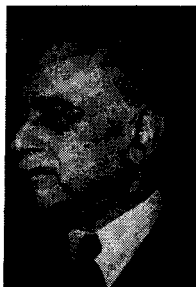


REMINISCENCE

By WALTER A. SCHMIDT

President, Western Precipitation Co., Los Angeles

When your genial editor asked me to write a story about the early activities of our Section and told me to take my time about it, as it would not be needed until the sixth of May, I recklessly agreed thinking that this would give me an enjoyable diversion from business during some idle day on my present eastern trip. However, this trip has stretched



Walter A. Schmidt

out beyond original expectations and no idle day has come along and the dead line of May sixth has rolled around. Consequently, I am in the proverbial jam of the guy who makes reckless promises. Writing about reminiscences under pressure is not so hot and this story may not be worth printing, but here goes the attempt with apologies to the editor and with the full understanding that there will be no offense to his throwing it into the waste paper basket.

Sitting in our New York Office, in the tower of the Chrysler Building, overlooking the busy metropolis, it is none too easy to think back to the peaceful Los Angeles of thirty-five years ago. We older fellows are inclined to glorify the golden days of yesteryear, but we had our troubles then the same as now. We also had our hopes and ambitions, as the younger men have today. Only, everything has become more complicated and life has become more hectic. In those early days of our profession we had time to sit down and visit leisurely and become acquainted and build up lasting friendships, which was a tremendous advantage in the game of making life worth while.

I shall not try to review the early meetings of our Section for these are well covered in the articles by Chandler, Herman, and Slater, printed in previous issues of SCALACS. I will rather attempt to picture the spirit of our meetings. To start with, let us say that as a group we did not amount to very much, at least not in the eyes of the public. We were just a few peculiar guys called chemists who gathered occasionally to discuss their equally peculiar activities.

It is an old story that nothing succeeds like success and success runs away

with the glamour and has the limelight. In those days the big projects in the Southwest revolved around reclamation, mining and construction. Consequently, the civil, mining and mechanical engineers were the live groups and had the spotlight. Chemists were mostly handmaidens to the others, but they were a swell group of fellows and it was one of my life's privileges to be one of the bunch. None of us, excepting Edgar Baruch, had anything, which put us on an equal and sympathetic footing and Baruch, being as plain and comfortable as an old shoe, did not embarrass the rest of us because of his greater material wealth.

Things, for the Chemist, were really at bed rock bottom in those days. It is rather difficult to reconstruct the picture in these days of synthetic rubber, high octane gasoline, plastics and the myriad other chemical activities now a part of the daily life of Southern California. Baruch was making sugar, Merrill was making soap, Hanna was making cement, Bobrik was making household chemicals. Hartley was selling chemical apparatus. Alexander was handling asphalt, Stabler was consultant for a dinky oil refinery, and Chandler, Stabler and Wetherby were teaching chemistry, holding out promises and hopes for the future of the profession. A few had safe Federal or Municipal jobs, but most of us were hanging on as best we could getting modest fees here, there, and elsewhere. No wonder that Herman coined the slogan "Accuracy, not satisfaction, guaranteed" to establish his business ethics. This gave him a reputation but cost him some business and he cut his living expenses by eliminating meat from his diet, and he is still a vegetarian by force of habit. Koebig, Payne and Walker ran modest chemical laboratories. Slater then came in with San Francisco backing and soon gave the other three a good run for their money. Herman, Baverstock and Perez did most of the assaying for the many prospectors who were combing the Southwest for undiscovered bonanzas. There were four little Colleges in which Chemistry was taught in a modest way, U.S.C., Occidental, Throop and Pomona. Redlands, Whittier and Lordsburg (now La Verne) could not support such luxuries, beyond the elemental teachings. Cal. Tech and U.C.L.A. had not been dreamed of. Quite a different setting from what we have today.

Reminiscences are obviously personal recollections so it is pardonable, perhaps,

to speak of personal experiences. When I returned from Berkeley in 1906 my father was very ill and because of family affairs I was prevented from going away to postgraduate study, as I had hoped to do, or from taking a job remote from home. So I tried to find a job in Los Angeles. I called upon every person and firm that could possibly make use of a green and inexperienced graduate chemist and did not even get a vague promise of a possible future job. I well remember my father's disgust at this proof of my having chosen a profession that offered no future. He had been a pioneer carriage builder which was something tangible and secure until the eastern machine-made carriages put him out of business in 1888. I got some sound advice from Julius Koebig as my call at his laboratory coincided with a day of complete absence of work in his establishment. He had plenty of time to talk and had nobody to talk to but me. He said he could not give me a job but could give me advice. His advice was to do everything possible to get into business for myself. He said "You will have many hungry days and worrysome nights but if you have ability and guts you will win out and your compensation in the matter of satisfaction will be ample reward even if you do not become rich." This was the day of rugged individualism. This session with the old doctor Julius probably did much to shape my life, as it bolstered up my dander, although I owe infinitely more to my beloved old professor Frederick Cottrell, for he gave me the opportunity that Koebig philosophized about.

A few years later Baruch, Hartley, McKinnon, Walker and I formed sort of a loose partnership. We subscribed a lot of hopes but no money. We met about once a month in an Italian restaurant on North Main Street. The idea was to enjoy the luncheon and to pool such non-confidential information which we had individually obtained during the previous month on matters which might serve as a foundation for a chemical manufacturing venture of small enough magnitude to permit our financing it with our collective assets, which were pretty slim. We had our eyes, or rather hopes, on such things as the desert salines and non-metallic mineral deposits. These hopes probably were colored by the fantastic stories which circulated amongst prospectors and around financial circles. We thoroughly enjoyed our lunches and our discussions, but we never risked a dime and consequently neither made nor lost a nickel. The reason was later quite obvious. All the good things that came to our individual attention were confidential and the remaining cats and dogs were worthless. We had no

machinery for unearthing good propositions for ourselves. However, it was a good and instructive experience in our early lives. We learned that success does not come from wishful thinking. The lack of results was not due to our being complete dumbbells, although our idea at the time was dumb. As part proof of this, Hartley has since been President of the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce and is now Vice President of the National Association of Manufacturers.

Of course, others were wiser than we were. They reversed the procedure, organized capital and engaged the services of chemists and engineers. Infant industries were established in many fields. Some of these suffered and died. Some suffered and lived. But, most of them suffered until their fate was determined. Finally eastern firms moved in and established chemical activity on a large scale. The rest of the story is common knowledge.

These anecdotes probably will serve to give a dim picture of the background to the first meeting of the Local Section held on December 13, 1910. This date is taken from Chandler's article for I am not sure of the exact date. For quite a while our meetings were exclusively for men and it was not out of order to tell stories that were a little on the rough side. These meetings were held in a very plain but congenial small rear dining room of the Hollenbeck Hotel at Second and Spring Streets. I have forgotten the price of the meals but it was about fifty cents. Each paid for such beer as he could drink and this raised the ante by five cents per glass. Nobody thought of buying cocktails or highballs for this was both bad form in those days and far too expensive. These meetings were essentially round table discussions usually attended by twenty to twenty-five good fellows and we always had a good time. One of the group was prepared to give a brief review of his own work and this was followed by a free-for-all discussion,

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or a good natured argument on whether the speaker knew what he was talking about.

As the Section grew and lady chemists came into being we had to change our habits and we finally moved to the upstairs restaurant of Paulais Candy and Ice Cream Parlor on Broadway between Seventh and Eighth. The awful term of tea room was not in vogue at that time. You either went to an ice cream parlor or a saloon for refreshments and you ate in a restaurant. At any rate, beer went out of our meetings at that time, the food became worse and the price increased. We bolstered up our spirit with community singing and good natured repartee and managed to have some pretty good times. To my way of thinking our best asset at that time consisted of three genuinely friendly individuals and God bless and comfort their departed souls. They were Henry L. Payne and his good wife and Mark Walker. They attended every meeting and saw to it that everybody became acquainted—not merely introduced but actually got to know each other. This was a hard labor of love but it was well done and it worked wonders. I wish we could do that now but with our larger membership this is none too easy. Henry L. Payne was secretary for many years. When he became chairman, Mark Walker succeeded him as secretary and continued in that office until his death when our present genial secretary, Harry V. Welch, took over. Thirty-five years and only three secretaries. We owe them a great debt of gratitude as they have done a swell job and very few of our members realize what an enormous amount of hard work they have put in to make things click.

The latter two-thirds of our existence is not in the province of this story, according to your editor's instructions, so I shall merely say that our meetings became more scientific and less social as time went on. With the growth of Cal. Tech, U.C.L.A. and U.S.C. on the

one hand and the growth and expansion of chemical industry on the other, coupled with the increased number of outstanding visiting scientists, we have had an enviable source of eminent speakers to draw from and our meetings are now on a par, from a scientific point of view, with those of the older and larger section in the East. Sometimes the speakers talk over the heads of us older fellows, but nevertheless we always get the inspiration that flows from being with a man who has achieved things in the building of the storehouse of knowledge which feeds the well-being of mankind. These men in turn are kindly souls who accept our frailties with sympathy. I well remember the night when Richard Tolman meticulously explained the Einstein Theory of Relativity. He knew that, except for his immediate co-workers, none of us followed or understood his complicated mathematical derivations which led to his equally abstruse and unorthodox conclusions and that we merely looked wise so as to be courteous. He gave me several sly but good natured looks that told volumes in this regard.

The turning point in the affairs of our local section was the National Convention of the A.C.S. in 1925. This in many ways ushered out the old and brought in the new. We became nationally minded and ceased to be merely a cozy bunch of Southern Californians with a common interest in the subject of chemistry. That national meeting in many ways was a climax in good fellowship and it is still being talked about throughout the country as the best Convention the A.C.S. ever had. It probably had less chemistry than usual but had far more fun and good fellowship. We were most fortunate in having the genial and eloquent William Conger Morgan as our Chairman at that time.

If we do as well during the next thirty-five years as we have done during the past thirty-five, we will establish a record that the Section can be proud of.

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