

Encounters with Chemistry

Herb Block

William B. Jensen

Department of Chemistry, University of Cincinnati
Cincinnati, OH 53706

Many famous nonchemists have left behind accounts of their first encounter with chemistry. Whether the person in question was a psychologist, a writer, a critic, an artist, an economist, a mathematician, or a philosopher, whether the experience was brief or prolonged, whether it was pleasant or unpleasant, the purpose of this series is to record these encounters and do so in the person's own words whenever possible.

Herb Block (figure 1) was perhaps the best known American editorial cartoonist of the period 1940-1980. Winner of four Pulitzer prizes and numerous other honors, his professional career began in 1929 at the *Chicago Daily News*, followed in 1933 by his move to the *Cleveland Newspaper Enterprise Association*, and, finally, to the *Washington Post* in 1946, where he remained until his death 55 years later.

Block's encounter with chemistry did not occur in school, but rather at home, as his father, David Julian Block (figure 2), was a chemist by profession, who later ran his own private consulting firm under the title of *Block Chemical Laboratories*. As described in his 1993 autobiography, *A Cartoonist's Life*:¹

My father was a chemist. I think he was also a genius ... Of course, he didn't think of himself as one and we kids didn't think of him that way either. He was Papa. He worked in his laboratory. It was not a mysterious place but one where he let us drop in and see the shelves of bottles, beakers and flasks, and where we could look through the microscope ...

During World War I he made possible the first commercial production of mustard oil and various dyes formally imported from Germany, and engineered construction of the first American plant for the production of aspirin. Among many successful commercial products he developed were Musterole and Rit dye soaps ...

Among the hundreds of things my dad developed, a couple come to mind. One was a method of printing the luminescent markings on radium watches and clocks. The early luminous markings had been painted on by women who got a good point on their brushes by putting them to their tongues, which produced a form of radium poisoning.

He solved another sticky problem with a method of



Figure 1. Herb Block (1909-2001) as caricatured by fellow editorial cartoonist Jim Borgman.

chrome plating or electroplating that made chrome stay put instead of flaking off. He developed a "punctured-proof" tire by filling it with a light, resilient gum-like substance that rode as smoothly as air. It didn't become popular as a tire filler but had other uses in products like erasers. A minor potboiler during the Depression was the press-on patch to save sewing jobs. He developed an early antifreeze for cars, which my brother Rich sold one winter on the boulevard drive along Chicago's lakefront while I played on the ice near the shore.

Synthetic sugar (before sugar substitutes) did not seem practical except during wartime shortages. But I recall that after this was written up in the newspapers,

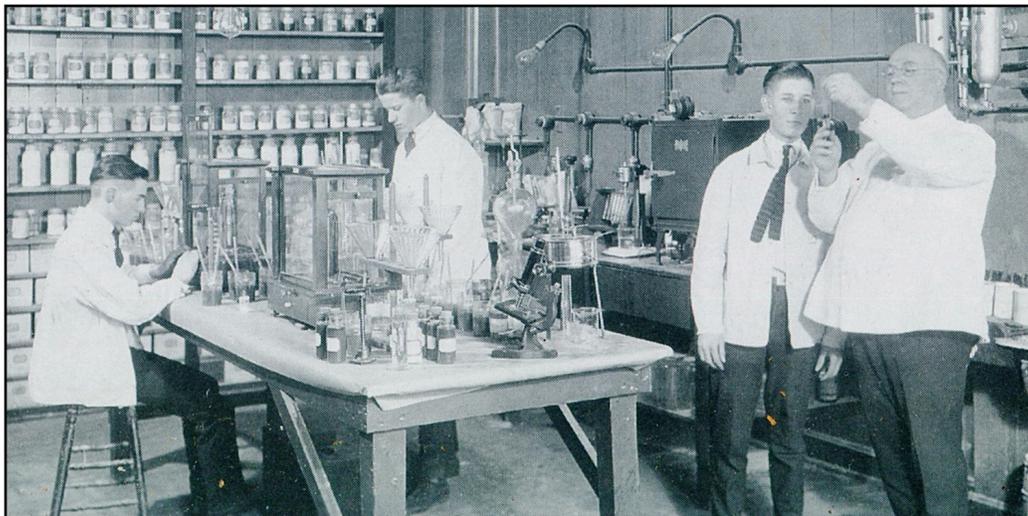


Figure 2. Herb Block's father, David Julian Block, on the far right posing with his laboratory staff.

my dad's office was rifled in a way that did not suggest common burglary. Sugar interests seemed like possible suspects. During the flu epidemic of 1918, he rigged up at home a chemical-and-burning mantel device that apparently served as an air purifier. However it worked and whatever its benefits, our family survived that epidemic, which took countless lives.

However, despite this positive image of his father and his professional activities, chemistry does not appear to have ever tempted Block as a career choice. Already by age 11 he was taking courses at the Art Institute of Chicago and, as a teenager, was active as a cartoonist for not only his high-school newspaper but for several local newspapers as well. The same was equally true of the well-known actor, William Holden (whose real name was William Beedle Jr.), and whose

father was also a chemist. This failure of a career in chemistry to pass from one generation to the next is common enough to have been commented upon by the sociologists Anslem Strauss and Lee Rainwater in their 1962 study of the American chemical profession:²

It is well known that a fair degree of occupational inheritance characterizes the medical, legal, and military professions. As we have already seen, this is virtually absent among the current generation of chemists.

References and Notes

1. H. Block, *A Cartoonist's Life*, Macmillan: New York, NY, 1993, pp. 10-12.
2. M. J. Swartz, L. Rainwater, *The Professional Scientist: A Study of American Chemists*, Aldine: Chicago, IL, 1962, p. 54.

