

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

ROBERT W. ALLINGTON

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Arnold Thackray and John R. Van Ness

in

Lincoln, Nebraska

on

13 November 2001

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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



ROBERT W. ALLINGTON

1935 Born in Madison, Wisconsin on 18 September
2006 Died in Lincoln, Nebraska on 26 March

Education

1959 B.S., electrical engineering, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
1961 M.S., electrical engineering, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Professional Experience

1952 M & M TV Clinic
1953 Lincoln TV Center

University of Nebraska-Lincoln
1953-1955 Electronic Development Technician, Agricultural Engineering
Department

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
1955 Intern, Lincoln Laboratory

Instrumentation Specialties Company [Isco, Inc.]
1958 Founded Instrumentation Specialties Company
1959-present Chairman of the Board
1959-1996 President
1961-present Chief Executive Officer

Honors

1959 National first prize for article in engineering student periodical,
Engineering College Magazine Association and McGraw-Hill
Publishing Company

1959-1961 National Science Foundation Fellowship
1960 First prize for undergraduate research paper, American Institute of
Electrical Engineers

1965-present Registered Professional Engineer
1970 Accredited Professional Chemist
1972 Handicapped Nebraskan of the Year
1975 Outstanding Engineering Achievement Award, Professional Engineers of

Nebraska

- 1978 Distinguished Service Award, Lincoln Kiwanis Club
1978 IR-100 Award, *Research and Development Magazine*
1985 National Small Business Person of the Year, U.S. Small Business Administration
1985 Honorary D. Sc., University of Nebraska
1985 IR-100 Award, *Research and Development Magazine*
1985 Honorary D. Sc., Chemistry, University of Nebraska
1986 Lincoln Jaycees Outstanding Chief Executive Award
1986 Support of Research Award, Sigma Xi
1988 Business Leadership Award, University of Nebraska
1989 Friend of Science Award, The Nebraska Academy of Sciences, Inc.
1991 Executive of the Year, *Research and Development Magazine*
1993 Outstanding Alumnus Award, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, College of Engineering
1998 Entrepreneur of the Year, Nebraska Center for Entrepreneurship, College of Business Administration, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
1999 Alumni Achievement Award, University of Nebraska
2005 Pittcon Heritage Award, Pittsburgh Conference on Analytical Chemistry and Applied Spectroscopy and the Chemical Heritage Foundation

ABSTRACT

Robert W. Allington begins the interview with a sketch of his family history. His father, a scientist for the United States Department of Agriculture, and later at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln [UNL], encouraged Allington's interest in science. During his adolescence, Allington developed his skills in electronics through building radios, among other things, and by working as a television repairman. He worked as an intern at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Lincoln Laboratory on the SAGE air defense computer in the spring of 1955. Near the conclusion of the internship Allington was diagnosed with polio, and throughout the interview describes the effect of the disease on his life. While still in the hospital, he met his future business partner, Jacob Schafer, an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Jobs repairing scientific equipment evolved into projects to fulfill requests from his clients for novel instrumentation. This led Allington to become an entrepreneur. He completed his master's degree in electrical engineering at UNL, having taken an unusually large number of chemistry courses for an electrical engineer. Allington abandoned his original intention of a career in academic research to found Instrumentation Specialties Company [Isco]. Originally creating specialized instruments on request, the company gradually evolved into two major divisions, separation and environmental instrumentation. Robert Allington remained active in the research and innovation behind product development even as chief executive officer of his company. He concludes the interview by sharing recollections of his personal life and briefly discussing his future plans.

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.

John R. Van Ness is vice president for external relations of the Chemical Heritage Foundation. He received Ph.D. and M.A. degrees in anthropology from the University of Pennsylvania and holds a B.A. from Colorado College, Colorado Springs. Van Ness has held several executive positions at colleges in the Philadelphia area, most recently as associate vice president for development at Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In addition, he is a noted scholar of Hispanic history and culture in the American Southwest, a series editor at the University of New Mexico Press, and the author of four books. He has won several grants, honors, and awards for his scholarship, and has been included in *Who's Who in America*. He is also on the board of directors of the Mexican Cultural Center in Philadelphia, and is a member of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

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2. Robert Allington, "Compound Optical Filter Providing a Sharp Cut-Off." U.S. Patent # 3,243,595. Issued 29 March 1966.
3. Robert Allington, "Certain Applications and Relationships Involving the Kerr Effect," Master's Thesis. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1961.
4. Robert Allington, "Apparatus for Making Chemical Separations." U.S. Patent # 3,202,188. Issued 24 August 1965.
5. Robert Allington, "Heat of Interaction Detector." U.S. Patent # 3,967,492. Issued 6 July 1976.
6. David R. Lide, ed., *CRC [Chemical Rubber Company] Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* (Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press Ltd., 2003).
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