**ASBMB Reminiscences**

**Instruments Were More Valuable than Biochemists**

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As part of our Centennial Celebration, we recently asked members to contribute reminiscences of their early thoughts about becoming a scientist, their experience as postdocs, their first paper published, their first lecture at an ASBMB Meeting, the friendships and connections they formed with other ASBMB members, their impressions of the first ASBMB meeting they attended, and anything else they thought pertinent. Here is another contribution. We believe you will find it interesting, and we look forward to receiving and publishing more reminiscences. Please send to them to editor@asbmb.org.

This is a story about the “pecking order” of chemists in university settings in the mid-1960s in the USA.

We all knew the mathematicians were at the top of the order of science. The physicists thought they should be on top, and maybe they were correct.

Let us look into the chemistry building of 40 years ago.

Near the top of the building, in clean cool quarters, were the physical chemists. They had an aura signifying the top of the chemistry order. They seemed to have some link to Godliness, because students were known to pray in order to pass physical chemistry.

The organic chemists present in large numbers were an odoriferous bunch with a great eagerness for recognition of their success in synthesizing chemicals that would enhance our culture and revolutionize our way of life. They had close access to the news media and proudly announced that the organic chemicals they made would soon treat, cure and prevent all of the medical maladies of human health.

The organic chemists also turned out new pesticides and herbicides which appeared to be of great value for American agriculture. The news media knew that it was the farmers who demanded crop protection chemicals, applied these organic chemicals into the soil. Some of these agrochemicals remained for long periods in the soil and surface water, and in some places are still in the ground water today. The media reported that in farm country an increase in child birth defects occurred and seemed to be caused by these agrochemicals. No, the chemists did not put the chemicals in the ground, but there was, and still is a public perception that these chemicals are “bad” and hence, “bad” chemists are to blame.

The inorganic chemists and analytical chemists were a quiet lot. They did not make “waves,” and went about their business without fanfare since grants from the NIH and NSF were scarce. Good positions were soon available when the students graduated.

During this time in the chemistry departments where were the biochemists? I will tell you. The biochemists were down in the basement of the chemistry building over in the corner where the pipes dripped and the faucets leaked. The quarters were less than desirable since the temperature of the rooms was either too hot or too cold.

But the instruments in the chemistry building were in climate-controlled rooms.

Did this mean that the instruments were more valuable than the lowly biochemists?

Lowly biochemists?

A revolution was on the way. Twenty years later the biochemists were garnering significant grant money from, NIH, NSF, USDA, EPA, FDA and great money (and recognition) was arriving from agricultural commodity trade groups.

Thus, the “pecking order” of chemists changed, and the moral to be noted:

Always be kind to the people in the basement; you many meet the same people when they move into your quarters.

*ASBMB member*