

ORAL HISTORY
HOWARD NECHAMKIN

Welcome to the Living History Series here at Trenton State College. I'm Professor Philip Dumas of the Chemistry Department and I'd like to introduce Dr. Howard Nechamkin who is retiring from our department after 24 years of service. Dr. Nechamkin was one of the first faculty members in the Chemistry Department, well actually you were the Chemistry Department for a number of years.

Dr. Nechamkin: Yes, that's right.

Dr. Dumas: How many years have you served?

Dr. Nechamkin: I came here in 1961, 24 years ago, and when I did there was a man named Shirley Troxel--remember one of our laboratories is named for him? He was the only person teaching chemistry here. When I got here it was just the two of us. But you see it wasn't the Chemistry Department --it was the Science Department.

Dr. Dumas: Where was the Science Department located?

Nechamkin: The Science Department was located where the other departments were located--Green Hall. Green Hall was the college and except for Phys Ed, every course was taught in Green Hall.

Dumas: How many faculty was here at the time?

Nechamkin: I don't know exactly how many, I would guess about 500.

Dumas: 500 faculty?

Nechamkin: 500 students, much less than we have today.

Dumas: How did you happen to hear of Trenton State College?

Nechamkin: I didn't. I was teaching at Pratt in the School of Engineering.

Dumas: What were you teaching there?

Nechamkin: Chemistry, and my daughter had just become old enough to go to school. Pratt Institute was located right in the Hell Hole of Brooklyn and I couldn't see sending my daughter to a public school there. I wouldn't send her to a private school there, and I wrote to the Commissioner of Education in the State of New Jersey who was Ron Eldridge at that time, and he sent me back a very nice letter suggesting that I apply at Trenton State because he thought there might be a position available at Trenton State, and there was.

Dumas: Who did you write to at Trenton State?

Nechamkin: I wrote to Dr. Crowell, who retired several years ago --you know, Crowell Hall was named for Dr. Crowell, and I came down to see him.

He telephoned me to come down for an interview. I came down to see him, well I had quite a problem. First of all I couldn't find the college. Secondly I came to the college I didn't know what building to walk into. The only buildings that were there were the gym, Green Hall, the Library, and Kendall. There were lots of little buildings all over the place, and I later found out people lived in them. And when I found Dr. Crowell he very graciously admitted me to his office and we sat and we talked and we talked and we talked. I looked at my watch and after awhile I said to him, Dr. Crowell, are you offering me the job? He said, yes, I'm offering you the job. I stood up and shook his hand.

Dumas: What time of the year was that?

Nechamkin: It was the end of July.

Dumas: And then you moved down to Trenton?

Nechamkin: I moved down to Trenton, got a house on Carlton Avenue and I started teaching in summer school.

Dumas: What type of students were you teaching in those days?

Nechamkin: The first course I taught was a graduate course in inorganic chemistry, and believe it or not the first name on my role was Stanley Aagaard, who is now of course on our faculty and whose daughter is now in my class this semester, so things have run a full cycle.

Dumas: So you taught a graduate course when you first came here. When did science start developing at Trenton State. I know for many years you were primarily the science department.

Nechamkin: We had in the science department what we now call physics and biology. Chemistry and the other sciences were altogether in one department under Dr. Crowell.

Dumas: Who else was here at the time?

Nechamkin: Herb Moses (he was here?). Yes.

Dumas: Was he here prior to you?

Nechamkin: He was here prior to me. Red Kreger, (?) They're all retired, they're gone.

Dumas: Who was the next chemist hired?

Nechamkin: The next chemist who was hired was --it's hard to remember, it's a long time ago. Oh yes, he's not here. But it was only after we began to split up into departments.

Dumas: When did you begin to split up. Was this a calculated move?

Nechamkin: Yes, we realized that the college was going to change it's function. It wasn't only going to be an education college anymore. It was going to be a multi-purpose college and we realized that what we had to do was upgrade our chemistry department to a point where it would be accredited by the American Chemical Society. And that's when we started hiring people.

Dumas: What year would that put us in?

Nechamkin: Oh, let's see. Just don't quote me. Late Sixties. Middle to late sixties.

Dumas: Now when I came here, I've been here--this is my (N: When did you get here?) 13th year I believe. I believe I came in 1971. The split had already taken place. You were chairman of Chemistry, I believe Fred Pregger was chairman of Physics, and I can't remember who was chairman of Biology. I think it might have been Joe Vena.

Nechamkin: Vena was chairman of Biology for awhile. There have been so many changes and some of them so quickly. I remember when I first hired Eileen Smith. She came down for an interview and one of the things I said to her and this was before the , I said to her, Look Eileen, I want you to come to our department, not only because you're a good chemist. You are. I appreciate what a good teacher you are. You're a good teacher. And then of course you know, we simply hired people who were chemically trained, with different specialties,

Dumas: What were your objectives for the Chemistry Department?

Nechamkin: My primary objective as soon as I became chairman and realized that there would be a department was to develop the department to a point where it would be approved and accredited by the American Chemical Society.

Dumas: And did you eventually get that accreditation?

Nechamkin: Yes. For eleven years I took on and hired a great many fine people.

Dumas: When I came to Trenton State this had all taken place, the courses were more or less laid out. There were courses in biochemistry, inorganic chemistry, physical chemistry, organic chemistry. One of the things I wondered about was who taught all that before all these people got here? How many people were in the department when you came?

Nechamkin: This sounds like a planted question, but it really wasn't. At the beginning I taught every chemistry course in the department that there was. (How many hours a week would you teach? -Dumas.) eighteen -- that is 18 credit hours.

Dumas: Eighteen credits, was that the standard load at that time?

Nechamkin: I taught day and I taught night --I taught undergraduate courses, graduate courses. I even taught courses for the Physics Dept. I taught a course in Astronomy once. I taught a course in meteorology.

Dumas: How about the life science courses? I understand you developed a number of those.

Nechamkin: Yes the course in growth and scientific science at that time was a very, very popular course. I see no reason why it shouldn't continue to be a very popular course.

Dumas: When I came here there were about 14 sections and they were full. And you say you taught eighteen credit hours? What was your salary when you first started working at Trenton State?

Nechamkin: You know, I was trying to think of that because I knew you were going to ask me. It was something like \$7,000 a year. Some such ridiculous figure.

Dumas: Did you teach in the summer?

Nechamkin : Oh yes, I did teach in the summer.

Dumas: Could you tell us something about the faculty that you hired. When they came in what were you looking for?

Nechamkin: In every case I was looking for people who were good teachers first. Nice people, good teachers, people who would relate well to our students, knew their subject and for this reason everybody that we hired had to give some kind of a seminar, so that we could judge his delivery, his vocabulary and everything else. I wanted to do a job of developing the department where it would be accredited by the American Chemical Society.

Dumont: I think we eventually got that. I never really asked you this. I understand you served as a dean? Dean of what.

Nech: I was dean for a year. It's different from what it was when I first came here. The administration consisted of the President and two deans.

Dumas: What was the title of the deans at that time?

Nech: I don't remember what they were. I think they were dean of students and one was dean of instruction, something like that. Then the dean of instruction was very busy. Jim Forcina. And I went to lunch with him one day and he told me how busy he was and he needed an associate and so I said I'll take the job if you want me, Jim. He said you will! I said yes, and he said are you sure you want to leave the classroom? I said I won't leave the classroom, I'll teach one class and I'll teach just for therapy. Which I did. I did that for a year and I hated it so I left and went back to teaching.

Dumas: I'd like to ask you a couple of other questions about some of your books. I think most people on campus know that you've written six books and you're working on your seventh, and one of the things I have heard attending the ACS meetings is that your general synthetic manual sort of set the trend for the future. It was unique at the time. What was unique about it?

Nech: You were too young to remember--when I was taking chemistry chemistry laboratory manuals were II cookbooks." (Dumont-synthetic primarily?) Absolutely! You just mixed this with that and what color is it. If you didn't do it right then you just looked in your textbook to see what color it was supposed to be and you put that down in the blank space. I decided this was not great, it wasn't intellectually honest for one thing, and one of the series of experiments to which there were no answers, so to speak.

Quantitative type of experiments, qualitative types of experiments, and each professor made up his own group of unknowns and the answers were nowhere but in this book. And I gave out --oh I guess about

forty such experiments --and I startled the international conclave of the American Chemical Society back in the late fifties in New York. (Dumont: that's what I had heard, New York City.) And I started reading and believe it or not I followed John Hildebrand. He was a very hard act to follow. I presented my ideas about how the chemical laboratory could be or should be run and after the talk I was approached by several publishers who asked me if I had a manuscript. They all had the mimeographed pages that I had distributed to my students. I said my manuscript is these mimeographed pages. And one of these publishers, Thomas Y. Crowell, took them and published my first book. (Dumas: that was your first book?)

Dumas: When I came here we were still using them. What was your second book? I remember you wrote one on physical chemistry?

Nechamkin: Physical chemistry, organic chemistry, another one on general chemistry, --I can't remember

Dumas: And your recent one is on organic chemistry and you have it in several languages, Arabic, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Greek. Tell me --

Nechamkin: It's coming out in Japanese.

Dumas: What would you say your major accomplishment as a teaching professor was? At the college.

Nechamkin: I think you're putting me on the spot to answer very quickly. I think the thing that gives me the most satisfaction is the number of students who were in my classes who became chemistry majors as a result of taking chemistry with me.

Dumas: do any students stand out in particular?

Nechamkin: Oh, yes. We've had some marvelous students. One of them, Jack Georgine who was one of the first people I saw here on campus, a young fellow from Egypt, considered a refugee, who was taking chemistry courses, had taken chemistry in high school, and he had very serious problems with immigration.. We actually had begun proceedings to adopt Jack in order to avoid his being shipped back to Egypt. And he didn't have to, he got married, an American girl, so things worked out fine. He began teaching high school and then he still kept in touch with me and I -- so he could go to graduate school which he did, and to make a long story short he finally got his Ph.d, did post-graduate work at Princeton, and he's now a professor of biochemistry at George Washington University.

Dumas: I remember Jack because when he left Princeton he came here for awhile.

Nechamkin: Jack was very loyal to Trenton State. He was the kind of man who would go on to Princeton and Georgetown and places like that, and I told him if he didn't go I'd fire him.

Dumas: I understand he's doing very, very well and is very active in the research program. You were telling me about the campus. We used to go to the faculty dining room and they would serve you.

Nechamkin: Faculty dining room. It was beautiful--table cloths and waitresses. The waitresses were

students who were working for their board. Lunch was something like 55 cents or some such thing. And you could always have seconds if you wanted them. Of course you were served cold water on the table, -- it was a very friendly atmosphere. The college was very different then. When I first got here, first of all the place was --the college itself was like a country place. And the faculty --everybody on the faculty called everyone by their first name.

Dumas: Did you know everyone? Did you hold group meetings?

Nechamkin: Everybody --actually the faculty met every week. The President called in the faculty every week and in fact the faculty meetings used to be held in the House, which gives you an idea of how big the faculty was, and of course the meetings were regular and they were the sort of things that you would have expected, but everybody felt that everybody was contributing. It was a very warm relationship that existed among the faculty and between the faculty and administration.

Dumas: How have the students changed over the years?

Nechamkin: When I first got here they were practically all girls. Occasionally you would see a boy, but later you could tell the sex more easily because the boys started to wear beards, mustaches, --and more boys came in --I'll tell you, Phil, the thing that impressed me when I first drove on campus was the cleanliness. Not just the campus, not just the buildings, but of the people. The students were dressed nicely.

Dumas: I think I'm beginning to see that again. I know that one of my first impressions of campus was that it was not kept up too well. There were muddy roads and the walkways were all broken up. I think a tremendous effort has been made, and I think our campus is absolutely beautiful. And also I think the students' appearance is better. It seems to be like a "cyclic" time again I guess.

Nechamkin: Well, I really think it's because they're career oriented now.

Dumas: When I walk through Crowell Hall I see the sign on the front that it was dedicated or it was built in 1963 or '66, that's where the cornerstone sets. I can't imagine Crowell Hall being a new building.

Nechamkin: Well, we were in Green Hall as I said, the Science Dept. And we moved to Crowell Hall and set up the department. Math Dept. was in our building too, it was in the front of the building, it said Science and Math.

Dumas: Everything was new?

Nechamkin: Except for the tables, the lab tables. We did get a lot of new equipment and it was very, very good. We were all moving --

Dumas: Who was the President at the time?

Nechamkin: Ed Hill was President at that time. He was very, very popular.

Dumas: When was the decision made to go from a multi- from an education oriented college to one of a

multi-purpose institution.

Nechamkin: when things were changing we were not going to be under the Commissioner of Education anymore, it was going to be Commissioner of Higher Education, and each of the departments was encouraged to develop a program that fit into a multi-purpose institution.

Dumas: Do you remember your first chem majors?

Nechamkin: Yes, I remember his name. Leon Walker (?).

Dumas: What year was that?

Nechamkin: The year he graduated--I think he graduated in '65 or '66.

Dumas: Do you know what he's doing now?

Nechamkin: No I don't. His name is Martin Shapiro. I know he moved out of town, he did come back to see me once, but I don't know where he is today.

Dumas: One of the things--I guess you know I'm active in research--one of the things I've been impressed with is your knowledge of descriptive chemistry. How come you didn't go with --I'll ask you a simple question, like what color this compound might be when I make it. You always have the answer. Where did you learn the descriptive chemistry?

Nechamkin: I'm not being funny when I say from books.

Dumas: You must have had a lot of practical experience. Now you've written at least 50 papers? What was the thoughts of those 50 papers?

Nechamkin: Very considerable. Of course I was getting ideas, perfect it, sharpen it up so that it was good, my heaven, it's published. I've published in all kinds of fields.

Dumas: I know that you have done a lot in inorganic chemistry and you've done a lot of experiments. Analytical also. Any parting advice? I know we've gotten ACS accreditation and you thought your mission was over, and you accomplished your objectives, and I think you wanted to get out so you could return to writing. What do you see for the future of Trenton State?

Nechamkin: Well, if I look at the appointments, I look at the faculties, and look at the facilities, I see this college becoming a university.

Dumas: Would you like to see the name changed?

Nechamkin: To me that doesn't mean anything.

Dumas: What was it called when you came? Trenton State---

Nechamkin: It was called Trenton State College, the name had been changed from Trenton State Teachers College. It had already been changed.

Dumas: Now when you came they were giving out degrees, bachelor of arts, now we give out a bachelor of science.

Nechamkin: Originally we gave a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Science, then we gave a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Chemistry, or in Chemistry and Science Education, now we give a Bachelor of Science Degree in Chemistry.

Dumas: I picked it up after you --

Nechamkin: I was chairman for two years, I went through three full terms and then I was elected for a fourth term and I did two years of it, totaled eleven years altogether, and after accreditation from ACS I said, that's it. I went to the meeting and said I have resigned the chairmanship and I will not accept a draft. I just had had enough. I was tired.

Dumas: What did you enjoy about being chairman'?

Nechamkin: I enjoyed many of the people.

Dumas: The Administration, faculty?

Nechamkin: Yes, the Administration. Unfortunately as you know when you're chairman and when I was dean, you get to see students and faculty that are in trouble. Rarely do you get to see a kid that is doing very well, and he comes in and he says, look at me I got nothing but A's in all my courses. You know, that doesn't happen. That was one of the things that I didn't like about being dean or being chairman. You get the troubled people coming to see you all the time.

Dumas: Yes, I can attest to that, very seldom do you get one coming in complimenting the faculty, just complaints. What are your complaints for the future?

Nechamkin: Well, several things. First of all, as you know, my wife established here on campus a fund that gives the outstanding student in chemistry in each graduating class, but she established this fund which she named for me and I hope it will continue. I'll be interested to see if there is enough money to continue the fund. We gave it this year. Who was the student?

Dumas: Rosemary Dernan

Nechamkin: One of my students. She was one of my students--I had her for, I think, two or three different courses. Very fine student. I was very pleased to give her the award at Commencement. But that's something that I will always treasure. I will always look forward to seeing who gets the award each year. I look forward to getting a copy of the Signal in the mail. I hope to get one. I like to see a copy of the catalogs as they appear.

Dumas: You plan to keep teaching in Florida?

Nechamkin: Oh yes, I won't be able to stop teaching. We're going to Orlando as you well know, and after we've had Epcot and Disneyworld up to here, and gardening and that sort of thing, I'll look around and see if I can find some part-time teaching work maybe. Perhaps one course. I've already sent around some application forms.

Dumas: Do you think you're going to enjoy Florida? Will you miss the cold weather?

Nechamkin: I know I'll enjoy Florida. Oh, no, I will not miss the cold weather. I hate it.

Dumas: What are you going to miss about Trenton State?

Nech: I'm going to miss getting up every morning, you know, to get to class. I'm going to miss going to the office every day, but most of all--seriously—I'm going to miss the students. I'll miss the contact with the youth, with the vitality and I'm going to miss being with the faculty. We've had our differences, we've had our very good times. I'll never forget as long as I live, that surprise party that the department gave for me the other night. I really was surprised.

Dumas: I know you had said to somebody on campus that you'll miss your desk.

Nech.: I love my desk. It's such a nice big desk.

Dumas: Your wife had heard that you'd really miss your desk, she had made arrangements for you to purchase the desk from the State so your desk will be going with you to Florida so you won't miss your desk.

Nechamkin: That I'm very pleased about, because it really a marvelous desk. I've been --I've had that desk for the past twenty-four years. It's part of me.

Dumas: I know that you've really been instrumental in helping my career along. You've been very supportive, being chairman you've helped me tremendously with my research. You're always helping me with my writings and personally I'm going to miss you very much. However, I'm never going to say goodbye to you because I know I'll be talking to you and working with you in the future. I think the college is going to miss you. They're going to miss what you've brought to Trenton State College. I think it's the end of an era, and I think it's going to be very sad for the college that you're leaving. I think it's going to be a very, very happy time for you. I know you're looking to do something different and I just want to say I want to thank you for all the years, the enjoyable years that I've had the opportunity to work with you. I'd like to wish you the best of luck.

Nechamkin: Thanks very much.

Dumas: Well, that concludes our interview with Dr. Nechamkin today and I just want to say thank you for being here with us and I really enjoyed it.

Nechamkin: Thank you.