

Fond remembrances of a gentle giant

Barbara Foster

Twinkling eyes above a dapper bowtie combined with rigorous science. Walter McCrone was always a study in contrasts.

PITTCON 2001 was the last time I heard one of Walter's famous presentations. Among the invited papers that focused on the latest groundbreaking technology in Fourier transform IR and the newest in Raman confocal, Walter presented an alternative: Use a simple light microscope. He showed one analysis after another, often using basic bench chemistry or the power of polarized light. Someone in the audience asked, "Don't you ever do FTIR or Raman?" "Oh sure," answered Walter. "We often use those techniques to check our results, but we are always right."

That was Walter's style: simplicity of design and directness of experimental method. Why invest \$10,000 in a programmable hot stage when you can do many routine fusion analyses with a conductive slide, two alligator clips, a bit of wire, and a rheostat? Why use a half-million dollar transmission electron microscope for routine asbestos analysis when you can mount a few fibers in the appropriate medium and observe under polarized light or his own dispersion staining?

Microscopy is unique among all the analytical sciences in that it requires a special hand-eye-brain coordination. As a rule of thumb, it takes a year for a microscopist to become competent, then a lifetime to accumulate the library of mental images and solved problems that make a microscopist genuinely valuable. In this context, Walter was a true master. With a deft rotation of the stage or a delicate adjustment to focus, he made microscopy look deceptively easy. Ask him a technical question, however, and you felt the huge power and experience of decades of chemical analyses and thousands of hours of obser-

vation. He generously shared that information through thousands of presentations, classes, papers, and collegial discussions.

Walter also shared much of his mental library in the incomparable *Particle Atlas*, a rare and massive compilation of electron and light micrographs and chemical and physical data, available on disk, that helps many microscopists identify contaminants, fibers, and crystals. It was that incredible collection of microscopy wisdom that led him to controversial, but well-founded, conclusions regarding the Vineland map and, his most famous case, the Shroud of Turin.

Of equal importance, Walter just plain loved looking through the microscope. He saw beauty and whimsy, color, motion, and form. Each year, he gave those on his Christmas card list a peak of something special that had caught his fancy that year.

Nearly a decade ago, I had the opportunity to visit Walter's famous institute, only to find myself in the midst of a school tour of 10-12-year-olds. Walter, as always, began patiently fielding questions, providing astute but easily understood answers. Much to everyone's surprise, one little girl asked, "Where do you want to die?" Without missing a beat, Walter pointed to a corner in the front of the classroom, "At that microscope," he replied.

Active until this last year of his life, Walter came close to getting that wish. His spirit will always preside over that special corner of the classroom, and it will rest fondly in the hearts and minds of the so many students and colleagues whose lives and minds he so profoundly, yet gently, touched.

Ms. Foster is Contributing Editor, Focus on Microscopy.