

Announcement

MUACC: A 50 year heritage that continues to grow

Visionary analytical chemists strive to make enduring contributions to their field, contributions usually thought of as breakthrough research, innovative use of base elements, or improved testing and refining procedures.

As shown by the soon-to-be 50 year history of the Midwestern University Analytical Chemistry Conference (MUACC), enduring traditions sometimes are made of different stuff.

MUACC, an informal gathering of top chemistry faculty from throughout the Midwest, has clearly made its mark, changing lives, careers, teaching methods and research outcomes since 1947.

“It started out with Hobart Willard, an analytical chemistry professor from the University of Michigan and two of his very precocious students, G. Frederick Smith and Harvey Diehl”, explains long-time MUACC attendee Professor Emeritus Carl Moore from Loyola University. “After Smith and Diehl earned their doctorates, the three kept a close, almost family relationship. Somehow, they got the idea to get together about once a year, visit, talk chemistry, talk about on-going work, talk ‘blue sky’ work, and engage in graduate student ‘horse trading’”.

Thus, MUACC was born. Its first meeting was held in December, 1947 at Northwestern University, with a dozen attendants from Syracuse to Iowa and in between. From the very beginning, MUACC separated itself from the multitude of other conferences available to academia.

The group differed, in part, because presentations must be informal discussions on research in

progress. No slides or formal final work were permitted, just ‘chalk talks’. Further, no specialized segments were held—all participants took part in the ongoing discussion, no matter their field of expertise.

“The topics covered were so broad, and all right on the forefront”, explains retired professor A.A. Schilt who participated in MUACC for over 30 years. “Often, you would read the results of the research problems presented in the following year’s research journals. We heard from people right on the fringe of scientific breakthroughs, detailing research problems in chromatography, mass spectrometry, polarimetry, all the different modifications in voltammetry, and a great deal in atomic spectroscopy”.

Professor James Taylor from the University of Wisconsin, who has become known as the ‘constant first’, always volunteering to take the lead in presentations, explains:

“When you are asked to talk without slides about a project you have not finished, you are forced to go directly to the heart of why you are doing what you are doing. Sometimes, you end up with absolutely fabulous suggestions on how to resolve roadblocks from individuals working completely outside your subject area. When I first started, many presentations focused on electrochemistry. Now, it is shifted toward mass spectrometry. This field is so dynamic, and you can taste that at every MUACC meeting”.

MUACC’s emphasis on innovation does not stop at the lab door. It also enters the classroom.

“I am at an institution where we do not undertake a lot of research, but I have found MUACC as a group is wide-ranging, discussing problems that touch faculty and graduate students in all facets of their professional and academic life”, says Professor Rod Olson at Hamline University in Minnesota. “Way back in the 1960s, I developed tape and slide curricula, something commonplace now but very different then. I shared preliminary versions of these materials with MUACC, and received enough positive feedback to keep me going on it. One segment was later published by the American Chemical Society”.

“Everyone gave advice and encouragement, that is what I always remember about MUACC”, notes Professor Bruno Jaselskis from Loyola University. “My first meeting was in the fall of 1995. Through the years, I have discussed issues like xenon chemistry, sometimes hilariously, some seriously. Xenon was very novel at one time, and while the analytical significance was not great, it did offer some very interesting characteristics. Some comments I received from founder G. Frederick Smith urged me to explore applications in an entrepreneurial nature”.

MUACC participants mutually agree that the three founders of the group left a strong personal imprint upon it. Professor James Carr of the University of Nebraska has even spent time researching the “genealogy” of MUACC.

“In large measure, MUACC is comprised of the academic descendants of Hobart Willard’s students and their students”, he explains. “An enormous number trace their background to Willard, and subsequently to Diehl and Smith”.

Schilt agrees. “MUACC is and was mainly built by Smith, Willard and Diehl. In one sense, though, the group flows back even further to critical research leaders like Fresenius. Like most family trees, it has just grown abundantly. We could probably tie it back to the first experiments of Adam”.

Part of the imprint includes what group participants now jokingly call “their anonymous benefactor”, G. Frederick Smith. Smith is one of a handful of academic chemists who successfully ventured into the commercial world. He founded G. Frederick Smith Chemicals with his brothers

Allyne and Clarence Smith, in Columbus, Ohio, in 1928. As the company prospered, Smith and his brothers quietly financed all or a portion of MUACC’s cost.

“Part of our success has always stemmed from making the meeting as affordable to participants as possible”, says Dr Alexander Scheeline, Associate Professor of Chemistry at the University of Illinois, and host of the 1996 meeting. “Professor Smith, and now GFS Chemicals, assist with event costs, and help us achieve that goal”.

MUACC also has extended far beyond just the “Midwest”. Over its 50 year history MUACC meeting sites have included the University of Colorado, and the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Canada.

“We stretch like a rubber band”, notes Jaselskis. “We are very flexible and we have drawn people from Pittsburg, Mississippi and around the country”.

Schilt remembers participants from places as far as Birmingham, England. He also notes that MUACC has spawned similar groups in the US, including SWAP, Southwest Analytical Professors, and SAC, Southeast Analytical Chemists.

What draws participants today to MUACC is the same draw created 50 years ago, says Steel Hutchinson, continuing event sponsor, grandson of Allyne Smith, and Vice President of Marketing for GFS Chemicals.

“The uniqueness of MUACC—and its number one reason for survival—is its ability to help participants step outside of their own paradigm, avoid myopic vision, and find a fresh approach to problem-solving in an atmosphere of openness and mutual support”, says Hutchinson. “We believe in the spirit of MUACC’s founders. Our business strives to carry on their traditions, by maintaining our independence as a privately-owned concern in a marketplace dominated by large corporations, by producing catalogs and other materials to educate and inform the industry, and by sponsoring MUACC, a group which clearly fosters great science”.

“The informality remains, but the role of MUACC has expanded”, summarizes Scheeline, who hosted the 1996 MUACC at the University

of Illinois. “We are a place where analytical faculty from both small colleges and large can go, where we can share our differences and our commonalities, whether an emphasis on classroom teaching or an emphasis on research, and we can meet and cross-fertilize”.

With 50 years of cross-fertilization, it is no wonder that MUACC continues to grow.

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