

Albert Washington Laubengayer

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Albert W. Laubengayer, known to his colleagues as “Lauby”, was associated with the chemistry department for over seventy years. He was a kind and gracious man, warm hearted, friendly and concerned for the welfare of others. He contributed immensely to the development and the character of the present day department.

Born on a Kansas wheat farm, Lauby entered Cornell as a freshman chemistry student in 1917, just in time to be inducted into the Student Army Training Corps. After graduation in 1921 with a B. Chem. degree, he went to Oregon State College as an instructor in chemistry. He returned to Cornell for graduate study in 1923 as a member of the first group of graduate students to occupy the new Baker Laboratory. He received a Ph.D. in 1926 under Professor Louis M. Dennis and began his postdoctoral career at Cornell with a Heckscher Fellowship (1926) and as lecturer in inorganic chemistry (1927-28). He retired from the department in 1966 with the well deserved title of professor emeritus.

Professor Laubengayer was an outstanding research chemist who was voted one of the Ten Most Outstanding Inorganic Chemists in the U.S.A. by the Chicago Section of the American Chemical society in 1947. Lauby’s research at Cornell was mainly in the area of synthetic inorganic chemistry and he was a pioneer in the development of boron chemistry. He prepared and studied novel boron hydrides, organo-boron and heterocyclic boron-nitrogen compounds. His work provided an important basis for further developments by later generations of chemists. One of his major achievements was the preparation of crystals of pure elemental boron. This result made possible the determination of an accurate x-ray structure of the material and thus contributed to the important discovery of a unique form of bonding between boron atoms in polyhedral structures. In later years before his retirement, his research turned to the synthesis of inorganic polymers containing boron-nitrogen and aluminum-nitrogen frameworks. In addition to his research activities Lauby always emphasized the importance of teaching. In hiring and promoting faculty, he could be counted upon to raise the right questions about the quality of a candidate’s teaching. This emphasis grew out of his genuine concern for students. To Lauby, Cornell existed primarily for the students.

Lauby himself was a dedicated and effective teacher. He would rise at 5 a.m. to prepare for his 8 a.m. general chemistry lectures. Clear exposition, lively demonstrations, and great enthusiasm for chemistry were the hallmarks of the lectures in which he shared his impressive knowledge of the chemistry of the elements. Lauby

was also devoted to graduate education. He enjoyed working with his graduate students and over fifty students received their degrees under his direction. Lauby had a quick and active mind, boundless energy, and notably good judgment. In motivating and evaluating students, he managed to find the proper balance between high standards and realistic expectations.

Professor Laubengayer had a great loyalty to the department and worked hard at instilling a similar loyalty in other members of the faculty. He was a strong proponent of recruiting the best young chemists and of promotion from within, because he felt that this was the best way to build a distinguished faculty with a deep loyalty to the department, and the university. He was an excellent mentor for young faculty, providing a strong link to the history and traditions of chemistry at Cornell. He and his lovely wife, Grace, offered welcoming hospitality to newcomers, whether in their home or at departmental receptions. They knew how to make young faculty feel at home and they treated them as valued members of the Cornell community.

Lauby had many interests beyond teaching and research and such interests were often associated with departmental affairs. He and Grace played a leading role in the old Grad-Fax dancing group. He played the guitar and enjoyed leading the singing at Chemistry Department picnics when that was the fashion. He organized chemistry square dances and chose to have such an event as the climax to his retirement party.

He enjoyed sailing on Cayuga Lake and was co-founder and first president of the American Wine Society, now grown to thousands of members. For many years he was an active member of the Ithaca Oenological Union of Home Wine Makers and even managed, with the help of his home health-care aide, to bottle his 1987 vintage. He loved figure skating and was a member of the American Figure Skating Association.

Over the years, generations of Cornell students have returned to campus to visit with Lauby and express their thanks for his influence on their lives. They will miss him and so will the Department of Chemistry.

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