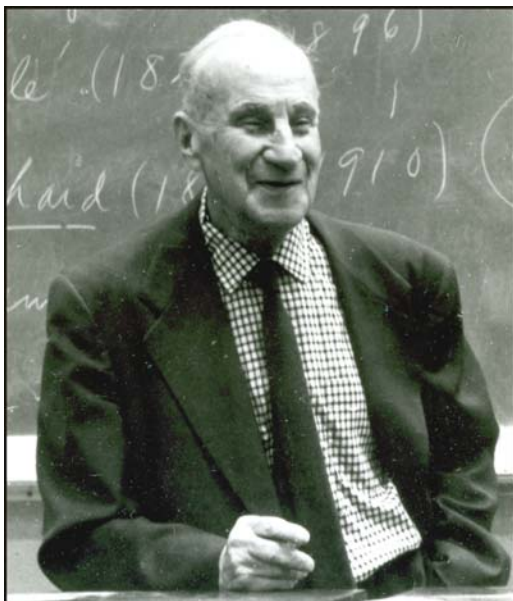


Ralph Edward Oesper (1886–1977)



Ralph Edward Oesper was born on June 14, 1886, in Cincinnati, Ohio. Entering the University of Cincinnati in 1904, he received his B.A. in 1908 and his M.A. in 1909. He took his Ph.D. there in 1914 under Lauder William Jones. After brief periods at New York University and Smith College, Oesper returned to the University of Cincinnati as a member of the chemistry faculty in 1918, where he remained until his retirement in 1951. However, this did not end his service to the University, as he continued to remain active as professor emeritus for 26 years. Professor Oesper died on December 10, 1977, at the age of 91.

Oesper was a prolific writer, publishing more than 300 papers in the fields of analytical, organic, and colloid chemistry and especially in the history of chemistry. He also used his mastery of the German language to translate nearly two dozen books in these fields, as well as countless articles. He wrote numerous short biographies of chemists, ranging from the most distinguished to some who were truly obscure. He taught a course in history of chemistry and gave many public and private lectures on the subject. In 1975 he published *The Human Side of Scientists*, a book of anecdotes about 132 chemists which reflected his deep interest in people. He served on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Chemical Education*, *Chymia*, *Mikrochemie*, and *Mikrochimica Acta*.

During his many trips to Europe, he visited working chemists and collected books and pictures for a collection which was bequeathed to the University of Cincinnati in both his name and that of his wife, Helen Wilson Oesper. Oesper also endowed a faculty position in the History of Chemistry and Chemical Education. The Oesper Collection of Books and Journals in the History of Chemistry contain most of Oesper's personal notebooks and photos and is the nucleus of the Oesper Chemistry-Biology Library. As of 2003, the Oesper Chemistry-Biology Library contained an estimated 13,000 volumes, spanning the period from 1600 to 1920. Included are approximately 4,000 chemical monographs, textbooks, and dictionaries; 8,000 journal volumes; and about 1,000 secondary monographs and journals dealing specifically with the history of chemistry and chemical biography. In 1986 a collection of chemical apparatus was added to the book and print collections. This collection currently houses more than 6,000 artifacts dating from the period 1890–1950.

In recognition of his scientific activities, he received the Eminent Chemist Award of the Cincinnati Section of the American Chemical Society and an honorary doctorate from the University of Cincinnati. In 1956, Ralph E. Oesper, professor of analytical chemistry at the University of Cincinnati, received the first Dexter Award for his career-long contributions to the history of chemistry.

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Photo courtesy of the Oesper Collections: University of Cincinnati.