Bland, FRACI, "Early Days of the CSIR Division of Forest Products" by Alf Watson, FRACI, "The CSIRO Division of Forest Products Post WWII" by Huntly Higgins, FRACI, "A Chemist in the Bush – the Shale Oil Venture at Glen Davis 1941–1951" by George Mapstone, FRACI, "Early Days of Food Science and Legislation" by Ray Stanhope, FRACI and a highlight "The Royal Australian Chemical Institute Fifty Years Ago" by Bill Purnell, FRACI who had been active in the Institute prior to his appointment as the first Executive Secretary, 1962–1976. The year concluded with a buffet luncheon at International House at which Emeritus Professor Ron Brown spoke about "The Beginnings of the Chemistry Department at Monash University".

1997 has started well with, at the March meeting, Menzie Lipson, FRACI talking about "Background to CSIRO Wool Research" and Keith Neill on "Early Days of Research in ICI Australia". At the June meeting, Noel Norman, FRACI spoke on "The Role of a Chemical Engineer in the Paper Industry in 'the Olden Days'" and George James, FRACI on "Tales of the Early Surfactant Industry".

Meetings of the group have been informative, entertaining and enjoyable, as evidenced by about twenty-five frequent attendees and some fifteen others who attend at irregular intervals. The South Australian Branch has retired chemists luncheons but other Branches should give consideration to forming groups that might ensure that early history of chemistry in Australia is recorded before it is forgotten.



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