

## Val Metanomski Remembered

On May 20, 2008, the Columbus Section of the ACS honored one of its own, Dr. Val Metanomski. Val was presented with the 2008 Columbus Section award in recognition of achievements extending over a lifetime of service to chemical information. Later in the year, on December 11, that life drew to a close, just a year after Val helped to celebrate the 100th anniversary of CAS, an organization he served for 44 years.

CAS published an account of Val's award in its employee newsletter, NewsCASTer, in July, and the following is based on the interview with Val conducted for that story.

According to the Section's *Chemical Record* newsletter, "Dr. Metanomski was nominated for the award for his work in the areas of nomenclature of organic substances, especially polymers, defining the technical content of CAS publications and for his work in joint editorial projects with other organizations including IUPAC (International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry)."

Most recently Val served as a Senior Scientific Information Analyst, having joined CAS in 1964. He worked in many facets of the editorial process, including abstracting and indexing, developing vocabulary control, nomenclature, and in defining the technical content of CAS publications and services. He was especially known for his work on polymers and has published a number of papers, chapters in polymer handbooks, and materials relating to chemical information history. Among the latter are a booklet on the history of the ACS Division of Chemical Information (1993) and an update on the history of the ACS Division of Polymer Chemistry (2001). Val served as the *de facto* resident historian of CAS and was a guiding light on the team responsible for CAS' centenary observance in 2007. In connection with that event, Val was one of CAS staff profiled by *Chemical & Engineering News*. See <http://pubs.acs.org/cen/cas/8524val.html>.

Val spoke at the award banquet held in his honor at the Ohio Dominican University on May 20, providing a personal retrospective titled "How Did I Get To Where I Am Now?" Sketching an educational and professional journey that has spanned several decades of CAS history, Val's talk delighted the audience. His earliest encounter with academic research was in high school, when he set out to trace the historical sources of a novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz (better known as the author of *Quo Vadis*) dealing with the Swedish invasion of Poland in the seventeenth century. To do this work, the young student obtained a pass to a prestigious Polish research institute, the Ossolineum in his home town, Lwów, where Val said, "I was intimidated by the huge reading room, and by the serious gray-haired researchers stooped over rare books." Nevertheless, a love of scholarship was ignited. Later his undergraduate thesis at the University of London, England, in 1952 entailed the design of a plant to produce ethanol from

cane sugar (a process especially relevant today in light of pressing energy concerns).

After a stint as a chemist at a chemical company, Val went on to the University of Toronto, Canada, where he earned Master's and Ph. D. degrees in chemical engineering and polymer chemistry, respectively. His studies taught him the value of chemical literature, so not surprisingly he responded to a journal advertisement seeking volunteer abstractors for CA. He was accepted into the corps of CA volunteers, and after completing his university work, Val noticed another CAS ad for full-time employment in Columbus. He was also accepted for that job, to the dismay of his Ph. D. advisor.

This was during a time of transition for both Columbus and CA itself. Many bygone landmarks were still standing then, including the Neil House and the Union Station, where passenger trains were still busy. Dale Baker had recently become the director of CAS, and the organization still occupied a building now known as Watts Hall on the OSU campus.

Val's early years at CAS coincided with the massive change from manual editorial processing to the pioneering days of computer-assisted production and the creation of the CAS Chemical Registry System. Before computer searching, indexers consulted indexes by selecting printed volumes from a sort of Lazy Susan that the staff called the "merry-go-round table." The indexing itself was done on 3 X 5 inch index cards. As Val said, "I happened to be at the right time and the right place . . . to witness all the developments and changes that took place in the 1960s and 1970s."

Those changes are traced by the milestones that led CAS from the printed to the digital age: the introduction of *Chemical Titles*, the first computer-generated publication, to the advanced processing and information services of the twenty-first century. Far from being a passive witness, however, Val was instrumental in improving CAS' vocabulary and indexing, especially for polymers. This work continues to evolve. "Polymer nomenclature continues to be quite challenging and rules have to be continuously updated as new types of polymers are synthesized and reported," Val observed.

Much like CAS itself, Val was multifaceted. His cultural roots were both European and American, his career encompassed the print and computer eras, and his engagement with chemical information was both rigorously serious and engagingly humorous. In his talk he shared some unusual compound names that he originally presented at an ACS symposium some twenty years ago. Felicene, for example, is the name of a substance whose molecule looks much like the head of a feline. At the award dinner, he shared a Devil's Dictionary definition: "symposium: a gathering ostensibly for professional purposes; often useful for job-hunting, drinking, and the like." Regarding vocabulary control, he quoted from Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty:

"When I use a word, it means what I choose it to mean."

During the ceremony an earlier honor of Val's was also recognized, when Eileen Shanbrom presented him with a plaque denoting the ACS Chemical Information Division (CINF) Lifetime Membership Award. Eileen, the former division chairperson, notes, "This is the first such award given to a CINF member. It is in honor of his dedication and commitment to CINF for many years."

Val's talk addressed a sort of personal "Road Less Traveled" and was warmly received that evening. Later Val remarked that he believed any youngsters in the audience would not have grasped his closing observation, which served to answer the question, is there anything from the old days that was better than today?

"Nowadays," said Val, "when searchers, sitting at their own terminals connected to a plethora of databases with the ability to use clever front-end software, pose a well defined question, they get instantly highly relevant answers, and nothing more. In the old days, browsing through the printed issues of abstracts or through tables of contents of primary journals allowed you to see, through a corner of your eye, something else on the same page, something of some obvious interest or even related to your topic. That was serendipity at its best. This capability has been lost altogether."

Perhaps it was also serendipity, many years ago, when a job opening at CAS caught the attention of a chemist at a crossroad in his career. We can all be glad that opportunity was not lost.



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## C&EN SPECIAL ISSUE



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## Database Operations Department Happy Historian

**W. Val Metanomski, Senior Scientific Information Specialist**

What I value most is my long (some 56 years) association with *Chemical Abstracts*, first as a user, then as a contributor, and finally as a full-time employee.

While in graduate school, I signed up as a volunteer abstractor and compiled a number of Chemical Abstracts for six years. Finally, in 1964, in response to an advertisement from CAS seeking full-time editors, I applied and was hired. I have been at CAS ever since, working full-time for over 43 years.

While this is not a record of the longest CAS employment (which at the moment is 47 years), I am most likely now the oldest full-time employee with respect to age. I am also most likely the only remaining WWII veteran.

My overall satisfaction with my tenure at CAS is the result of an old adage: I was at the right place at the right time. I was privileged to take part in a transition from a completely manual operation, which was epitomized by the use of thousands upon thousands of 3-by-5-inch index cards, through various transitions, to the current highly sophisticated computer-supported operation, symbolized, in turn, by interactive computer terminals on every desk at CAS and by the computer-driven production, storage, and delivery of recorded chemical information.

I have enjoyed my unofficial job as the "CAS historian," although I have not been appointed to be one, nor was there ever any such position. I just love history, and over the years, I have managed to collect a lot of memorabilia, including some complete sets of special CAS publications. My memory is good enough that I can answer many questions about CAS history as to who did what and what happened when.

One nostalgic reflection is that when CAS was a small organization, everybody knew everybody, from the office boy to the CAS director and editor. Now, with the organization so large and, out of necessity, with so many managerial levels, this is no longer possible. A sad reflection occurs every time the eligible employees are presented with a 25-year award. I discover that I do not know a number of them, since now we work in three buildings, and the number of specialized functions have mushroomed to such an extent that now I have no need to ever interact with most of the other staff.

*Metanomski started with CAS as a volunteer abstractor. He received a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from the University of London in 1952 and master's (1960) and Ph.D. (1964) degrees, also in chemical engineering, from the University of Toronto, before joining the CAS staff full-time in 1964.*

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