

HIST CENTENNIAL MEMORIES

AARON JOHN IHDE (1909-2000)

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Introduction

As promised in the HIST Centennial special issue of this journal, the *Bulletin* is running centennial features in each of its 2022 numbers (1). That Centennial issue included several articles that discussed chemist historians and historians of chemistry. This feature focuses on one of the key figures from HIST's first hundred years who stood firmly in both of those professional camps, Aaron J. Ihde (Figure 1). It highlights aspects of his personal and professional lives using materials graciously supplied by his daughter, Gretchen Ihde Serrie and others previously published by HIST. The spotlight begins with a biographical sketch prepared by long-time HIST historian James J. Bohning for the Division's collection of biographies of Dexter Award winners (2). After reviewing Ihde's career, this feature concludes with personal reminiscences excerpted from the eulogy prepared by his daughter for his memorial service in 2000 (3).

Ihde was no stranger to the *Bulletin*, despite his having retired before the journal was founded. He

was a frequent contributor to its early numbers, including a series of articles on winners of the Division's Dexter Award (4). Ihde was on the cover of the *Bulletin* shortly after his death. Between the covers of that issue were several articles about him by HIST colleagues and former students (5) as well as a final article by him (6).

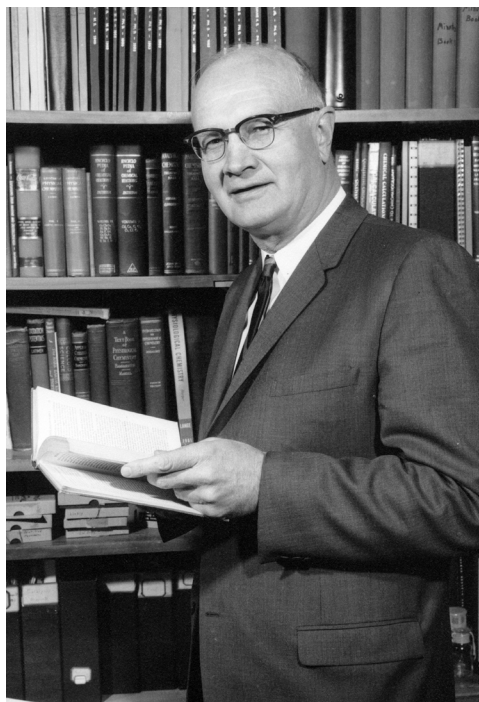


Figure 1. Aaron J. Ihde in his element (i.e., among books) in the middle 1960s. (Courtesy of Gretchen Ihde Serrie and the University of Wisconsin archives.)

Biographical (2)

Aaron John Ihde was born on December 31, 1909, and raised on a dairy farm near Neenah, Wisconsin. His parents were the children of immigrants (7); they had little formal education, but they treasured books and learning. Aaron was only the fourth of his one-room country "K through 8" school to go on to high school. His parents realized his lack of interest in farming and supported their son to attend the University of Wisconsin in Madison. He graduated in 1931 from the university's "Chemistry Course" and accepted a job as the staff chemist at the Blue Valley Creamery Company in Chicago, Illinois (later acquired by Beatrice Foods), where he did

research and development on food products. It was at this time that he developed a deep interest in the history of food controls.

In early 1938 he returned to the University of Wisconsin in Madison where he majored in food chemistry (under Henry Schuette) and minored in biochemistry (under Harry Steenbock), earning his doctorate in 1941. It was Schuette who furthered his latent interests in the history of chemistry. After one year of teaching in the chemistry department at Butler University, Indianapolis, Indiana, he returned to Madison for a one-year instructorship in the chemistry department. Following two renewals of this appointment, in 1945 he was hired on the tenure track and carried a heavy teaching load in the freshman chemistry program during and after the war years. In the summer of 1946, he revived a dormant course in the history of chemistry previously taught by Louis Kahlenberg (until his retirement in 1940). Ihde's interest in the history of science was further recognized in 1947 when he was invited to teach the first science course, "The Physical Universe," of a two-year sequence of general studies of an interdisciplinary nature. Ihde's course, which drew material from chemistry, physics, and astronomy, sought to show the nature of science and the growth of scientific ideas through the historic debates associated with planetary systems, atomic and molecular theory, and cosmic concepts. He continued to teach the course until his retirement in 1980; more than 7,000 students took this course under his leadership. By 1949, Ihde had placed the history of science at the center of the new Integrated Liberal Studies Program at the University of Wisconsin.

Ihde's thrust toward history of science was accelerated by three parallel developments: 1) the creation of a major program in the history of science at Wisconsin—started in 1941 by Henry Guerlac and continued after the war by R. Stauffer and Marshall Clagett, with ancillary history programs in pharmacy, from Georg Urdang and medicine from Erwin Ackerknecht; 2) the university's purchase of Denis Duveen's book collection—supplementing the Thordarson Collection (1945, science and technology) and the later purchase of two collections of Hugh Sinclair (1957, Boyle and Priestley) and William A. Cole (1978, rich in revised editions and translations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European treatises); and 3) a year spent at Harvard University in 1951-52 as a Carnegie Intern in General Education, working with James B. Conant, Leonard Nash, and Thomas Kuhn in teaching Conant's Case History course in science. That year also permitted him to become associated with

George Sarton, I. B. Cohen, and Gerald Holton in the history of science program they were developing at Harvard. In 1957, the University of Wisconsin's History of Science Department welcomed Ihde officially to its ranks. Ihde's research and publications transformed the field of the history of chemistry. The intellectual fruits of six decades at Wisconsin as a student, as a faculty member, and as professor emeritus occupy seven bound volumes in the stacks of the Memorial Library and consist of 342 items including a posthumous paper published in the *Bulletin for the History of Chemistry* [(6)]. He made the University of Wisconsin the premier center for the study of the history of chemistry especially after he was joined on the faculty by his first Ph.D. student Robert Siegfried. Over the years, Aaron supervised 21 Ph.D.s in history of science, as well as a number of masters students and post-doctoral fellows. His best known books are *The Development of Modern Chemistry* (1964) and his volume of *Selected Readings in the History of Chemistry* (1965), culled from the *Journal of Chemical Education* and co-edited with the journal's editor William Kieffer. *The Development of Modern Chemistry*, the standard textbook in the field, included the history of chemical technology, biochemistry, agricultural chemistry, and chemical physics, extending coverage to the first half of the twentieth century. He wrote broadly and widely about Paracelsus and Boyle, on classic nineteenth-century European scientists such as Avogadro, Faraday, Bunsen, and Baeyer, on the development of chemistry in the United States, and on the history of the pure food law.

Ihde was an advocate of progressive causes, especially the social responsibilities of scientists, and the purity and safety of drugs. From 1955 to 1968 he was a member of the Wisconsin Food Standards Advisory Committee and served as its chair for two years. In 1958 he was offered the position of scientific director of Consumers Union, but declined a position that would have doubled his salary because he loved his work as a scholar and teacher. In the early 1960s Aaron Ihde and other University of Wisconsin professors, including Grant Cottam, James Crow, Arthur Hasler, Hugh Iltis, Karl Schmidt, and Van Potter, advocated public and scholarly discussion of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and the impact of pesticides on the environment. As a result, they were accused of spreading false and misleading information and some questioned their competence and their qualifications to speak to the public about pesticides.

Ihde was admired and respected by students and colleagues. All his dealings with students were models of organization, dignity, and respect for scholarly inquiry.

He was generous in making all his books and resources available to any visitor to his office. He promoted and enjoyed contacts with alumni and former students. He was the long-time editor of the *Badger Chemist*. His interest in the history of the University of Wisconsin Department



Figure 2. The Ihde family in 1948. Left to right: Olive and Aaron (rear), Gretchen and John (front). (Courtesy of Gretchen Ihde Serrie.)

of Chemistry resulted in the publication in 1990 of his last book: *Chemistry, As Viewed from Bascom's Hill: A History of the Chemistry Department at the University of Wisconsin in Madison*.

Ihde received the Dexter Award in 1968 and the University of Wisconsin's Chancellor's Award for Distinguished Teaching in 1978. He served as president of the Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, chair of the ACS Wisconsin Section, and chair of the ACS History of Chemistry Division (1962-1964). He was elected fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. He remained active in retirement and devoted himself to reading, writing, family visits, and volunteer work in the Arboretum, removing invasive honeysuckle and buckthorn thickets from the Lost City Forest section of the Arboretum; over the years he single-handedly restored a large wildflower meadow. He spent his final eighteen months with his daughter

Gretchen and her family in Sarasota, Florida, where he began to show symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. He is survived by his two children and their families. [His wife, Olive Jane Ihde, née Tipler, had died in 1988. Figure 2 shows the Ihde family.] Aaron Ihde died on February 23, 2000, in Sarasota, Florida.

Family Remembrances (3)

[Figure 3 shows Ihde with his daughter, Gretchen, when he received his doctorate in 1941. Figure 4 shows the same two in a scenic spot in 1993.]



Figure 3. Aaron Ihde, about to receive his Ph.D. in 1941, with his daughter Gretchen. (Courtesy of Gretchen Ihde Serrie.)

So many of Dad's, and Mom's, students, colleagues, and friends have written our family since his death. The word most often used to describe him has been "gentleman." One person called him a "gentleman and a scholar," which made me chuckle, because we used to tease people by saying, "You're a gentlemen and a scholar." But Dad was a proud scholar, and he was a gentleman.

One of the writers didn't have enough room at the end of the line for gentleman and divided it. The separate words almost pulsated at the end and beginning of two lines, becoming a "gentle man." And, indeed, my father was a gentle man, he was the gentlest of men,

For years, for some reason I can't explain, one memory of my father has always stood stark in my mind, I was not more than eight or ten, my brother John, four or six. We were travelling back to Madison after a weekend visiting our grandparents, a ritual my parents, both only children, devotedly repeated every two weeks. It was a dreary November day, cold and grey. Our car hit a pheasant, which dragged itself into the woods. Dad stopped the car, leaving Mom, John, and me, and traipsed into the woods, searching for the pheasant for half an hour. He did not find the bird and was tormented by the incident the rest of the way home. If he had found it, he would have taken it home and tried to nurse it back to health.

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"Gentle" is the first adjective that describes him. Another word does as well, a very old fashioned one, "bashful." Dad was an incredibly shy person. Actually, Ihde (pronounced Ide) was not his real last name. He was born Aaron Ihde (pronounced Ede). As a freshman at the University of Wisconsin, he never had the courage to correct his teachers when they mispronounced his name "Aaron Ihde [Ide]." When he returned for graduate study, as he left for his first day of classes Mom told him, "Now, Aaron, you have to inform your professors you are Aaron Ihde [Ede]." He came home that evening, hanging his head, and said, "Olive, I just can't do it." So they led two lives, Aaron and Olive Ihde [Ede] in Neenah, Wisconsin, and Aaron and Olive Ihde [Ide] in Madison, with relatives muttering about the airs Olive and Aaron had put on since arriving in the big city.

Mom told me that in high school Dad was so shy that whenever a girl spoke to him he would turn beet red. A favorite Neenah High School pastime was to have a girl seek out Aaron and walk down the hallway with him while her friends watched him blush to the roots of his white-blond hair.

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My father was a temperate man: little wine, no cigarettes, my mother the only woman in his life. However, he did have one addiction, from which no twelve-step recovery program could ever have cured him: it was books. He never met a book he didn't love. If books were hard liquor, he could have been the father in *Angela's Ashes*. There was never a room or hallway or attic in any house we owned that didn't have bookcases. The year we spent in Boston, when Dad was a Carnegie fellow at Harvard, he would come home almost tipsy with the joy of having spent the day imbibing in the used book stores

of Cambridge. I remember him actually throwing his hat up the stairs one night as he arrived with a big box of books he had purchased, to see if he was still welcome home after this latest binge.

He rarely read fiction—always serious material, always underlining and making marginal notes, even, for the past two years, in many of the books in my patient husband's library. When Dad finally had to leave our home to live in the Westminster Asbury memory unit, for several weeks he carried about with him his chosen reading material—*The Food Crisis in Pre-History*. The saddest loss in his last year was his ability to read.



Figure 4. Gretchen Ihde Serrie and Aaron Ihde in Northern Wisconsin, 1993. (Courtesy of Gretchen Ihde Serrie.)

I decided to try to sum up the life lessons I learned from my parents. They are these.

1) Have a social conscience. This was usually preceded by, "Gretchen, will you ever develop a social conscience?" The words "social conscience" are not heard frequently nowadays, but they meant striving, to the best of your ability, to take good care of the individuals in your life, of those in the community in which you lived, and of the larger community which is this earth and all of its resources.

2) Desserts are good for you. Have desserts for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and as a snack before you go to bed. If you are grandchildren, have even more desserts. If you are grandparents, facilitate this.

3) Vote for the Democrat. Mom cast her very first vote for Herbert Hoover, an act Dad delighted in teasing her about. My grandma, a liberated women who worked in the fields beside her husband, pitching hay and driving horses, refused to vote, feeling that was not a women's

place. But in 1932 my grandpa popped her into the car and said, “We’ve got to vote for Franklin Roosevelt And I’m taking you with me.” That was the beginning of a fierce and unwavering family allegiance to the Democratic Party, although my Dad’s Puritanic soul was sorely tested by Bill Clinton.

The corollary to “Vote for the Democrat” is: Liberal is not a bad word. Dad was a proud and unabashed liberal, be it in politics or in education, as in “Integrated Liberal Studies.” Dad also never forgave *Time Magazine* for calling Adlai Stevenson an “egghead,” punishing *Time* by cancelling his subscription and depriving himself of what for years had been among his favorite recreational reading material.

4) Books are good. More books are better.

5) Co-ops are good. Buy your gas at a co-op gas station, even if you have to drive 100 extra miles out of the way to get to it. And keep all of your money in a Credit Union.

6) Historians never throw anything away. This tradition is carried on by his grand-daughter Jennie. Amongst the incredible UW memorabilia we found on moving day from Dad’s Chemistry Department office were glass shards from the explosion in Sterling Hall during that period in the 60’s which so traumatized and demoralized Dad’s generation of professors.

7) Let your children follow their dreams. Dad didn’t discover until the middle of his career that what he really wanted to be when he grew up was a historian of chemistry. His expectations of us were only that whatever we did, at whatever period of our life, we would do it responsibly and to the very best of our abilities.

8) Sports are an important part of life and not just for guys. He told me, “I don’t want to have a daughter who throws like a girl!” (not a very P.C. way to put it nowadays, but not bad for the forties) and taught me to throw a baseball just as well as the boys in the neighborhood. He was proud that his granddaughters participated in sports.

9) Fill your life with music. Our radio was tuned to WHA from the time I woke up until I went to bed. These two kids from central Wisconsin farms had exquisite taste in music.

10) Make the best of things. Our greatest and final test is how we leave this life, and my father got an A plus. He lost a great part of that marvelous mind and memory, yet retained what is most important, the ability to love. He told us he loved us from the time we were born until his very last hours in the hospital. He didn’t love us because we’d received an honor, gotten an A on a test, won a basketball game, played a good concert, but just because we were his children, grandchildren, students, or friends. Kind of a precursor to Mr. Rogers, a 225 pound Mr. Rogers, he loved us all “just the way we were”.

Lastly, and most important, I learned from my Dad, and my Mom, what a better place the world would be if each and every one of us were “gentle persons”.

References and Notes

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7. His grandparents immigrated to the US in the 1850s from Mecklenburg, in the northeastern part of the current German nation state. Ihde grew up in a German-speaking home. (G. Ihde Serrie, personal communication.)