

The Origin of the Name “Nylon”

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Question

What is the origin of the name “nylon”?

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Answer

The story of the development of nylon and the tragic fate of its discoverer, Wallace Hume Carothers (figure 1), are well known (1, 2). Its importance as a landmark in the evolution of commercial synthetic polymers is uncontested and its preparation is still used as a demonstration in introductory chemistry courses (3). Consequently, it comes as a disappointment that its name is totally devoid of both chemical and historical significance and was selected, not by the chemists involved in its synthesis, but by the managers and executives at Du Pont.

As detailed in Stephen Fenichell’s highly entertaining history of modern plastics and polymers, the more than 350 original contenders for the name of the new polymer included such choices as Amidarn, Amido Silk, Linex, Lastrapon, Moursheen, Poya, Rayamide, Syntex, Tensheer, and Wiralene (4). Among the more imaginative suggestions were Duparooch (short for “Du Pont pulls a rabbit of the hat”), Dupron (short for “Du Pont pulls a rabbit out of nitrogen, nature, nozzle, or naphtha”), Delawear (Du Pont is located in the state of Delaware), Duponese, and Wacara (short for Wallace Carothers).

Though the final choice of “nylon” has no intrinsic meaning, this has not prevented others from reading unintended interpretations into the name. Thus many of the visitors to the New York World’s Fair of 1939, where its discovery was first publicly announced, came away believing that it was named after the fair’s famous “Trylon” tower, whereas others believed it was a contraction of New York (NY) and London (LON). Reflecting the growing tensions between Japan and the United States shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War, the most bizarre interpretation came from a



Figure 1. Caricature of Wallace Hume Carothers (1896-1937).

Japanese newspaper which contended that Du Pont had developed the polymer for the explicit purpose of destroying the Japanese silk industry and that the name was an acronym for an anti-Japanese (Nipponese) slur.

Literature Cited

1. D. A. Hounshell, J. K. Smith, *Science and Corporate Strategy: Du Pont R&D, 1902-1980*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1988.
2. M. E. Hermes, *Enough for One Lifetime: Wallace Carothers, Inventor of Nylon*, Chemical Heritage Foundation: Philadelphia, PA, 1996.
3. B. Z. Shakhshiri, *Chemical Demonstrations*, Vol. 1., University of Wisconsin: Madison, WI, 1983, pp. 213-215.
4. S. Fenichell, *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century*, Harper Collins: New York, NY, 1997, pp. 139-143.

Do you have a question about the historical origins of a symbol, name, concept or experimental procedure used in your teaching? Address them to Dr. William B. Jensen, Oesper Collections in the History of Chemistry, Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati,

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