CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

ELKAN R. BLOUT

Transcripts of Interviews
Conducted by

James J. Bohning and Arnold Thackray

at

Harvard School of Public Health, Harvard Medical School, and Cambridge, Massachusetts

on

30 May 1991, 13 September 2002, and 22 November 2002

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION
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ELKAN R. BLOUT

1919	Born in New York, New York on 2 July

Education

1939	B.A., chemistry, Princeton University
1942	Ph.D., chemistry, Columbia University

Professional Experience

1939-1942	Research Assistant, Columbia University
1942-1943	Research Fellow in Chemistry, Harvard University
	Polaroid Corporation
1943-1962	Chemist, Research Division
1948-1958	Associate Director of Research
1958-1962	Vice President and General Manager of Research
1950-1962	Research Associate, The Children's Cancer Research Foundation, The Children's Hospital Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts
	Harvard Medical School
1950-1952	Research Associate in Pathology
1956-1960	Research Associate in Pathology
1960-1962	Lecturer in Biophysics
1962-1964	Professor of Biological Chemistry
1964-1990	Edward S. Harkness Professor of Biological Chemistry
1965-1969	Chairman, Department of Biological Chemistry
1990-present	Edward S. Harkness Professor of Biological Chemistry, Emeritus
	Harvard School of Public Health
1978-1989	Dean for Academic Affairs
1986-1988	Chairman, Department of Environmental Science and Physiology
1987-1990	Director, Division of Biological Sciences
1980-1990	Treasurer, National Academy of Sciences

Honors

1942	National Research Council Fellow, Harvard University
1954	Fellow, New York Academy of Sciences
1955	Fellow, American Academy of Arts and Sciences
1958	Fellow, American Association for the Advancement of Science
1962	A.M. (honorary), Harvard University
1963	Fellow, Optical Society of America
1969	Member, National Academy of Sciences
1970	Class of 1939 Achievement Award, Princeton University
1976	D.Sc. (honorary), Loyola University
1976	Foreign Member, USSR Academy of Sciences
1979	Member, Institute of Medicine
1982	Honor Scroll Award, Massachusetts Institute of Chemists, Division of the American Institute of Chemists
1990	National Medal of Science
1990	Elkan R. Blout Professorship in the Biological Sciences, Harvard University Medical School and School of Public Health
1991	Ralph F. Hirschmann Award in Peptide Chemistry, American Chemical Society

ABSTRACT

Elkan R. Blout begins the interview with a description of his family and childhood. Growing up in Manhattan as an only child, Blout was cared for by his parents, aunts, and uncles. He attended DeWitt Clinton High School, in the Bronx, earning marks that were high enough to skip three grades. Blout was still too young to attend college when he graduated, so he enrolled in the Philips Exeter Academy. The school was tough both scholastically and socially, but he made it through by attending his classes regularly, and playing bridge. After a year at Exeter, Blout attended Princeton University, becoming one of only twelve Jewish students accepted in 1935. As a Jewish student, Blout struggled against discrimination from both the University and the students. He graduated in 1939, and married Joan E. Dreyfus that same year. In 1942, Blout received his Ph.D. in chemistry from Columbia University. He then accepted a fellowship at Harvard University, where he worked with Louis Feiser and R. B. Woodward. After a year, Edwin H. Land offered Blout a position at the Polaroid Company. At Polaroid, he helped develop the instant photographic process and the color translating microscope. At the same time, he received a research grant to study synthetic polypeptides, and established a spectroscopy laboratory at Children's Hospital of Boston. In 1961, Blout left Polaroid for more academic pursuits at Harvard Medical School. During his long, fruitful relationship with Harvard University, Blout has done much to improve both Harvard's Medical School and Harvard's School of Public Health. In 1984, Blout divorced Joan Dreyfus and married Gail Ferris. In 1991, Blout became the senior science advisor for the Food and Drug Administration. Blout concludes the interview by expressing gratitude for the John Philips Award, which he was awarded in 1998.

INTERVIEWERS

James J. Bohning is Professor of Chemistry Emeritus at Wilkes University, where he was a faculty member from 1959 to 1990. He served there as chemistry department chair from 1970 to 1986 and environmental science department chair from 1987 to 1990. He was chair of the American Chemical Society's Division of the History of Chemistry in 1986, received the Division's outstanding paper award in 1989, and presented more than twenty-five papers before the Division at national meetings of the Society. He has been on the advisory committee of the Society's National Historic Chemical Landmarks committee since its inception in 1992. He developed the oral history program of the Chemical Heritage Foundation beginning in 1985, and was the Foundation's Director of Oral History from 1990 to 1995. He currently writes for the American Chemical Society News Service.

Arnold Thackray is President of the Chemical Heritage Foundation. He majored in the physical sciences before turning to the history of science, receiving a Ph.D. from Cambridge University in 1966. He has held appointments at Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, the Institute for Advanced Study, the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In 1983 he received the Dexter Award from the American Chemical Society for outstanding contributions to the history of chemistry. He served on the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania for more than a quarter of a century. There, he was the founding chairman of the Department of History and Sociology of Science, where he is the Joseph Priestley Professor Emeritus.

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NOTES

1. W. D. Paist, E. R. Blout, F. C. Uhle, and R. C. Elderfield, "Studies on Lactones Related to the Cardiac Aglycones. III. The Properties of β-Substituted $\Delta^{\alpha,\beta}$-Butenolides and a Suggested Revision of the Structure of the Side Chain of the Digitalis Strophanthus Aglycones," *Journal of Organic Chemistry*, 6 (1941): 273-289.

2. See note 1 above; E. R. Blout and R. C. Elderfield, "Synthesis of β-Substituted $\Delta^{\alpha,\beta}$-Butenolides from Methyl Ketones," *Journal of Organic Chemistry*, 8 (1943): 29-36; E. R. Blout, J. Fried, and R. C. Elderfield, "The Condensation of Ethyl Oxalate with Ethyl γ-Cyclohexylcrotonate and a Method for Predicting the Products from Such Condensations," *Journal of Organic Chemistry*, 8 (1943): 37-42.

3. R. B. Woodward and E. R. Blout, "The Condensation of Acyloins with Ethyl Acetate," *Journal of the American Chemical Society*, 65 (1943): 562-565.

4. For a complete list of Elkan Blout's publications, see Chemical Heritage Foundation Oral History Research File #0095.

5. E. H. Land, E. R. Blout, D. S. Grey, M. S. Flower, H. Husek, R. C. Jones, C. H. Matz, and D. P. Merrill, "A Color Translating Ultraviolet Microscope," *Science*, 109 (1949): 371-374.

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