

## John H. Wotiz (1919–2001)



John Wotiz was born in Ostrava, Czechoslovakia, on April 12, 1919. Wotiz enjoyed his childhood in Moravská, Ostrava, with his brother and parents, and first developed an interest in chemistry from his tutor in high school. "After graduating high school in 1937, he attended the Technical University (Czech Polytechnicum) of Prague, specializing in chemical engineering. Due to the rising threat of Nazi invasion, John and his brother left Czechoslovakia for the United States in 1939 to complete their schooling. Shortly after arriving in the U.S., Wotiz received a scholarship through the International Student Service to attend Furman University, where he completed his B.S. degree in chemistry in 1941. Wotiz then attended the University of Richmond, receiving his master's degree (on polyhydroxy amines) in chemistry in 1943." During the later stages of World War II, while working towards his Ph.D. at Ohio State University under Melvin S. Newman, Wotiz served two years in the U.S. Army as a lieutenant in the Chemical Warfare Service and gained

his U.S. citizenship in 1944.

After receiving his Ph.D. (on rearrangements of acetylene compounds) from Ohio State University in 1948, Wotiz accepted an instructor's position with the University of Pittsburgh. In 1954, he was promoted to associate professor of chemistry. He remained there for nine years, leaving in 1957 to become group leader and then senior group leader at Diamond Alkali Company in Painesville, Ohio, where he was awarded 44 U.S. and foreign patents. In 1962 "he returned to academic life, becoming professor and chairman of the Chemistry Department at Marshall University in Huntington, WV. There, Wotiz worked to improve the chemistry curriculum and to build a research-oriented program. In 1967, he joined Southern Illinois University (SIU), in Carbondale, Illinois, as chairman of the Chemistry and Biochemistry Department, where he would remain for the rest of his career." While at SIU he worked with numerous graduate students, established an extensive international graduate student program, conducted research on allene chemistry, published numerous papers in organic chemistry, and worked as a consultant with Air Reduction Company (Airco).

"In 1969, Wotiz made an extended study of chemistry education in the Soviet Union under an exchange arrangement between the National Academy of Sciences and the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences. Later, he visited other East European, Asian, and Pacific Rim countries" to conduct similar teaching system comparisons. This led to the development of exchange programs involving graduate students and faculty between SIU and many foreign universities, primarily in Eastern Europe, notable among them the Technical University in his birthplace, Ostrava, Czech Republic. In 1989, he retired from Southern Illinois University and was named professor emeritus. He continued to work with SIU on the foreign exchange programs.

"Wotiz had a deep interest in the history of chemistry. As a result, he wrote and published a directory of international chemistry museums, and, beginning in 1971, he organized and conducted widely attended chemical history tours throughout Europe. Wotiz was a long-time member of the Division of the History of Chemistry (HIST) of the American Chemical Society (ACS) and served as its chairman in 1980. Wotiz performed extensive research and was a renowned expert on the life and theories of F. August Kekulé, and was editor of *The Kekulé Riddle: A Chal-*

*lence for Chemists and Psychologists* (1993). Extending his interest in the history of chemistry, Wotiz, with the ACS, began to explore the idea of establishing a national center for chemical history." That idea eventually came to fruition and today is The Chemical Heritage Foundation in Philadelphia.

In 1982, John H. Wotiz received the Dexter Award for his contributions to the history of chemistry. In that same year he was the recipient of the Gold Medal (Vysoká Škola Bánská), from Ostrava Technical University. Wotiz received the *Doctorem Honoris Causa* (honorary Doctorate) from Ostrava Technical University, Czech Republic, in 1998, recognizing his personal contributions in chemistry and his work on foreign exchange programs.

At Ohio State he met his future wife, Kathryn (Kay), and they were married on February 23 1945. John and Kay had three daughters, Anita, Karen and Vivian. An avid bridge player, Wotiz received an American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) Life Master award in duplicate bridge. John H. Wotiz died on August 21, 2001, at age 82, in an automobile accident in Morehead, KY. That tragic accident also claimed the life of his wife Kathryn.

### Sources

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Quoted text is taken from John H. Wotiz, interview by Herbert T. Pratt at Newcastle, Delaware and Washington, DC, 7, 8, and 10 August 2000 (Philadelphia: Chemical Heritage Foundation, Oral History Transcript #0197):

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Photo courtesy of Anita Wotiz.