

Alfred Theodore Blomquist

November 16, 1906 — January 15, 1977

Alfred T. Blomquist, one of the outstanding organic chemists of his generation, had a relatively unconventional career compared to that of most academic scientists. A native of Chicago, he received his B.A., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees all from the University of Illinois. It was also at the University of Illinois that he met and married Sara Moffat. He had always been a brilliant student, and on completing his doctorate under the supervision of Professor Carl ("Speed") Marvel, he was awarded a prestigious National Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship. He used this fellowship to pursue organic chemical research at Cornell and had intended to follow a career as a research scientist. The death of a key person in his father's clothing business, however, caused him to revise his plans; he declined an attractive offer from the DuPont Company when his fellowship appointment came to an end in order to return to Chicago as a partner in his father's firm. He spent the next eight years in the family firm and undoubtedly gave up any hope of being able to use his organic chemical training again.

World War II, however, brought Al Blomquist back to the academic world by temporarily depleting Cornell of its entire organic chemistry faculty. Professor J. R. Johnson had always wanted to bring Al back to chemistry, and he was finally successful in an appeal to Al to forsake his life in Chicago and to return to Ithaca to help out in this emergency. When Al claimed that he had forgotten most of his chemistry and had certainly failed to keep up with any new developments, Professor Johnson simply sent him a set of Chemical Society annual reports for the appropriate years, along with some recent texts and monographs, and told him to do some homework. While the practice of organic chemistry had not changed significantly during the 1930s, there had been very important advances in electronic theory and in the understanding of reaction mechanisms. The task of digesting these new developments in a few months must have been enormous. Nevertheless, Al Blomquist prepared himself the best he could, joined the Cornell University faculty as an assistant professor of chemistry in 1941, and soon found himself teaching all the organic chemistry courses and directing the research of all of the organic chemistry graduate students. It was under these strenuous circumstances that Professor Blomquist launched his academic career.

During the war years, Professor Blomquist was deeply involved in a number of research projects closely connected with problems of national defense. His true love, however, was organic chemistry per se, and he soon developed an international reputation on the basis of his many investigations in this field. His principal contributions to science were largely concerned with organic synthesis, and he published classical series of papers dealing with

the preparation and reactions of strained, small-ring molecules, the chemistry of many-membered rings, and the synthesis of novel monomers and polymers. Later in his career, he became interested in the chemistry of amino acids and of low-molecular-weight peptide hormones. He edited an excellent series of monographs on selected topics in organic chemistry. In 1960, he became the third member of the Cornell department of chemistry to be elected to the National Academy of Sciences.

Professor Blomquist served as a chemical consultant to the B. F. Goodrich Company for twenty-five years, and he received a grant from Goodrich in support of his own research program at Cornell during most of that time. Especially in its early years, when federal funds in support of chemical research were not yet readily available, this grant provided invaluable support to a succession of very able graduate students.

Al Blomquist's prime personal qualities were his warmth, his generosity, and his empathy with students and younger colleagues. He consistently attracted a bright, diverse, and dedicated research group, and the Blomquist research group was always one of the largest and happiest in the chemistry department. He paid particular attention to helping his students get the best and most appropriate positions upon leaving Cornell, and he kept track of and helped each one during the subsequent years whenever necessary. He could count among his coworkers Bob Holley, who went on to become a Nobel laureate in chemistry, and Liang Huang, the woman who now leads a major research effort on the synthesis of antifertility steroids in the People's Republic of China.

As a colleague, Al was especially helpful to the younger members of the chemistry department. He understood the special insecurity that most assistant professors feel, and he was always available for an unhurried discussion of any problem, from the most personal to the strictly professional. In this quiet and totally unobtrusive way, he contributed greatly to faculty morale and to the well-being of the entire department.

Al Blomquist's life appeared to be dominated by his professional activities. In his earlier years, however, he was an avid stamp collector, and he and Sara were enthusiastic ballroom dancers. He always took great pride in his family. While he had few hobbies, he was a devoted gardener, and he derived particular pleasure from the cultivation of his roses. Throughout his life he maintained a certain elegance in his style of writing, in his speech (which he would occasionally grace with an apposite Latin phrase) and in his dress that marked him as a scholar and a gentleman. Those who knew him will long remember him with deep affection.

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