

Wyndham D. Miles (1916–



Wyndham Davies Miles was born on November 21, 1916 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, less than 100 miles from the last home of Joseph Priestley. It is not surprising that Wyndham took a deep interest in early American chemistry. His early attraction to chemistry resulted in his taking his B.S. in chemistry at The Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and the Sciences in 1942 and his M.S. in organic chemistry at The Pennsylvania State College (now University) in 1949. His Ph.D. was awarded by Harvard University in 1955, under I.B. Cohen, for a thesis on "The Development of Chemical Education in Columbia, Princeton, Rutgers, and Pennsylvania." Between degrees he served on the chemistry faculty at Penn State (1944–1950 and 1952–1953) and as historian in the U.S. Army Chemical Corps. (1953–1960).

After 1953, he spent most of his career in the service of the government as historian on a range of assignments. He served the National Archives during 1960–1961 as Specialist in Science and

Technology and the Navy during 1961–1962 as historian on the Polaris Project. In 1962 he was appointed the first professional historian for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). He served at NIH until 1974, when he moved to the History of Medicine Division, National Library of Medicine (NLM). In 1974, on the instruction of Martin M. Cummings, the library's director, Miles began to work on the history of the library, a dream of the library's directors ever since Frank B. Rogers began to work on one in the late 1950s. His masterwork, *A History of the National Library of Medicine: The Nation's Treasury of Medical Knowledge*, was published in 1982.

Shortly after Miles' appointment as historian of the NIH, he undertook a series of oral interviews with individuals important to the history of the NIH. For over a decade, Miles conducted interviews with current and former NIH employees and with selected other Public Health Service officials. He conducted in all at least 76 interviews. Today the NIH has more than 140 oral histories.

Wyndham Miles' books include: *The Chemical Warfare Service: From Laboratory to Field*, (with Leo P. Brophy and Rexmond C. Cochrane) (1959); *American Chemists and Chemical Engineers, Vol. 1*, (1976); and *American Chemists and Chemical Engineers, Vol. 2*. (1994). He has published 105 papers in the *Journal of Chemical Education*, *Chymia*, *Isis*, *Armed Forces Chemical Journal*, *Library Chronicle*, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* and other journals. He has written contributions for *Great Chemists*, *Science and Technology: Vital National Assets*, *The History of Rocket Technology*, and the *Dictionary of Scientific Biography*.

Miles gained recognition in the American Chemical Society's Division of the History of Chemistry (HIST) early in his career. He presented his first paper in 1947 and read twenty more in the next decade. Miles was rarely absent from a meeting, took an active role in the business of the division, and was always willing to accept problematic jobs. He was elected chairman of the division in 1957, re-elected two years later, and again in 1965. For many years he served as unnamed program chairman, editor of the newsletter and, in 1975 following the death of David Wilcox, took over the secretary-treasurer position for two years. He organized numerous symposia,

chaired paper-reading sections, sought to promote greater support for preservation and promotion of historical programs by the parent society, and pioneered in obtaining taped interviews with leading chemists.

In 1972, Miles was invited by the American Chemical Society to become a member of the Board-Council Committee engaged in planning the ACS centennial celebration. Later, when general planning was completed and various aspects of the program were being initiated, he was appointed to the board of editors for the ACS Centennial History that in 1976 published *A Century of Chemistry*.

Another unique interest of Miles was in the area of chemistry and warfare. He wrote several papers about early suggestions for chemical warfare, the nature of chemical agents, Fritz Haber, the Chemical Corps., and chemists and the Civil War.

In 1971, Wyndham D. Miles received the Dexter Award for manifold contributions to the advancement of the history of chemistry, in particular for his faithful work on behalf of HIST and his studies in the field.

Sources

Autobiographical material provided by Wyndham D. Miles

Aaron J. Ihde, *A Quarter Century of Dexter Awards*, 1981, unpublished manuscript. Copy in the University of Pennsylvania Library, QD21 .Q8 1981a; an abridged version can be found in *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* 3 (1989):13.

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