

A philanthropic career: Arnold Beckman and chemical heritage

During the 25th anniversary of its Beckman Center for the History of Chemistry, the US Chemical Heritage Foundation reflects on the career of a founding benefactor.



CHF's Othmer Library where Beckman Center scholars study. This view is from the mezzanine above the library where the best of CHF's Alchemy Art is on display.

In 2012, the Beckman Center for the History of Chemistry at the Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF) marks 25 years of support for scholarship in the history of chemistry and early science.

But really, the party should have been last year. In the academic year 2011–12 and continuing this year, the Beckman Center at CHF is the largest grantor of fellowships in the history of science in the US.

No Ivy League university or national foundation holds first place in backing the scholarship. Across America, funding has been cut for the study of the history of science as well as science itself. Arnold and Mabel Beckman created the program when CHF was just five years old and occupied two basement rooms on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. Who could have foreseen that a modest program in a fledgling organisation could become the national leader.

If anyone could see that clearly into the future, it was Arnold Beckman (1900–2004). In 1986 Beckman gave CHF

\$2 million. In a few years, the Beckman gift led to others. It would be easy to make a case that without Arnold Beckman, CHF would not exist in its current form.

But betting on a winner at the beginning of a game is the mark of Beckman's business career. He is well known as one of the first innovators in automatic instruments. He was one of the first to see the potential of automatic instruments in chemistry – what some have called 'The Second Scientific Revolution'. In his 30s before the Second World War, Beckman founded his first company, Beckman Instruments, making the automatic pH meter and the DU spectrophotometer.

After the war, Beckman saw the potential of semiconductors in electronics. He brought Nobel laureate William Shockley to the West Coast from Bell Labs and set him up in business to make transistors. Beckman was going to set Shockley up in business near Beckman's offices in the Los Angeles area. Shockley insisted on living near his family in San Francisco Bay

The Beckman Center:

- has given fellowships to 178 scholars from all over the world to work at CHF and awarded nearly 200 travel grants to use the CHF Library & Museum collections
- will support 17 long- and short-term fellows in residence at CHF during the 2012–13 academic year
- organises and conducts at least two international academic conferences every year at CHF
- forms the largest physical community of historians interested in chemical topics
- provides an intellectual community for fellows, with a weekly talk series and bimonthly writing seminar to promote scholarly engagement and development for fellows and CHF staff
- offers historians and sociologists of science an opportunity to share their original research with a wider public.



Lawrence M. Principe (right), the Drew Professor of the Humanities at Johns Hopkins University in the Department of History of Science and Technology and the Department of Chemistry and senior scholar at CHF, discusses a 16th century print in CHF's DuPont Gallery with a visitor.

Area. The place we now know as Silicon Valley owes its existence to Beckman's investment and Shockley's desire to be near home.

Beckman helped to bring the automatic instrument industry into existence; he was one of the founders of Silicon Valley and the high-tech revolution that followed, and his prescient gift in 1987 leads the nation in sustaining scholarship in the history of chemistry.

CHF had the privilege of bestowing one of the final scientific honours in Arnold Beckman's illustrious career. In 2000, the year in which Beckman began his second century of life, he received the Centennial Othmer Gold Medal, a special edition of CHF's highest award and an especially appropriate award for a

man of achievement, innovation, learning and generosity. The qualification for the Othmer Gold Medal could have been written for Beckman's life:

The Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF) established the Othmer Gold Medal to honour outstanding individuals who have made multifaceted contributions to our chemical and scientific heritage through outstanding activity in such areas as innovation, entrepreneurship, research, education, public understanding, legislation, or philanthropy.

Neil Gussman <NeilG@chemheritage.org> is Strategic Communications and Media Relations Manager at the Chemical Heritage Foundation.



Techstaff: the catalyst for scientific careers.

Servicing Australia's leading scientific and technical employers for over 20 years.

Be first to know about the best chemistry roles; register at www.techstaff.com.au.

VIC: 03 9864 6050 NSW: 02 9432 3333 QLD: 07 3347 7600