

July 2017

James. C. Nichol: Instructor, Research Advisor, Colleague, Mentor, Friend

By Larry C. Thompson

On June 20, 2017 UMD, and in particular, the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry, lost a remarkable individual who was instrumental in the development of UMD into a modern comprehensive university, Professor J. C. (Charlie) Nichol. Charlie grew up near Edmonton, Alberta, graduated from the University of Alberta earning both undergraduate and M.S. degrees in organic chemistry. At Alberta he was influenced by a number of outstanding professors, particularly his M.S. advisor, R.B. Sandin to whom he often referred. He then completed his Ph.D. in physical chemistry at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) and in 1949 took his first teaching position at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon. During the 1953-54 school year, he was a visiting faculty member at Yale in the laboratory of Prof. R. Fuoss studying transport properties of a special group of electrolytes. Although his time at Willamette was successful with many of his students going on to advanced degrees in medicine and the sciences, he felt constrained by the minimum research opportunities that were available. Consequently, in 1957 when he was offered a position at the relatively new campus of the University of Minnesota in Duluth by F.B. (Red) Moore, he left Oregon for Minnesota.

UMD was in the early stages of transformation from predominantly a teacher-training institution and Red had been hired to facilitate the change in the chemistry department by, among other things, encouraging a wider range of research activities. Charlie was the first of the new faculty and promptly obtained NIH funding for his research. Over the next ten years the new hires, following his example, helped transform the Chemistry Department into the modern department it is today. Even in the face of considerable opposition a M.S. program was begun in 1964 with Charlie as one of the first two individuals authorized to direct students.

In these early years the growing pains for UMD were evident in the all-faculty meetings and common ground was hard to find. On more than one occasion the solution was to have Charlie and Jim MacLear (History) work out the best compromise and that would be accepted by the entire UMD faculty. Although Charlie would never describe himself as a diplomat, the skill and sincerity he brought to these issues is self-evident. In the middle years of his tenure at UMD he served two years as the Associate Dean of the Graduate School. He brought his usual skillful manner to this important position.

Charlie was first and foremost a true scholar. He was widely read in history, theology, and philosophy and was often able to resolve questions from his excellent memory. His interest in chemistry meant that he attended lectures and seminars in all fields and was constantly taking notes even long after he had retired. His research on moving boundaries in electrophoresis was done with extreme care and skill. His cheerful greeting "My, isn't it a wonderful day!" would echo down the hall even if it were 40 below outside.

His passion and greatest concern was for his students. He was concerned for them as individuals and devoted many hours to preparing lectures that would make difficult concepts more easily grasped and understood whether it was in General Chemistry, Physical Chemistry, or a graduate level course. He spent many hours with individual students to help their understanding even developing simple models to illustrate concepts. Students respected him, appreciated his concern, and many, even from his days at Willamette, stayed in contact with him for nearly 70 years.

July 2017

For many years, he was the advisor for all Chemical Engineering students who had to transfer to the Twin Cities. He forged excellent relations with the faculty and after engineering programs began at UMD he presented a review course for the engineers to prepare for the professional exams. Even after retirement, he was asked to teach stoichiometry and thermodynamics for engineers until he was nearly 80. He taught his last class, a graduate course in Kinetics at age 80.

All of us, faculty, students, and graduates of the UMD Chemistry and Biochemistry Department were blessed to have had the opportunity to interact with such a truly outstanding human being. Memories of his adventures with coffee cups and coffee spilled on lecture notes will be with us always.

(N.B. These comments on the life of this extraordinary individual were written by one who had the privilege to interact with him over a period of 63 years as a student in his courses, as his undergraduate research student, and finally since 1960 as his colleague and friend.)